

TEACHERS VALUING TEACHERS:  
A new professional development paradigm

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# Teachers valuing teachers: A new professional development paradigm

Lars Nyberg

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of three years' worth of purposeful interactions between colleagues in the mathematics department at a Montreal area High School as a form of 'grass roots' professional development. Recognizing the lack of meaningful avenues for self-improvement within the teaching community, this group started meeting formally and regularly to discuss improving their practice. Over the course of the three years they met there was the strong feeling that there had been an overall improvement in the quality of the instruction within a student centered learning approach. The experience was described as empowering and led to a greater degree of accountability as well as a stronger sense of camaraderie for each of the ten participants. Each member described how they felt that they had improved their craft in some way and how much more connected they felt to each other.

In a School Board that primarily relies on periodic mass workshops to provide professional development to its workforce, this professional learning community appears to offer an interesting alternative instead. Parker J. Palmer (1998) provides the backdrop throughout by suggesting that teachers tap into their individual strengths and create communities that are conducive to teaching and learning. The main questions to be answered in this paper, through dissection of some of the existing literature and in interviews with the participants, are whether this sort of group dynamic meets the criteria of PD and if it is a viable alternative to what is currently being offered?

## Acknowledgements

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Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Ayaz Naseem, PhD., my program and thesis advisor, who is one of the most thought-provoking lecturers I have ever encountered. I truly enjoyed taking part in the discussions we had, both in class but also one on one. He always seems to ask the right question that moves a discussion forward and gets you closer to understanding what previously was uncertain. That is a gift I will cherish as I strive to emulate it. Thank you all for the past three years.

## Table of Contents

List of abbreviations	6
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction</b>	7
Background	7
Context	12
Purpose and significance	16
Design and methodology	18
<b>Chapter 2 – Literature review</b>	21
<b>Chapter 3 – Qualitative data analysis</b>	35
<b>Chapter 4 – Conclusion and recommendations</b>	53
Implications for future research	65
<b>References</b>	68
<b><i>Appendices</i></b>	71
<i>i. Research questions</i>	71
<i>ii. Consent form for participants</i>	73
<i>iii. Field notes</i>	74

## List of abbreviations

Below is a list of the common abbreviations and what they mean that appear throughout this thesis.

- **CST (Cultural, Social, Technical)** – the base level of high school mathematics that students must pass in grade 10 in order to graduate.
- **ECEE (Early Childhood and Elementary Education)** – the name of the teachers education program at Concordia University which focusses on preparing prospective teachers for Kindergarten to Grade 6.
- **OME (Ontario Ministry of Education)** – the provincial organization in Ontario responsible for legislation of Educational Policy.
- **PD (Professional Development)** – the ongoing and deliberate growth in practice over time in ones job.
- **PDIG (Professional Development Initiative Grant)** – a monetary award for groups of teachers looking to start their own professional development practices available through the Quebec Ministry of Education.
- **PLC (Professional Learning Community)** – a small group where the members both mentor and are mentored with the intention of improving practice.
- **SN (Science and Nature)** – one of the branches of High School mathematics that allows students to get direct access to Science programs at Cegep.
- **TS (Technical and Scientific)** - one of the branches of High School mathematics that allows students to get direct access to Science programs at Cegep.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## Background

*"In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom so much depends."*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

From the very first day I entered the teaching profession I was struck by the caring nature of the individuals I encountered. I had come from the corporate world where it often seemed like everyone was out for himself or herself and people didn't matter nearly as much as results. My first few years flew by as I grew, with considerable help from others, into a competent and confident, young(ish) untenured but inquisitive, new teacher. As the years wore on however, some of that initial luster faded, and I found myself asking the existential question, "How could I regain that feeling of discovery and connectedness that had led to my rapid but controlled growth in this new profession and avoid the sense of stagnation that I had once felt?" I hope to answer this complex and important question in the pages that follow.

Some 17 years ago, at the age of 35, I walked away from an unremarkable and unfulfilling career as an accountant. I put my life on hold and entered the world of teaching. At the time, I may have had more life experience than most novice teachers, but I embarked with similar noble, but lofty, goals. I desperately wanted to make some real contribution to the world around me. That sense was something that I had felt lacking for my entire professional life to that point. Through much soul-searching, it occurred to me that teaching had always existed in the periphery of my professional life but had never seemed like a viable career choice – until it was. I had finally figured out what I wanted to do when I grew up!

Shortly thereafter, when I entered the Early Childhood and Elementary Education program at Concordia (ECEE), it turned out to be a great transformative experience. Ultimately, it was the culmination of my most inspired academic performance to date. I was so excited to be on a journey with other like-minded people trying to learn the ‘art’ of teaching. I couldn’t wait to delve deeper and deeper into the subjects. It was the first time that I had actually enjoyed going to school, and I was deeply immersed in what I was trying to master. It was the first time that I had ever experienced passion for my profession.

Still, the learning curve was steep as I tried to put the practical courses (the science if you will) I had taken to good use in my applied practicums. We were encouraged to be reflective in our practices, and we received regular, constructive feedback on how we were doing; both from our cooperating teachers as well as from our supervisors within the program. This was the first time that I had been given this kind of feedback in any job that I had ever undertaken, and I immediately saw how valuable it was for learning. I remember feeling quite supported (something very foreign to me in the world of business) and enthusiastic. I truly believed that mastery of this craft was achievable through hard work.

In retrospect, it makes perfect sense to me that this model of feedback and learning works as well as it does. In my early twenties I played college tennis in the US. The model for improving as a player is exactly the same. You practice a particular skill and receive immediate feedback from a coach (usually harsher than from a professor) and then you internalize the commentary and try to improve the skill. In my experience, self-reflection does work, but it is far less effective than someone watching what and how you do something and giving you advice on how to improve upon it. I would say, however, that the desire to improve makes one much more open to hearing about areas of possible improvement.



Later, once I had graduated and started working in a school, I found that I was getting less and less of this valuable feedback. I was still being evaluated because I wasn't tenured – that is part of the teachers' collective agreement. However, this was done only once a year by an administrator who gave me (mostly) generic feedback, on what I was doing well and what I (might) need to work on. It was hardly useful.

Nevertheless, my confidence and ability as an educator still grew steadily for those first few years due largely to the tremendous sense of purpose I was feeling. I felt that there were a finite and achievable number of skills that I needed in order to be proficient. That important progression continued for a few years while I worked towards greater expertise. It would only be years later, and with much more experience, that I realized that what a teacher needs to know is always evolving so one can never truly master teaching.

Over the years that followed, the feedback seemed to become less and less useful as I encountered administrators that were not particularly qualified at, or willing to give real, constructive advice on what I could work on as I strived to be that elusive master teacher. They constantly seemed to tiptoe around me as if I might be offended at the suggestion that everything I was doing was not great – which, of course, it wasn't. At that point in my teaching career I was still feeling enthusiastic but no longer as well supported.

The truth is, giving helpful feedback is not an easy task. In my 15 years in business very few of my managers were very good at examining the job I was doing and then suggesting concrete ways to improve. Come to think of it, I was not particularly good at it when I was a manager either. It is uncomfortable to critique the work of another, even when that is what is required as part of your job or what they are themselves looking for.

Then, a few years ago, I noticed that, slowly, over time, my learning had plateaued. As soon as I got my tenure I stopped being evaluated. So, even the infrequent (and rather poor) feedback I had been getting, stopped. Very often I found that if I was not trying something new, I tended to repeat past successes – human nature I suppose. The problem with that is that even the best lessons get outdated or we simply execute them on auto pilot. Of course the more times we do something, the less we tend to reflect on the outcome and ‘tweak’ it to keep it fresh. Over time it becomes more and more automatic and less and less relevant.

Deep down, I knew that I wanted to continue improving, but I just didn’t know how or even what it was that I needed to work on. I would talk informally with my colleagues about specific issues I had encountered, but that was altogether too infrequent and haphazard to be of any real value. Also, with no one but my students to observe what I was actually doing every day, I felt largely on my own to figure things out.

In theory, our students are the ones who should have the best vantage point to provide meaningful feedback. However, and through no fault of their own, rarely have I gotten any actionable feedback from my students when I have solicited it. Even with emotionally mature and aware students, they are not likely to evaluate one’s performance candidly when it is your job to evaluate theirs. On the occasions where I have tried to solicit feedback from my classes, what I get back tends to be rather one-dimensional in scope. There is a lot of, “I don’t like homework” or “You are funny” in the responses. These reactions from students, I believe, are their way of saying that I either give too much homework (for the first) and that, overall, they like me (for the second). Some of it is moderately useful but it certainly doesn’t point the way to engaging these students, fostering their understanding or making one feel like they are improving

as an educator. The truth is, giving helpful and useful criticism is very difficult for everyone, not just teenagers.

At that particular stage in my development, my enthusiasm was starting to slip as I couldn't figure out how to move forward, and I was really feeling like I was on my own. I was even contemplating a move into administration as I thought that would allow me to continue to evolve. That's when I entered the Master's program...

## Context

*“Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal – or keep them from learning at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating these conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the sources of both the intent and the act.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

So, how does one go from feeling idealistic and supported to not in just a few short years? To ensure continued professional growth, there needs to be some sort of enrichment plan for teachers past those early years of rapid growth that tends to characterize the careers of most competent educators (Palmer, 1998). To be fair, the school boards and the teachers’ unions do offer a fair amount of professional development (PD) workshops intended to help teachers continue to grow, but they tend to be ‘one-size-fits-all, tips-and-tricks-of-the-trade’ type presentations and rarely (if ever) have they met my needs. I have given some of these workshops myself so I know just how hard it can be to meet specific needs when you are expected to deliver to a diverse group that you rarely know anything about. One is not actually tasked with trying to make better teachers, simply to share what has worked for you in the past in a specific situation. It is very much ‘hit or miss’ for those in attendance – usually more miss than hit.

Therefore, as I was feeling stuck in my personal development but wasn’t able to find any sort of stimulating PD, it was proving very difficult for me to improve. I was very frustrated. It seemed to me that in a profession inherently set up to be nurturing and to providing useful feedback, I should be able to get the help for which I was searching.

Right around the time I was struggling in this ‘rut’, I was exposed to the work of Parker J. Palmer and his book *The Courage to Teach (1998)*. This was, for me, not only different from any perspective on teaching I had ever read but also offered a new lens through which to consider my professional growth. Palmer (1998), amongst other things, espouses the idea that good teaching

is not simply about the ‘right’ technique but much more about getting down to the very identity and integrity of the teacher – a sentiment with which I identified. Furthermore, he suggests that the best way for teachers to get to that level of understanding and avoid getting lost within themselves is to draw upon the community of professionals around them for feedback – again, very much in line with my own thoughts at the time. He seemed to put into perspective for me many of the ideas that I had regarding professional development for teachers, but had been unable to give proper context to. This came at the right time for me: I was both open and willing.

Serendipitously, at roughly the same time as I was discovering the works of Parker J. Palmer, I had a casual conversation with one of my colleagues about the learning process for student teachers. We concluded, at the time, that they were afforded an opportunity not available to seasoned teachers. Namely, pertinent and timely feedback on what we were doing in the classroom by someone skilled in giving feedback. Suddenly, things seemed to fall into place and I had (what I thought was) a revolutionary idea. This colleague and I decided to try to emulate this model and to create a similar feedback loop for each other. The hope was that we could help each other to improve our teaching. We kind of experimented with it at first – dropping in on each other’s classes and then debriefing informally by pointing out to each other what we had seen. We discovered that this was useful to both the person watching, as they were exposed to different approaches as well as to the person being watched, who inevitably received useful feedback. It soon became clear, however, that we needed to expand beyond the two of us and to develop a more structured feedback system.

Eventually we solicited other interested teachers in our department and applied for a grant from the Quebec Government (Professional Development Initiative Grant or PDIG). We started meeting once a month as a group of seven different, but like-minded math teachers to discuss

best practices and how to achieve better results for our students. The money we got from the PDIG was used to pay for substitute teachers to cover our classes so that we could meet formally once a month throughout the school year. We were fortunate to have a PhD student with a specialization in professional development for teachers helping us navigate this new course. Our excitement grew and before we knew it, we had opened up a rich vein of PD that still seems boundless. We had created our very own Professional Learning Community or PLC.

In a nutshell, we met and dissected video of group members teaching and then shared feedback on what people had observed. We worked on developing innovative lessons together and embraced the sense of collegiality and support that emerged. I can say that I learned and observed things about my own teaching style that have greatly influenced what I do every day in the classroom. It is very powerful to watch video of oneself teaching and to detect the nuances of how one communicates with students – something that is all but impossible if all you have to go on is your own (flawed) memory of a lesson. We did this for three years before we took a hiatus this past year due to our professional development leader taking a year off to have a baby.

I can say with confidence that I am a better teacher today as a result of this initiative. Watching my colleagues teach has opened my eyes to different techniques that I have incorporated into my own classes. Watching myself teach has made me much more aware of what I do well and what I need to work on. As we start to understand what good teaching can look like and how that compares to what we actually do in class, we can start to tailor our existing skills to be more effective. Collectively, each one of us seems to be progressing at a rate that is appropriate to the individual. Our goal is not to become carbon copies of each other but to acknowledge what we do well and then add to that in order to better serve our varied students’

needs. I won't speak for my colleagues, but I, myself, feel renewed and excited about teaching again as a result. For the first time in a long while, I feel both supported and enthusiastic.

In order to make use of the valuable wisdom that each person possesses, one must be open to listening to other ways of doing things without feeling like what you are doing is less than. It seems so easy when written down, but it is much more difficult in practice. I believe that the most efficient way you can know what you are lacking as a professional is for someone to actually point it out to you. But that means letting someone (other than your students usually) actually witness what you are doing. We accept it readily as student teachers, so what changes?

I believe that because teachers tend to be alone a lot of the time in their classrooms and can develop a sense of 'dominion' in what they do and how they do it. This does not lend itself easily to scrutiny. When one is isolated it is easy to be resistant to critique – a condition that I believe only becomes more pronounced the longer you teach and the older you get.

This is not unique to the teaching profession of course. It is human nature to be wary of criticism. Once you get used to doing things your own way and having no one to see it, it can be very difficult to give up that freedom. Whether someone is overly confident in their abilities and not really open to change or insecure about their abilities and reluctant to let anyone see that they are not doing a 'good job' it can be equally unappealing to open up ones teaching 'fiefdom' to another teacher or (heaven forbid) an administrator. It is ironic to me that the solution to helping teachers continue to grow seems to involve simply getting out of our own way and drawing on what is readily accessible.

If only it were that easy...

## Purpose and Significance

*“When you love your work - and many teachers do – the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in. We must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve our students well.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

When I was first exposed to the writings of Palmer (1998) in a philosophy course earlier in the graduate studies program, I realized how much I could relate to what he was saying. Moreover, much of what he writes about seemed very pertinent to what we were trying to accomplish in our school microcosm. Palmer talks about teachers being able to understand themselves as people in order to be able to reach their students more completely. When we started meeting as a group of professionals to discuss how to improve what we did in the classroom it wasn't because of current research but from shared interest. This professional learning community we had created, while organically grown is, however, rooted in current research (which I will discuss in the Literature Review to follow) focused on what are the best professional development practices and why we should employ them as well as what are the best practices for teaching mathematics.

It was (and still is) my strong sense, that a PLC such as this can be, not only the solution to any challenges in my continuing growth as a teacher, but for anyone truly willing to resume their own journey towards mastery of the craft. I strongly feel the positive effects the experience of meeting regularly with my colleagues has already had on me. I feel more confident and even excited about what I do. It reminds me of the feelings I experienced when I was straight out of the ECEE program and everything was new and exciting. In many ways, it seems that way to me again and I credit the last three years of close collaboration with my colleagues. I believe that



my coworkers have undergone similar growth and a renewed sense of fulfillment in their own professional lives.

It became very important to me to examine the concept of PLC's as professional development more closely. I suppose, my big idea was, that a professional learning community, such as the one we have created, could improve teacher proficiency and overall job satisfaction. The purpose of my research study was to gain some sense of how a PLC can allow teachers to gain better understanding of themselves and what they do and then to use that knowledge to improve upon what they already do well. That, coupled with a strong sense of community, fostered by the pursuit of a common goal, I felt would inevitably lead to improved job satisfaction and improved teacher performance in the long run. Seven of my colleagues agreed to be interviewed in order to help me with my research. As a participant observer and through interviews with each of them, I have recorded our progression as teachers and as colleagues over the course of the three years (and one year where we did not meet) of the PLC.

## Design and Methodology

*“As we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

This was qualitative research in the form of a phenomenological study. The aim of the study was to understand the “essence” of this ongoing multi-year experience as perceived by the participants, (McMillan, 2012). I believe that our instructional styles and perceptions about teaching were changed as a direct result of the Professional Learning Community that we created. I conducted two rounds of interviews that allowed each person to reflect on the process from the beginning to now. I believe that this was the most efficient way of getting each participant’s firsthand experience of the process. I then transcribed each person’s answers before making notes on what I saw as the important and common ideas that we all seemed to share. The study focuses on each individual teacher’s experience from before we started to the present – which includes a year where we did not have the benefit of the PLC mostly due to the absence of our PD leader.

I decided to pursue qualitative research as I was interested in understanding my colleague’s perceptions of their own personal growth as a result of our interactions. I believe this to be the most efficient means with which to gather meaningful data. Phenomenological studies are used when the goal is to understand the experiences of a group of people such as the Professional Learning Community we created (Glesne, 2016). I decided not to try to conduct quantitative research, as this would then have made it a long term, longitudinal study. That sort of study would require recording the before and after marks of all the students being taught by these teachers. As this would require several years’ worth of data, involving roughly 1000 students per year, I do not feel that this would be appropriate for a Master’s thesis. The scope of

such a study, I feel, would be too large and would require more time than I currently have to give.

My research attempts to answer the following specific questions:

1. What is professional development for teachers and what are the possible benefits it can bring to the participants? Does professional development really benefit teachers as much as is generally believed?
2. How does a peer-based Professional Learning Community work and can it be a model to take the place of current PD? If so, what are the possible barriers?

My choice of methodology is to conduct an auto-ethnographic study. I have chosen this particular type of study, as I prefer to write from a personal point of view. From the very beginning in this program I have always tried to put any and all topics within the context of my own experience. It has always been very helpful to me and I feel has given me the most insight into what I have been doing. Also, as I am one of the participants in this group, I feel that it is only appropriate to give my own viewpoint. I looked for threads of commonality amongst the interview responses that indicate what the majority of our group has experienced. I have tried to weave in my own experiences either to compare or contrast with the experience of my colleagues along with my understanding of what Palmer (1998) has to say on the subject.

I have decided to break up the interview responses given by the two questions above (as well as general background provided), as some questions were clearly better suited to one or the other when providing my analysis. Also, I will be addressing the questions individually as I feel this

will provide a degree of logical flow to the responses. As stated above, I will be looking for points of agreement and disagreement both between my colleagues but also in my own view. I will attempt to address the problems I have had in the execution of this research project to give a more complete account of the process from beginning to end.

I believe that this is an extremely important topic for anyone striving to stay current and engaged in the field of teaching. Broad and Evans (2006) point out that while most professional orders in Canada, such as law, medicine and accounting all have universally accepted standards for in-service training, teaching does not. From my point of view, I believe that this leaves teachers floundering and alone. In a profession that is supposed to be built upon mutual support and understanding, why would there not be more support for teachers struggling to do a good job in an ever-evolving world?

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

*“Knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

In this section I looked at some of the literature that exists on the subject of teacher professional development. There is a very large amount of literature to consider on this broad topic. I focused on three areas in particular. The first area was the need and nature of Professional Development for teachers. I concentrated on what the literature says can happen to teachers who don't receive effective PD but also on the benefits to those that do. The second area that I looked at was what popular opinions say about what effective PD for teachers should look like and why some of the current methods in practice may not be working. Finally, I looked at the nature of Professional Learning Communities and how they can provide an effective method for delivering worthwhile PD for teachers.

Just where does the idea that teaching is both a performance art as well as a science, as stated in my introduction, come from? Clearly, it is not my own idea. It is one of those things that I heard when I was doing my undergraduate degree that registered, but only took on real meaning once I had spent time in my own classroom, actually leading a discussion with a class. But what does the statement really mean? I believe it means that good teaching is split into two separate, but equally important skill sets. The first part is the actual knowledge of a subject (the science part), which, of course, is crucial. Just as important (and arguably more), however, is the ability to explain what one understands (the performance art part) so that the audience hears and understands it also. In any case, it was made clear in the ECEE program that we needed to work on both skills and neither was deemed more important. What has become very clear to me is that,

in order to do either with any degree of proficiency it is imperative to work on them continuously or risk becoming stagnant and ineffective.

My personal experience to date is that the ‘science’ part is challenging but that the ‘performance art’ part is much more difficult. The subject matter does not change that much or often, but there is a lot to know. A lesson plan, on the other hand, is rarely the same the second or third time it is implemented (not to mention the 32<sup>nd</sup>). As a math teacher, I have had little difficulty learning a mathematical concept that is part of a new course. What I have struggled with, and I would venture that every teacher has struggled with, is how to present it to my students clearly and in such a way that they will remember it for any period of time. When you add to that the fact that the nature of classes changes continuously, not only year-by-year, but also even week by week or period by period, only then can a teacher start to appreciate the enormity of the task confronting an educator. It is no wonder then, that at the end of each school year, I feel emotionally drained and physically tired. I know that I cannot do this job alone.

The need for support for teachers in both of these areas is well documented. The realities of the modern classroom are complex and taxing and teachers (young and less young) need constant support from somewhere in order to just get through. (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). This was something that I started to feel almost as soon as I left the safe confines of my teacher-training program and found myself in a classroom by myself trying to decide what to do each day. When someone is undertaking as monumental (and ever-evolving) a task as teaching, there is a strong sense of independent creativity but it can easily turn to a feeling of isolation if you aren’t careful or deliberate.

As a result, teachers that don't tap into some sort of network of support run the very real risk of a sense of seclusion and, often, a lack of job dissatisfaction. Roulston, Legette and Womack (2005) posit that one third of all new teachers in Canada and the United States end up leaving the profession within five years largely as the result of a sense of stagnation and isolation. This grim result was borne out in a study by Guarino, Santibañez and Daley (2006) on Teacher Recruitment and Retention. Their conclusion was that the first few years of a teacher's professional life are the most vulnerable. It is in those early years where young teachers feel the most underappreciated in, and overwhelmed by, their new careers. Palmer (1998) believes that the inherent isolation of a classroom coupled with a steep learning curve can exact a high price on new teachers going from a very supportive teacher-training program to almost no support, seemingly overnight.

The main reasons as indicated in both the Roulston et al (2005) and the Guarino et al (2006) studies, for teacher burnout were overly taxing workloads and the resulting lack of time (both at home and at work). Very few of the respondents mentioned poor pay but many talked of a lack of comfort with classroom management and how to deal with difficult parents. It is important to note that both studies concluded that mentoring of new teachers was a powerful tool in order to help stem the tide of teachers leaving the profession early. Additionally, Nahal (2010), writing on the disconnect between teacher preparation programs and the realities of the classroom, says that to stem the tide of teacher burnout it is essential that young teachers receive adequate professional development opportunities and feel that sense of collegiality which can help them overcome difficult times.

While I concede that teacher burnout is not a cut and dry issue where isolation or lack of adequate preparation are solely to blame, there does seem to be some evidence to support that

theory. There also seems to be common ground to suggest that a possible solution to this problem lies in the proper mentoring of new teachers (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). When I first made the move to high school, I was mentored and I did feel there was a value to it from a very practical point of view. In my mind I was not particularly vulnerable but it certainly did ease my transition and help me connect with my colleagues right away. Feeling supported is always comforting for human beings particularly when doing something for the first time.

But should mentoring simply stop once a teacher feels comfortable enough in a school or grade level or course curriculum? Based on my experience I would say that it does largely stop but that it should not, in order to ensure the continued development of all teachers. There are just so many things for teachers to consider on a daily basis in order to stay current and effective that it is crucial that they continue to grow as professionals. It cannot be a coincidence that other professional orders place such a premium on ongoing PD. Among other things, teachers must be aware of the many ways in which student learning can unfold in the context of development, learning differences, language and cultural influences, and individual temperaments, interests, and approaches to learning. (Bransford, et al, (2005).

There is extensive literature on the need for professional development for teachers at every stage. Professional development is defined as the growth that occurs through the training cycle of a teacher (Glattenhorn, 1987). By gaining increased experience in one's teaching role, there is a systematic gain of experience in professional growth through the examination of teaching ability. Professional workshops and other formally related meetings are a part of this professional development experience (Ganzer, 2000). Broad and Evans (2006) describe PD as the formal and informal learning experiences and processes that lead to deepened understanding



and improvement of practice. In other words, it is something that should continue throughout the career of a professional. While most professional orders such as medicine, law and accounting all have universally accepted standards for in-service training, the profession of teaching does not. (Broad, Evans. 2006). This begs the question, “Why not?” Unfortunately, I believe that the answer lies in the under appreciation by most people of the complexity and importance of what teachers do in society.

The shift over the past 20 years has seen teaching go from the relatively one-sided model of lecture and drill to one of teaching and learning within a climate of increasing accountability. (Vescio, Ross, Adams. 2007). It is no longer possible to be effective in the classroom without constantly evolving how and what you do. But the additional effort comes with an important bonus: the chances of becoming complacent or bored are lessened considerably. Furthermore, the act of teaching is becoming increasingly complex and that highly competent teachers continue to learn, are adaptive, build up a sophisticated pedagogical repertoire, and are able to apply a range of practices for varying purposes that incorporate and integrate different kinds of knowledge, used in various combinations flexibly and fluently (Bransford, et al, 2005; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Turner-Bisset, 2001).

In addition to the above, current research suggests strongly that no factor is more important to student success than teacher competency. (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Teachers play such an important role in determining student outcomes because they must take a curriculum, decide what technique to employ in order to best convey it and then try to adjust it to fit the diverse learning styles of a modern classroom. When the fact that most current teachers only have the

much more teacher-centric models from their own schooling to fall back on (Palmer, 1998), it seems even harder to keep up.

Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, Suk Yoon (2001), in an article in the *American Educational Research Journal*, state that if policy makers really want more comprehensive education, then there also needs to be a fundamental shift in how teachers are taught and trained. If children are to be expected to meet certain standards of achievement, it only makes sense to expect the same of teachers. After all, when teaching is done well it can create better citizens that can lead nations of the future. This is an extremely important investment in the future – that can only happen if those expected to execute upon the vision are sufficiently prepared and confident. Fullan, et al, (2006) claim, that professional learning that focuses on contextually-based, personalized, data-driven instruction is one of the central components that will be critical to successful educational reform and that will noticeably improve and sustain learning for students and teachers alike. In their view, teachers must be learning in their classrooms every day.

Clearly there is a consensus that professional development is a necessity. I could not find one article saying that PD is not useful. But then the question becomes, what type of PD should be offered to be most effective? Organized in-service programs are designed to foster the growth of teachers that can be used for their further development both as individuals and as professionals (Crowther, 2000). For this reason it is important to examine the content of those experiences through which the process will occur and how it will take place (Ganzer, 2000; Guskey, 2000). But, how does one effectively accomplish this in a one-size-fits-all type of setting? Clearly, improving as teachers is very difficult under the current professional development paradigm.

What would good professional development look like then? Broad and Evans (2006), citing research on PD practices of teachers in a report to the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) say, among other things, that collaboration, shared inquiry and learning from and with peers is paramount. Furthermore, they say, that for PD to be effective over the long term it needs to be sustained, ongoing, in-depth and requires active engagement from the participants. The ‘one-shot’ workshop type programs most typical of the profession have little or no impact on improving teacher effectiveness. What the OME recommends closely mirrors both what Palmer (1998) advocates and what I feel is happening within the small group of math teachers that have been meeting regularly for the past three years.

The most common type of PD I have experienced and is mentioned in the literature, is the workshop. (Garet et al, 2001). A workshop is when a speaker addresses a large group and tries to teach some of the lessons they have learned so that the listeners can adopt those practices themselves. It ‘ticks many of the boxes’ that school boards and unions have for teacher enrichment. After all, it is easy, it is relatively cheap and it targets some of the day-to-day concerns for teachers. The problem is that it usually addresses a very specific need that is not based on what people are struggling with and often leaves the participants annoyed and frustrated that they are forced to attend something that does not take into account any of their real needs. The realistic approach to teacher training is to take teachers seriously, work with them on the basis of their concerns, even to train them in the use of certain skills, but only on the basis of their wish to develop these skills. It implies taking account of the moral purposes of teachers. (Korthagen, 2001). No ‘one-shot’ school board workshop can possibly hope to offer that, no matter how dynamic the speaker might be.

The real problem with workshops, no matter how well-intended, is that they approach PD from a very instructional manner. The expectation seems to be that the audience (in this case teachers, who often aren't that interested in the topic) are missing something in their teaching 'toolbox' that the speaker can provide. Often, in my experience, the subject being discussed is too specific for the audience at large or it is too general to be truly useful. I would venture that all teacher education programs today bring in the works of educational philosophers like Paolo Freire, Plato, Jean Piaget (to name a few). None of those philosophers (or any others) would suggest teaching students as if they were empty vessels (Evans, 1973; Piaget, 1950). Why, then, would school boards treat teachers in that manner? The workshop is targeted at compensating for a lack of knowledge or skill that can be filled. (Broad, Evans. 2006). Teachers need help in understanding the many complexities of the modern classroom, not just the little tricks that can make something a little easier. The intricacies of teaching demand a very targeted and hands on approach that cannot be achieved in a classroom setting with a lecturer and listeners. Clearly workshops are not the answer unless they are for very specific information items like introducing a new curriculum or subject. They are not designed to improve teaching but to inform teachers – which is not the same thing.

Palmer (1998) in *The Courage to Teach*, writes 'that the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching – and living – will become' (p. 5). This statement resonates with me. Teaching isn't about techniques or tricks of the trade, which can help, but ultimately don't make good teaching. What most professional development tends to focus on are the tips and tricks good teachers pick up but not what actually makes them good teachers. I would attend a workshop that focused on being a good teacher.

Unfortunately, what makes a good teacher is different depending on the individual and is extremely difficult to convey. You have to be true to whom you are and genuine to your students. There is no ‘how to’ of being a good teacher! If there were, there would only be master teachers.

Judith Warren Little at UC Berkeley in her 2003 book, *Inside Teacher Community: Representations of Classroom Practice*, writes that the impact of infrequent, poorly designed and/or inadequately delivered approaches to teachers’ professional development is evident in the literature. Not only costly, some approaches to professional development, as Warren-Little reminds us, continue to be dominated by a “one size fits all”, transmission orientation to learning and in many ways are unproductive. She suggests that, not only are these workshops wasteful from a resource allocation perspective, but that they lead to no significant improvement in teachers day to day or long term professional lives. These strategies for professional learning, it is now understood, are no longer sufficient. Also, in a 1990 book, *The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers’ Professional Relations*, she notes how teaching is moving from an individualistic and isolated approach to more of a supportive and collaborative model. She mentions professional learning communities as being much better suited to meeting this change than most other forms of PD.

But what is a Professional Learning Community (PLC)? Richard Dufour (2004), writing in an edition of *Educational Leadership*, suggests that to create a professional learning community, there is a need to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and then hold individuals accountable for results. This is what I feel like our small group has been doing these last few years. In a nutshell, it is thought to be a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-

oriented, growth promoting way (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Toole and Louis, 2002). An underlying assumption is that the teachers involved see the group as a serious collective enterprise (King and Newmann, 2001). It is also generally agreed that effective PLCs have the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of professionals in a school with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning (Louis and Marks. 1995; Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas & Wallace, 2005).

So what are the relative advantages of a Professional Learning Community as a tool for professional development? The key findings for Bolam et al (2005) were that an effective PLC fully exhibits eight key characteristics: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support. All of these characteristics are key to any kind successful group endeavor. They also found that PLC's are capable of changing over time to suit needs as they come up making them very adaptable.

International evidence suggests that educational reform's progress depends on teachers' individual and collective capacity and its link with school-wide capacity for promoting pupils' learning. Building capacity is therefore critical. Capacity is a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support. Put together, it gives individuals, groups, whole school communities and school systems the power to get involved in and sustain learning over time. Developing professional learning communities appears to hold considerable promise for capacity building for sustainable improvement. (Stoll, et al., 2006)

The concept of a PLC is based on a premise from the business sector regarding the capacity of organizations to learn. Modified to fit the world of education, the concept of a learning organization became that of a learning community that would strive to develop collaborative work cultures for teachers (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Within this model it is assumed that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003).

The strongest case for using professional learning communities as a vehicle for teacher professional development comes from Vescio, et al., (2007) where they examined the results of 11 separate studies in the United States on the effectiveness of PLC's. They list four compelling reasons for using this model:

- All 11 studies showed that participation in a PLC leads to positive changes in teacher practice.
- There was a fundamental shift in the daily habits of the classroom teachers involved.
- The focus of each PLC group was on meeting the needs of low achieving students better.
- Teachers in all eleven studies felt a much greater sense of ownership of their curriculum as they were given more leadership in deciding the goals of their individual group.

This all sounds too good to be true, right? While PLCs do offer some exciting prospects in the area of professional development, there are some limitations. For instance, Stoll and Louis (2007) point out that the size and structure of a school (mostly high schools) can make setting up a PLC very difficult, as the focus tends to be on the specific disciplines (math, science, English

etc...) rather than on developmental needs. Also, they contend that there must be some sort of cohesive group in place for a PLC to work effectively because there must be a sense of 'buying into' the model for it to be successful. Finally, they point out that sustainability is often a problem. As the PLC is in place over time it can become stale and the members will lose interest. Our PLC has encountered all of these difficulties over the three years we have been together.

Talbert (2010) talks about how difficult it can be to convince teachers to collaborate after years of working largely on their own and with no one, really, to whom to report. This can present a challenge to anyone looking to change the status quo. Furthermore, he points out that there are real problems in properly measuring the actual impact of any type of professional development on the students. How can you know if what you are doing is any good when it can be quite difficult to measure the eventual outcome? How do you measure whether a student is a better problem solver? Talbert (2010) also talks about the difficulties in how to best dole out the extremely valuable school resources of time, money and space. When you have a large school (such as the one we are in) it can be a logistical nightmare to navigate and negotiate the utilization of all those commodities amongst the many people and/or groups who could use them. Broad and Evans (2006) echo this concern. Finally, Talbert brings up the very real issue of how a group must come to a consensus of what the needs and goals are. It is easy for a group to get stuck and be unable to move forward if the members cannot agree on where they should be going.

Dufour (2007) comments that, the PLC model has now reached a critical juncture as with other well-intentioned school reform efforts. He contends that, in an all-too-familiar cycle, the initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to



bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. He suggests that PLC's 'day' may have already come and gone as an effective means of providing PD but I am not so sure.

Despite these reservations, I go back to the concluding reflections of Broad and Evans (2006). They conclude that PD frameworks and practices will need to be respectful of the emerging literature that highlights the complexity and multifaceted nature of teaching excellence and the professional learning process. It needs to attend to authentic themes and issues in the day-to-day work of teachers in relation to student learning and be respectful of those theoretical and technical knowledge bases that inform the act of teaching. A richer and more integrated mix of sustained and ongoing professional development practices is needed. Furthermore, these practices need to carefully consider 'fitness of purpose' (congruency between learning goals and learning strategies) and encourage collaborative professional (peer and expert) support and problem solving in relation to student learning and school context. There is extremely compelling evidence in the literature that mandated, discrete events that are unrelated to student learning, the context or learning needs of teachers do not encourage sustained, internalized professional learning and/or change in practice.

"Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn" (Palmer, 1998. p 25). Is Palmer talking about the student-to-teacher relationship or the teacher-to-teacher relationship here? I believe that when mentoring is done well there is growth apparent in both parties. PLC's offers the opportunity for experience and vitality to flow between those

that are actively engaged in understanding not only what they do, but also who they are and where they want to go. It can be very empowering.

## Chapter 3 – Qualitative Data Analysis

*“As a young teacher, I yearned for the day when I would know my craft so well, be so competent, so experienced, and so powerful, that I could walk into any classroom without feeling afraid. But now, in my late fifties, I know that day will never come. I will always have fears, but I need not be my fears – for there are other places in my inner landscape from which I can speak and act.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

The first round of interviews took place before the school year had ended (early May 2017) and focused only on the three years the group had actually worked together. I asked them not to consider the year that had been, where we only managed to meet once due to the fact that we did not renew our grant, as we knew our facilitator was not going to be available to us. All of the interviews took place on the same Pedagogical day, which was apropos as they are set aside for teachers to receive professional development of some kind. All but one of the current members of the group agreed to be interviewed. It is to be noted that she, “C”, could not be interviewed because she was pressed for time as she was going off on sabbatical, rather than an unwillingness to be interviewed. Also, “JB” preferred to write his answers rather than have them tape-recorded. A final (but original) member, “T”, agreed to be interviewed but due to his relocation last year to Dubai, it was not practical to interview him.

I would like to note that all references to my colleagues are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the respondents. In most cases, the respondents chose their own pseudonym but in some cases, especially where no interview took place, as above, I have simply used an initial to indicate that person. I do not mention the name of the school to further maintain respondent anonymity.

Once I had transcribed the first round of interviews, there were many questions that I felt remained unanswered yet seemed pertinent to my topic. The second round of interviews took place after the school year had ended (late June 2017). The questions (both sets of which can be

found in Appendix i) are follow-ups to things that came out in the first round. One of the members, Ella, could not be re-interviewed due to illness. Everyone else (including DJ) agreed to be interviewed on audiotape this time. All of the interviews took place on the same day, after exams and marks were completed.

In the course of transcription, it became more and more clear that there were two separate but interrelated ideas that dominated both my observations and questions. One, Professional Learning Communities (or PLCs), refers to the Strategy of organizing professional development based on mutual cooperation. The other, Whole Group Discussion (or WGD), is the in-class tactic of exploring concepts collectively for deeper understanding. It seems to me that they are parallel ideas that can run concurrently to increase satisfaction and efficacy of learning. I do believe that it would be better to separate out the notes (field notes can be found in Appendix iii) on each idea for greater ease in answering my specific research questions. I decided to drop the responses to two questions from the interviews because they did not, in retrospect, address either of the questions I set out to answer nor provide any meaningful background information about the respondents. (The answers to these two questions are, however, noted in my field notes in Appendix iii)

The first question in both the first and second, follow-up round of interviews was a background information question meant to give some context to the teachers answering the queries. The group is made up of four men and four women (currently) ranging in age from 32 up to 58. Each of us is in the mid-to-late portion of our careers, where it seems that ongoing, significant professional development is increasingly more important for us to stay current in our chosen field. (Broad, Evans, 2006). It was interesting to note that not one of my colleagues has a degree specializing in mathematics. We had degree specializations ranging from music to

computer science to early childhood education. I believe this is noteworthy as it gives the group a varied knowledge base that is not limited by the confines of academia's idea of how to teach mathematics. In my opinion, it gives us more of an open mind, not only to the research on best practices but also on new ideas in general.

From this point forward I will go through peoples' responses question by question, indicating what people said and analyzing their responses. I will try to put it into context of both the thesis questions and what the literature says about a particular theme.

*What do you see as the overall goal of the group over the past few years?*

This really was a background question, also meant to give me a sense of what were peoples' expectations of what we were initially trying to do going. This is a question that addresses my colleagues' desire for professional development of some kind. Seven of the eight responders talked simply about wanting to get better at what they already do, while one recognized the desire to connect and collaborate with others. It was to be expected that each person wanted to change or improve something in their teaching as each one chose to join the group in the first place. There was the knowledge from each one of us that while we feel good about what we already do, there is always the possibility of doing things better. I believe that anyone who truly cares about what they do is wary of becoming complacent.

When Randy (not his real name) and I first started this initiative and it was just the two of us, I remember longing for that feeling I had had as a new teacher – to be excited about teaching again. Over the years it had worn off somewhat, and I was frustrated at not being able to figure out how to get it back. I had a circle of supportive colleagues with whom I had surrounded myself, but they were never in a position to comment directly on anything I did or vice versa. I,

like most of the others, was thinking in concrete terms of learning new tips and/or tricks that would make me more effective and I was looking forward to working more closely with my colleagues. This is generally the easy but lazy way of presenting professional development, which rarely has any gains in enrichment for the participants. (Little, 2003)

Palmer (1998) writes that most teachers know how to teach already and do not gain anything from tips and tricks. Instead, the gain in talking about teaching actually comes from the act of discussing teaching. If we try to suggest that there is only one way to do things well in a classroom, then by default, anyone who does not do it that way is left feeling less than adequate. If, instead, we focus on listening to other ways of doing things, we gain so much insight into our own practice. Not to mention that as we, ourselves, talk about our own practice we begin to see it much more clearly. Darling Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) write that helping teachers rethink practice necessitates professional development that involves teachers in the dual capacities of both teaching and learning and creates new visions of what, when, and how teachers should learn.

*Describe your teaching style prior to joining the group and then describe your teaching style today.*

The aim of these dual questions was, of course, to see if the respondents could recognize any changes in their overall practice over the course of time. This question addresses the need for professional development also. The responses were very consistent in one important regard: everyone did recognize that they had, in fact, made changes in their styles directly as a result of the time spent with the group. Most described their teaching prior as good but not particularly

inspired any more. The responses tended to vary more when talking about their teaching styles after having worked together. This says to me that each individual took from the meetings what they felt would add to their styles rather than simply trying to emulate some ideal teacher method. It made the experience that much more valuable to each person involved.

I recall that when we first started meeting, the facilitator showed us a video clip of what research indicated would be an example of best practice-math teaching. Strangely, I did not feel that the expectation was that I teach the way the teacher in the video was teaching, just that this was an example of what it could look like. In other words, I did not feel inadequate – and no respondent indicated that feeling either. Similarly, each time I went to watch one of my colleagues teach a lesson, or watched a video of one of them teaching or even, watched video of myself teaching, I was filled with ideas of what good teaching could look like and it was exciting. It prompted me to consider new and interesting ways to do things that added to my teaching ‘tool box’. The fact that they were doing the same while watching me teach validated the good that I do in the classroom also.

Palmer (1998) writes that teachers often get stuck in their own self-serving delusions about their competence. He contends that our colleagues offer the most effective way to avoid that but, due to an academic culture filled with barriers; it is very difficult to get access. He believes that the barriers between colleagues are greater even than the ones between teachers and their students... and they do not have to be. Teachers have so much to offer (and also to gain) by lowering these barriers and helping each other become greater than we are when alone. “‘Development’ takes what is there as a valuable starting point, not as something to be replaced, but a useful platform on which to build. To do so is to recognize not only that teachers do have valuable existing expertise but also that, if teachers are forced to choose, they will usually revert

to their secure established ways of doing things. The metaphor of ‘building on what is already there’ is not, however, satisfactory because it suggests adding on something separate to what is there, something extra on top. The concept of development, in contrast, implies that whatever is added, whatever is new, will be integrated with what is there already, and will indeed grow from what is there.” (McIntyre & Hagger, 1992, p. 271)

*What, if any, are the significant changes you have made in your teaching as a result of ‘the group’ and what impact do you feel that has had on your students?*

The goal of these questions was to zoom in on what each teacher felt that they had changed specifically in the classroom and to attempt to get at whether they felt there had been noticeable changes in how their students were reacting to the changes. I realize now that I was still operating under a flawed notion of what the true purpose of professional development should be – to develop knowledge of practice rather than simply the skills needed to be ‘better’ educators. (Vescio, et al, 2007). The answers that I noted, despite the very specific intent behind the question, were not to do with specific things (or tricks) in the classroom but about a general but universal shift towards student-centered over teacher-centered education. It did not seem to matter whether the teacher already believed in the effectiveness of this model or not. Those that did not embrace the idea before we started had moved slowly towards it, while those that already believed in its value were more convinced than ever. Regardless of where the individual started off in their opinion of student-centered learning, everyone described more independent, confident and generally happier students as a result of the shift away from the more traditional teacher-centric focus.



Palmer (1998) notes that his greatest joy as a teacher is when he discovers ‘uncharted territory’ with his students. By this he means (I believe) when they are able to explore an idea together as a group. Each of my colleagues described this sort of interaction at least once in the interviews, a moment where they were engaged in an exciting moment of discovery with their classes. It was described as an ‘aha’ moment or ‘a light bulb’ moment but, what was clear was the connection between teacher and class in the quest to uncover something interesting. The students were engaged in the task while the teacher struggled with how much guidance to give to keep the task moving forward. The questions that were asked were deeper and more thought provoking and there was a general feeling of accomplishment for all when it was done.

Vescio, et al, (2007) contend that participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student-centered. In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning; when teachers participate in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time. I was concerned, despite how we all felt we saw an improvement in our students, that without concrete evidence (increased test results for instance) that there would be a lack of validity to my study. I have come to believe, however, that the common belief of the ten competent individuals, who have participated in the group over the past few years, indicates that students are more engaged and independent, counts for something in evaluating the efficacy of the model. That, and the fact that others have undertaken to do quantitative studies on similar models, tells me that there is validity in what we have been doing. Lather (1986) calls this ‘catalytic validity’ – the idea that because the experience (in this case, meeting as a PLC) had such an undeniably positive effect on the members and achieved what we had hoped for, it is valid.

*Describe your general feeling towards teaching before joining the group and then any impact the experience has had on your overall job satisfaction.*

My intention with these questions was really to try to gauge the feeling of community that I, myself, was feeling through our group interaction and was having a very positive effect on my own experience. When ‘Randy’ and I first started the group, I fully expected to learn more about teaching much as I had when I was in teacher training. What was not quite expected was the sense of closeness that I discovered in tackling a difficult problem (how to be a ‘better’ teacher) with first one and then many colleagues. I should not have been surprised as, in retrospect, it was one of the highlights of teacher training also – “I was so excited to be on a journey with other like-minded people trying to learn the ‘art’ of teaching” (as I so ‘eloquently’ noted in my intro).

As I was transcribing and writing my notes of what people had said in the interviews, I was struck by the fact that there are parallels between what we are striving to create for our students and what we are striving to create for ourselves as educators. This is one of them – as we work towards a challenging goal with others the reward is not what happens at the end (getting the right answer) nearly as much as what happens to us as we do it. Palmer (1998) says, “in a society divided by race and ethnicity and gender, I am often moved by the fact that high school and college classrooms contain a broader cross section of people engaged in common work than one can find in many settings. As we reweave our tattered civic fabric, educational institutions are our most important looms.” (p. 92) Teachers in particular, but people in general,

crave community – even when they turn towards greed and individualism. A shared journey is always more enjoyable than one taken alone.

Professional Learning Communities honor both the knowledge and experience of teachers and knowledge and theory generated by other researchers. Through collaborative inquiry, teachers explore new ideas, current practice, and evidence of student learning using processes that respect them as the experts on what is needed to improve their own practice and increase student learning. Learning communities are not a prescriptive, one-size fits all approach. (Vescio, et al, 2007).

*After taking a bit of a hiatus this year due to ‘our facilitators’ absence, what if anything, have you missed?*

The intention of the second round of interviews was to focus on the year off from meeting that we just finished. It was an opportunity to have a ‘before and after view’ of our little experiment. The first question (above) was a reaction to the sense of loss that I knew I was feeling as a result of not meeting formally on a regular basis. I was trying to ascertain whether the others in the group were also feeling that way. To no great surprise, everyone mentioned a similar feeling. There is a strong feeling of camaraderie within the group but the formal meetings serve to give us a common purpose that is greater than simply teaching as well as one can.

Two other responses were common in this question. The first was that people (mostly female) missed our facilitator. She is a strong personality and really good at what she does. I have wondered in the course of writing my notes, how important she actually was to the success of this group. If she were less likeable or good at leading groups or not present at all, would we

have been (as) successful? I am not sure how to measure it. It is unfortunately, an uncontrolled variable in this data group.

The other response that came from the above question was on the subject of accountability and was more unexpected than the other two common responses. I recognize (after the fact) that part of the group dynamic that occurred when we were meeting was that I was doing certain things in preparation for our meetings that I would not have done otherwise. Not because they were not a good idea as much as they require additional effort and time. There is strong evidence to support this assertion in the year when we did not meet officially, where almost no one did those extra tasks that we were doing the previous years. I mention, in particular, watching video tape of myself and others teaching to gain deeper understanding of the process and creating more interesting launches for lessons, to name a few. The group definitely helped us take the extra steps necessary to make good teaching better. Wayne spoke of a sense of accountability that the meetings provided as members wanted to stick to the agreements made during meetings. Without that, it is very easy to let things slide during a busy school year.

Palmer (1998) talks of authority, but I believe that it is related to the sense of accountability that I mention above. He says that, “external tools of power have occasional utility but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher’s inner life.” (p. 33). I believe he is talking about the powerful ‘draw’ that humans experience to go back to the comfortable feeling of tried and true. In this particular case he refers to teachers stepping back from self-examination of what they do and hiding behind the veneer of ‘what they have done before because it works.’ This was clearly happening to all of us, based on the responses, as we got away from meeting and talking and examining our practice.

There is broad agreement in the literature that members of a PLC consistently take collective responsibility for student learning (King & Newmann, 2001; Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1995; Leithwood & Louis, 1998). It is assumed that such collective responsibility helps to sustain commitment, puts peer pressure and accountability on those who do not do their fair share, and eases isolation (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). I heard my colleagues say that often they were doing certain things not because it was the right thing to do or the best thing for them but that they made a commitment to the group and that they didn't want to disappoint.

*Do you feel that you have continued to teach the way you described since we started the group or have you gone back to old habits?*

My intention for this question was to find out if people felt there had been a fundamental shift in their teaching that had carried over despite taking a year off. I felt it was important to ascertain if the effects were only present when we were meeting. If so, I would have to believe that what we were really gaining through these meetings was only a sense of shared experience as opposed to a real shift in each teacher's ability to do their job effectively. Each one of my colleagues (myself included) reported that habits they had formed during our meetings had continued and they felt strongly that these changes were now part of their teaching process. I want to be clear here that the changes that each made were not the same, just the permanence of those changes was.

Palmer (1998) writes that as we discover the techniques that work for us and incorporate them into our teaching, the techniques themselves have less importance than the fact that we have found them. If the focus is on one particular technique, then anyone who is not comfortable

or capable of doing things that way can never be successful. Instead, if you find the tools that work for whom you are, both as a teacher and a person, then there will be a more permanent and effective shift in capability. It seems to me that each person in the group found what worked for them through our discussions and work and made it their own – which helped each one in the way that they needed.

Stoll, et al, (2006) suggest that collaboration concerns staff involvement in developmental activities with consequences for several people, going beyond superficial exchanges of help, support, or assistance. The link between collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose is highlighted (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Feelings of interdependence are central to such collaboration: a goal of better teaching practices would be considered unachievable without collaboration, linking collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose. In our group we have a strong core of people that are interested in improving and evolving what they do professionally. The PLC allows us to bring our various strengths together and work on what our perceived weaknesses are while growing closer as a group. There is a symbiotic association which allows each member to take what they need while simultaneously sharing what they have to offer. It is not perfect but it is powerful.

*In your opinion, do you think that the better we get, the better the students get? If there are no tangible results, is it still a worthwhile endeavor?*

This was a thought that was constantly coming to my mind during the first round of interviews. Virtually every participant felt that there had been a gain in their students' ability to follow the material as a result of new things that they, as teachers, were doing in the class. I was interested in knowing if only the belief in this gain was enough. I suppose not unexpectedly, each

respondent felt strongly that there had been a concrete gain for their students directly as a result of what they were now doing in class. By far the most common answer was that because the kids were happier to participate in the classes we were now hosting, there was a gain in the engagement and by default, the understanding of what we were doing.

The most insightful response, I felt came from 'Wayne'. He said, "How I know it's working is how I hear kids talk in class. There's no way that that doesn't make them better. So like kids are working in groups, they can say things like, "I understand what you're saying but..." They're having discussions about math, they're using different words, and they're linking ideas. I cannot imagine that being worse than kids not talking about math and working on their own and doing things in a more traditional way. That is the big tell for me that I think they're doing better or understanding more math. The way we assess doesn't always get to that. I don't know that our assessments match how enriched the experience is for the kids but, just based on those observations, why would you ever go back to whatever you were doing?" In my mind, this is true. The fact that we are seeing changes in behavior, not just grades, says that we are doing the right things to improve the educational experience of our students regardless of any concrete assessments.

Palmer (1998) notes, "In a culture that sometimes equates work with suffering, it is revolutionary to suggest that the best inward sign of vocation is deep gladness – revolutionary but true. If a work is mine to do, it will make me glad over the long haul, despite the difficult days. Even the difficult days will ultimately gladden me, because they pose the kinds of problems that can help grow in a work that is truly mine." (p. 30). By creating an atmosphere in our classes where it is actually enjoyable to work on a difficult problem by sharing the burden together and bringing everyone's insights into the conversation, we are undoubtedly improving

the abilities of our students. The same can also be said for our staffrooms when we take on this kind of group dynamic. It is much easier to get through tough times during the year when you feel that you have the support of colleagues going through similar tribulations.

Little (2002) reports that research has steadily converged on claims that a professional community is an important contributor to instructional improvement and school reform. Louis, et al, (1995) found that in schools with a genuine sense of community and increased sense of work efficacy led to increased classroom motivation and work satisfaction, and greater collective responsibility for student learning. In Australia, Andrews and Lewis (2007) also found that where teachers developed a PLC, it not only enhanced their knowledge base, but also had a significant impact on their classroom work.

*In your opinion, did we set out to become better teachers by improving what we do but inadvertently become better because we were more engaged?*

This was a follow-up question to the previous one where I wanted to ascertain what was the real effect of what we were doing? The original purpose of getting together was the generic ‘to get better’. But, what does that really mean? The general feeling, at the beginning, was that it meant for us to have better lesson plans or strategies for our least capable students. The reality, as evidenced by the responses, was that the result was much more layered than that. Yes, everyone did gain some practical strategies, which could be accessed (I suppose) through a workshop lead by a particularly skilled speaker with knowledge of our particular needs. What we all commented on was how much better we were feeling about what we were doing. For instance, ‘Polly’ (who I wasn’t all that sure would even join our group) had this to say in her



response, “I think the brainstorming that comes out of it, the ideas are fantastic. I’d like more opportunity for that not just within our school. I think it’s also contagious; the more people you have like that, whether it’s younger or older, that range together, the energy, the fun, the collegiality that comes out of it is really important.”

Polly’s response exemplifies the typical reaction to what we all seemed to be feeling. I remember thinking early in my transcription that maybe the only real improvements we were making were in our renewed enthusiasm, which was undeniable. This is known as the Hawthorne Effect, where the positive feelings associated with participation in some activity give false positive readings of actual gains. (Vescio, et al, 2007). This particular question was meant to address whether we were actually making changes to our teaching or simply basking in the glow of working together.

In the Vescio, et al, (2007) study, when they addressed the Hawthorne Effect, they concluded that, while the small number of studies made it impossible to discount the possibility of the false positive, four of the ten studies did report a differential impact on teaching practice or student learning as a result of participating in a PLC and therefore would contradict the effect. My colleagues also, all mentioned doing things differently as a result of things they had witnessed and discussed in our meetings. Whether it was a question routine, or being more thoughtful in the questions they asked, everyone mentioned something that they had changed permanently that was improving their teaching practice. For these reasons, I do not believe what we saw was, in fact, the Hawthorne effect but real changes in professional behavior.

But, if all we really changed was our enthusiasm towards teaching would that even be a bad thing? According to Palmer (1998), “Academics often suffer the pain of dismemberment. On

the surface, this is the pain of people who thought they were joining a community of scholars but find themselves in a distant, competitive, and uncaring relationship with colleagues and students.” (p. 20). I don’t believe that we have only managed to make ourselves feel better by working collaboratively; the responses just don’t support that conclusion. However, I believe that there is still real value in feeling connected to your colleagues. It makes difficult days easier and good days better knowing that you have someone sharing the same experience and offering support or sharing success.

*What is your general opinion of the professional development offered by the school board and by the teachers union? Do you believe that this kind of model (PLC) could be a viable alternative to the PD currently being offered? If so, what do you see as the barriers?*

These are the questions, I suppose, I really was hoping to answer. From the day we started working together, I was keenly aware of the positive impact the experience had on me personally and on my ability to do my job. It was the most formative experience I had had as a teacher since I left the early childhood program. That, coupled with my own disappointing experiences with the professional development being offered by the School Board and the Teacher’s Union, made me wonder why everyone wasn’t doing it. I remember coming out of a Board mandated workshop for 400 or so teachers and hearing how angry many were to be subjected to what they felt was a pointless and even demeaning three hours of their valuable time. This was money that was spent in order to (somehow) make us better teachers and to inspire us. Instead, it had the exact opposite effect of demotivating and even angering the attendees.

Largely as expected, each of my associates felt that the PD currently being offered was poor (at best) and that our little professional learning community offered an exciting alternative. There was more diversity in the answers when it came to what people saw as barriers to this type of PD but there were some common themes also. The main deterrent people saw was in funding. This funding issue was mainly in convincing administrators to part with funds designated for teacher development. For teachers to be able to meet (and for there to be an animator) funding would need to be available. I believe that there are funds that are accessible (like the grant we applied for and received) that make this concern manageable.

A more difficult problem that was brought up was how to convince teachers to ‘let their guards down’ and trust their colleagues. This is a much greater challenge in that trust does not necessarily come easily for many. It is not easy to invite someone to comment on the job you are doing, particularly if you have been doing it behind closed doors for some time. The fear of potential criticism can easily outweigh the possibility of constructive feedback. It was also mentioned that older teachers, closer to retirement, might not be willing to make any changes at all. This is an all-too-real problem for any PLC. If the initiative is to be successful, there needs to be fairly universal buy in for it to be successful. If it is mandated by administration then the issues of accountability and teacher resistance begin to assert themselves. There is real animosity for many teachers who feel that administration is out of touch with the realities of the modern classroom and that they feel taken advantage of (which does happen...)

Palmer (1998) has this to say, “If teaching cannot be reduced to technique, it is both good news and bad. We no longer need suffer the boredom many of us feel when teaching is approached as a question of ‘how to do it’. We rarely talk with each other about teaching at any depth – and why should we when we have nothing more tips and tricks and techniques to

discuss? That kind of talk fails to touch the heart of a teacher's experience." (p.11) This statement gets at the heart of the difficulty of finding meaningful PD for teachers. Everyone wants quick fix solutions that cannot possibly fulfill the much more complex needs of professionals looking to improve upon their craft. Until teachers can look beyond quick fixes and into themselves for what is really required, there can only be continued frustration.

McIntyre and Hagger (1998) believe that professional development takes what is there as a valuable starting point, not as something to be replaced, but a useful platform on which to build. To do so is to recognize not only that teachers do have valuable existing expertise but also that, if teachers are forced to choose, they will usually revert to their secure established ways of doing things. The metaphor of 'building on what is already there' is not, however, satisfactory because it suggests adding on something separate to what is there, something extra on top. The concept of development, in contrast, implies that whatever is added, whatever is new, will be integrated with what is there already, and will indeed grow from what is there."

I think that when you combine what Palmer (1998) and McIntyre and Hagger (1998) say about this type of professional development model you start to get the sense that, despite the difficulties, it is worth it. My colleagues and I are desperate for meaningful professional development that will allow us to grow by both mentoring and being mentored. This would simultaneously make us feel valued and supported. This is something no workshop can offer.

## Chapter 4 – Conclusion and Recommendations

*“How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our students, ourselves and educational reform? That simple question challenges the assumption that drives most reform – that meaningful change comes not from the human heart but from factors external to ourselves, from budgets, methodologies, curricula, and institutional restructuring. Deeper still, it challenges the reality and power that drive western culture.”*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

When I first decided to turn our professional learning community experience into the focus of my Masters thesis it was because I recognized how much the time I spent working collaboratively with my colleagues had meant to me. In the first paragraph of my introduction I mention wanting to ‘regain a feeling of discovery and connectedness’ that had waned as I transitioned from a new and inexperienced teacher to a more seasoned but certainly also a more self-contained one. Even before doing any research I felt pretty strongly that we were on to something special. Over the course of the past months, as I have read (and read) educational journals and interviewed and transcribed my colleagues’ thoughts on the subject, I am more convinced than ever that professional development is crucial and that professional learning communities offer a very effective means with which to deliver it. I believe that approaching the topic in this manner was both appropriate and effective and that I am in a better position to answer my central questions.

It all started with Palmer (1998) for me and continued through a great number of educational and peer-reviewed journals. With my own experience as the backdrop, and with fresh understanding as a result of my readings, I came up with my two research questions. The first one was to try to understand the value of professional development for teachers and why, in my experience, it seemed like it wasn’t offered in a more meaningful way. The second question was aimed at understanding the small group dynamic that I had experienced with my colleagues and whether or not that couldn’t somehow take the place of the ineffective PD I had been

subjected to. I felt that the most efficient way to examine the issue was through a combination of focusing on what the literature says about best practices and then discussing it with my colleagues – also roughly the structure of our meetings over the past three years.

I think it appropriate at this time to mention Parker J. Palmer (1998) and his book, *The Courage to Teach – Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Throughout this dissertation I have tried to weave the wisdom of what he says in with my own thoughts and experiences. I would say that the underlying message throughout his book is the idea that we are stronger as a group than we are as a collection of individuals. It is an idea that is borne out through the educational literature and the results of my own research as well as my own personal experience. Teachers are amongst the most caring and committed individuals (as a whole) that I have ever encountered. It only makes sense that we would rely on each other in order to be stronger. The question I have come back to again and again has been why we seem to make it so difficult?

In my attempt to answer the above question I interviewed my coworkers to see if they were also feeling that we (as a PLC group) were better off together as Palmer suggests. I recognize that the size of my focus group is small but the data provided comes from the experiences of the past four years. I include the past year, where we did not meet, as it gave me a valuable contrast to the previous three, where we did. The near unanimity of many responses, coupled with the strong parallels to what the literature said, suggests to me that there is validity to my research and that I am on to something here.

Added to my associates thoughts and opinions I read a lot of research literature to shed further light on the issue. I recognize that any time someone does a literature review they will

invariably gravitate towards authors that agree with their point of view and will, by necessity, have to limit the articles they review. However, I did my best to try to stay unbiased and to read as many different authors as possible. What I found was that in the central issues of general professional development and professional learning communities as PD, there was overwhelmingly affirming research. This suggests to me that there is some consensus within the educational scholar community as to the necessity of the former and the validity of the latter.

In the course of my research and writing I have often been struck by the many parallels between what our group is trying to institute within our classrooms for our students and in our staffrooms amongst ourselves. We all want classrooms that are open and collaborative in nature in order to make learning more meaningful and more permanent. It is what the research says has the greatest chance for student success. (Broad and Evans, 2006). We also want the same thing for ourselves as we meet and discuss that very issue. Again, the research says that is a strong method for achieving success in professional development. (Vescio, et al., 2007). Another parallel I encountered was the fact that for both students and for ourselves, the real gain in what we have achieved does not seem to be in the final outcome (better grades) but in the shared experience of discovery learning.

What I learned from the literature and from my colleagues during the course of this thesis research was that effective professional development involves more than improving or adding on to what teachers do well. (McIntyre & Haggart, 1992). It must be blended with what they already do to be beneficial and lasting. PD is the continuous learning that must happen over the course of a teaching career in order to keep up with the rigorous demands of an ever-evolving clientele and world. Every article or book I read explained quite clearly how important effective PD is to both student success and to teacher morale. My colleagues all sensed that there were strong signs of

growth from their students as a result of the work we had been doing. Also, there was unanimous agreement that working together had been valuable to them when they were doing it regularly and was missed when we were not.

The literature shows that many teachers in the first five years of the profession suffered from a sense of isolation that made them vulnerable to burnout. (Roulston, Legette and Womack, 2005). It also shows that teachers in the later stages of their careers can become isolated due to the nature of a profession where they spend most of their time behind a closed classroom door. (Broad and Evans, 2006). It was suggested that some sort of mentoring was helpful in overcoming this sense of isolation for both new and seasoned teachers (Stoll, et al. 2006). When we first undertook this venture I was looking for ways to improve my teaching but I would say that the sense of ‘connectedness’ that I have felt with my colleagues has done more for me as a teacher than any techniques ever could. My coworkers echoed that sentiment. Mentoring does seem to improve working conditions for both mentor and mentee – which is very important for long-term job satisfaction.

Professional learning communities (or PLC’s) are a form of mentoring whereby a cohesive group pursues a common goal through collaboration and sharing. The key to success for any PLC seems to be having goals based upon research. The success comes in the form of positive changes over time in teacher practice as well as in greater ownership of curriculum. Studies show that no single factor was greater to student success than teacher proficiency. (Darling et al, 1999). PLC’s offer a means to provide mentoring for members by group sharing of best practices ideas which can lead to significant changes in day to day practice. Our group displayed elements of both these benefits. Each member noted the effects of mentoring each other as strongly positive and having made permanent changes to their teaching practices. I think



it important to note that these changes were still in effect even after we had taken a year off from working together, suggesting some longevity.

Through the literature it is clear that single workshops do little to meet the need for teachers to stay current in their field. For some reason, we are one of the few professional orders that do not have specific guidelines for ongoing and effective professional development. (Broad and Evans, 2006). The research suggests that professional learning communities are one way in which teachers can meet the dual needs of mentorship and skill refinement. (Louis and Marks, 1995; Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas & Wallace, 2005). In our small group it was very apparent that this particular model was meeting the needs of a fairly diverse collection of individuals. There were different ages, backgrounds and grade levels taught but everyone was very positive in their responses as to the success of what we had started. There was also consensus in that they wanted it to continue and that it could work for other departments and schools. Which begs the question, why aren't we? (Other departments and schools I mean).

The main obstacles, according to the readings and to my colleagues, to setting up department or school wide PLCs are a lack of time, trust and willingness to break from the status quo. Let me explain. For a PLC to be in existence there needs to be the time to meet and discuss. My experience is that time is in short supply in most schools. The school day can be long but frenzied and then there are the further demands of coaching, sitting on various committees and prepping for the next day or week. Pedagogical days (which are intended for PD of some sort) are usually littered with meetings and other busyness. Time was mentioned in several articles as a commodity that administrators find difficult to allocate to activities that aren't immediately quantifiable. (Stoll and Louis, 2007), (Talbert, 2010).

The obvious solution to this problem is to use (ped)agogical days the way they were meant to (since they occur monthly) but then administrators are faced with a whole new dilemma: how to make sure that all the departments are actually working the way they are supposed to? Principals are tasked with ensuring that every employee meets the contractual number of hours on a ped day. Unfortunately, my experience is that not everyone does. So, like most rules made for the minority, they affect everyone adversely. It is unfortunate that a lack of trust in the work force can derail such a promising endeavor. But trust also goes both ways.

The reality is that many teachers would not trust an edict passed down by the school board either (like instituting a PLC) due to an underlying wariness of professional development as mandated by the board. After years of poorly designed and instituted PD, coupled with leftover ‘bad blood’ from past labor disputes, teachers have come to distrust the school boards and, in particular, anything they propose in order to improve standards. It was clear in the interviews how poorly thought of the school board PD is. It is also unfortunate that many teachers would almost certainly turn their backs on (even) a good initiative by the board.

The obvious solution to the above would be to have the teachers’ union propose this kind of initiative. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of trust in the teacher’s union due mostly to ineffective bargaining on our behalf. Also, and perhaps much more daunting, is the very real challenge of overcoming the status quo. People are generally more comfortable with what they know and often will resist change unless it produces immediate results which, ironically is the basic idea of the much dreaded workshop – somebody tasked with improving teacher proficiency in a two-hour presentation. The chances of success are so low that it is hardly worth discussing but often, that is all the time teachers are willing to give before giving up on an initiative. It makes it very difficult to offer effective long term PD.

I believe, based on the interviews and the literature on successful PD by Broad and Evans (2006) that a large part of the success of our particular professional learning community was due to several key factors. I think it is why we weren't hampered by many of the difficulties described above. It may very well point the way for instituting PLC's as a program for professional development on a much larger scale (our school board) and eventually produce more satisfied, better prepared teachers.

I believe that the most important factor in our success has to be in leadership. It all started with motivated teachers interested in changing things up and soon after, others followed. If there is mistrust in management and unions, people will still follow enthusiastic leadership. There was never a sense that people had to join but everyone was welcome. Each year, we had one or more join the collective, interested in being a part of what they saw the rest of us eagerly discussing. For such a group to start, there would have to be some sort of leadership willing to take it on. It could be as few as two (or even one) but, like any initiative, it requires leadership.

I don't know that our group (or perhaps any group) could ever achieve 100% participation. Even if it were mandated, there would likely be people who are not interested or willing to change what they do. That is their right. It was brought up as a 'roadblock' to instituting a PLC in the interviews. I have given this a lot of thought and, in my opinion 'outliers' don't detract from the group. They still benefit from the work the group does, they just do not get the very real benefit of shared experience. Their benefit comes from being part of a vibrant and enthusiastic workplace – some of which is bound to 'rub off' on them. Also, as new ideas are introduced into the department, they are exposed to them, albeit only as an observer. This may prompt them to try something new.

The second reason, I think, for our (relative) success lies in the application of the grant we used to pay for our meeting times. It removed the problem of finding time (or money) from our principal to pay for the substitute teachers who covered our classes while we met. It is difficult to find real time to meet and discuss pedagogy with colleagues. We removed that obstacle by applying for funds from the provincial government (PDIG – Professional Development Initiative Grant). The problem here is that if there are multiple departments in multiple schools vying for the same grant money there may not be enough to go around. There just isn't enough money to go around if each school is applying for the same fund for multiple departments.

The solution, in my mind, still lies in using 'ped' days for what they were intended – to talk about pedagogy. The real difficulty here is to convince administration that this is both valuable and cost-effective. Currently those days are intended for staff meetings and other activities where an administrator can both see that everyone is there and what they are doing. It can be difficult for some to allow their staff to largely 'police' themselves in terms of what they are doing on what amounts to a 'free' day. While there will always be those that take advantage of that kind of freedom I still believe that the vast majority of teachers (at least that I have come in contact over the last 15 years) are professionals and would take an initiative like this seriously and strive to get the most out of the experience – particularly if there is strong leadership at each department level.

The final reason for success is that what we were modeling was based on research of best practices for math teachers. This is quite clear in the research about any kind of professional development and specifically PLCs, for it to be effective it must be based on some ideal of what good teaching can look like. The expectation is not that everyone emulates what the research

says is good teaching but that everyone is exposed to it and then takes from it what fits in with their own style. This ensures that everyone stays true to their own strengths and thus avoids making anyone feel inadequate. We had a PD leader that provided the research for us but I know that the research is available for anyone willing to look.

I believe that what was achieved over the course of the three years that we worked together was not an anomaly. The research is very favorable on the model we adopted and we are certainly not unique in our success. Furthermore, while I respect my colleagues greatly, I do not think that we are an exceptional group. This type of PD can occur (almost) anywhere if the motivation is there. The leadership came from several sources and while we benefitted from strong pedagogical help, I do believe that with everything else being the same, we would have been successful as a group. This is well thought out, effective PD that is inclusive, gives teachers both a sense of connectedness and valuable insight into what good teaching should look like. It truly helps professionals develop their skills and feel like a part of a community.

The key, I think, in making this a viable alternative to the PD offered right now involves ‘selling’ the idea gently to both administrators and teachers alike. The model has different attractive features to both groups. For teachers the selling points would have to be in increased time and more ideas to help them grow. I don’t think it could be mandated because it would likely be treated with suspicion and even reluctance. Instead, it would need to spread slowly. First through a school, department by department and then to other schools interested in trying what we have started. Currently, the science department at our school took on the model and worked with it all of last year. I believe that other departments within our school would be open to trying it also. From there, it would be plausible that other schools, interested in what we are trying, try it also.

The difficulties for administrators would be negated, I think by the benefits of a better prepared, happier work force where they wouldn't be put upon to manage the professional development. They would, of course, need to figure out how to better inform their teaching staffs about important details without having to meet as often. But I know that is possible as I have worked for some principals who meet very rarely and give teachers the respect of deciding how to spend the time best. If administrators were to allow 'ped' days to be used for departmental meetings led by an animator with knowledge of best teaching practice, they would soon see the relative benefits. Some of what they would have to give up would be control of their staff – which can be daunting for many.

The way I can see this type of plan unfolding is in multiple layers. If I use my own school and board as the testing ground I can explain how it might play out. We have already been meeting as a group of math teachers; I would say that was the first step. Last year, the science department adopted the same PLC model based largely on our success. That would be step 2. The next step would be to approach different departments and invite them to see what one of our meetings looks like (either math or science) to hopefully try it out themselves. Palmer (1998) writes that this should be able to work school wide but, in my opinion, because of the sheer size and the difference in best practices between say math and English, it makes more sense to go department by department – at least initially. Smaller departments like physical education or art might be able to join another department with similar approaches. In this manner one could entice an entire school to adopt the practice in the course of a year or two.

Meanwhile, I believe the principal could be convinced try out at least one of the 'ped' days as a test for a PLC type meeting to allow different departments to meet and discuss pedagogy. The principal would also have to provide for an animator to lead each group. Or

perhaps, some of the people that have been part of other groups could be used as animators for this type of test run. The hope being, that if successful, the ‘ped’ days would all be used in this manner going forward. I feel strongly that our principal would agree to this request as he has been kept up to date from the very beginning of our group meetings. The principal has arranged for the PD leader we had working with our group in the past present to our entire staff how to set up a similar professional community within other departments at our school.

I feel that once the PLC model is up and running within the school, that by word of mouth alone, the idea would spread to other schools. Members who participate and then move on to other schools would be likely to spread the word. Also, in discussion with friends and colleagues at other schools, I have received plenty of interest in how to set up a similar system for them. In March 2018 I will be presenting my thoughts on setting up a PLC for other schools at a school board sponsored event. I believe that the administration team at our school will share the idea with their colleagues at other schools as I’ve seen that principals tend to share a success they have had as a point of pride when they meet. It is entirely feasible that this model could be a fixture within the school board within three to five years.

One crucial thing that I have discovered over the course of writing this thesis is that while the pedagogy that we have discussed has made me a better communicator, it is the time spent working with my colleagues that has made me a better teacher, more in touch with my place within the classroom and with my students. Palmer (1998) so often talks about understanding ‘one’s inner landscape’ but I did not fully comprehend what that really meant until I had this eye opening experience with my colleagues over the past several years. I believe that anyone open to letting their colleagues into the narrow confines of our professional lives stands to gain so much in terms of enrichment that the reward far outweighs the risk.

This has been such a rewarding experience for me since the very first day we embarked on this journey. All of the readings, but Parker J. Palmer in particular, have shown me that what we have experienced is real and better still, reproducible. I believe that the teaching community has so much to offer that it is a shame that so many teachers don't get the most out of the experience. I would like to think that this type of PD offers everyone in the profession the hope of a long and rewarding career. I look forward to continuing this path I have embarked upon with my colleagues and seeing where it takes us.



## Implications for future research

*"It was my turn to become a mentor to someone else. I needed to turn around and look for the new life emerging behind me, to offer to younger people the gift that had been given to me when I was young. As I did, my identity and integrity had new chances to evolve in each new encounter with my students' lives."*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

This was an exploratory study and on a rather small scale. The answers that the respondents gave were consistent with what the data from the literature said so I feel that it can be judged to be valid. However, professional development and professional learning communities as PD are a much more complex topic deserving of further study. Once more departments within the school have adopted this model it would be useful to conduct surveys with them also to see if they have similar experiences and what, if any, are the subject – specific differences. Similarly, once other schools adopt the model, it would be useful to conduct the same research.

As there is a large body of literature it was not practical to include all of it in my literature review. I did my best to include as much as was practical into my paper. It would be helpful, I think, to combine the literature from some of the larger reviews into one very large examination of what other studies in other countries have to say on both of these topics.

Ultimately, however, the only way to truly track the success of the ongoing initiative would be to track student learning over time. This would require either (or both) tracking (in our case) student math scores over several years to see if there was a gain in performance or interviewing students periodically to ascertain understanding. As stated in the introduction this would be a considerable undertaking requiring several years of data as well as work. I would be interested in pursuing this in the future as I think it would be worthwhile and interesting.

Some important issues about PLCs were not discussed in the paper and would benefit from being addressed at a later time. The relative importance of the PD animator was never quite

clear throughout the process. It would be interesting to study how important that person is to the success of the group. How much of our success was the result of the particular leader, well-versed in professional leadership? Was the success of our PLC contingent upon her leadership or would other, strong leadership by one of the group members (like 'Randy' or myself for instance) be enough to move everyone forward? I feel like the more accessible initiative success is to a group with untrained leaders the more likely it is to be adopted on a larger scale.

Also, why do some teachers refuse to participate in an exciting initiative and what effect that has on the outcome would be interesting to address. Within our department there are two teachers that have made it clear they are just not interested in participating and one who has expressed interest but has, as yet, not committed. It would be interesting to primarily look at the barriers these teachers see to joining their peers in professional development. I feel it would improve the whole process if we could better understand teachers who are reticent to change. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine if that is just okay. If you don't have 100% participation does that diminish the gains of the group? I feel like it does not but it could make an interesting examination.

Finally, is there a way to bring a professional learning community into a school if there is no strong core willing to lead it? This is similar and related to the issue of the role of our PD leader played but is, I think, an issue all to itself. Is there a way that a school or department can embrace this kind of professional development without strong leadership? Again, this speaks to the accessibility of programs such as this one. Many schools I have been in (more particularly in elementary schools) could benefit from this type of initiative but lack the personnel to institute it. Once it was up and running I felt like they would be able to maintain it but actually starting it requires the courage to put oneself out ahead of ones colleagues. That can be off-putting and

frightening to many. I wonder if it is possible to bypass that and have a principal take a chance on instituting such a program and then leaving it to the staff to make the most of it? I'm not sure that most teachers would be ready for that. It certainly would require a strong and self-assured administrator to try something like that.

Any of these issue are worthy of their own studies. I would be interested in pursuing any and all of them given the time...

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## *Appendices*

### *i – Research Questions*

#### Initial interviews

1. How long have you participated in the PDIG?
2. What do you see as the overall goal of the group throughout the past few years?
3. Describe your teaching style prior to joining the group.
4. Describe your teaching style today.
5. What, if any, are the significant changes you feel you have made in your teaching as a result of the Pdig?
6. What, if any, do you feel has been the impact on the students you teach as a result of the changes you have made?
7. Describe your general feeling toward teaching prior to joining the Pdig.
8. What impact has your participation in the Pdig had (if any) on your overall job satisfaction?
9. What do you see as the future of the group involved in this project?
10. What are the weaknesses that you see in this type of professional development initiative? Are there things you feel should be improved? If so, what?



### Follow-up interview questions

- 1 Give me a quick 'biography' of your teaching experience.
- 2 After taking a bit of a hiatus this year due to Megan's absence, what, if anything, have you missed?
- 3 Do you feel that you have continued to teach the way you described since we started the pdig or have you gone back to old habits?
- 4 How important do you think the task of watching video and discussing it with the group is/was to your overall learning?
- 5 In your opinion, do you think that the better we get, the better the kids get? If there are no tangible results, is it still a worthwhile endeavor?
- 6 In your opinion, did we set out to become better teachers by improving what we do but inadvertently become better because we were more engaged?
- 7 Are there groups you feel more or less comfortable changing your teaching style with? If so, why do you think that is?
- 8 What is your general opinion of the professional development offered by the board and by the union?
- 9 Do you think that this kind of model could be a viable alternative to the PD currently being offered? What are the limitations that you feel this model faces?

ii - Written Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research project on *professional development for teachers*, entitled Teachers Valuing Teachers and conducted by Lars Nyberg. I understand that:

- This research project is part of a masters program at Concordia University
- My participation consists of an interview, to last approximately one hour and if necessary, a follow-up interview of similar length.
- I am not required to answer any questions I do not wish to answer.
- I may withdraw from the research at any time, up to and including, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017 by writing a brief email requesting the change
- The interview will be taped if I so agree. The only people that will listen to this tape includes: the researcher, and possibly, the Faculty Supervisor (Dr. Ayaz Naseem).
  - **I agree to having the interview tape recorded Yes / No**
- The data will be kept by the researcher for a period of five years. This research will be presented in the form of a final Masters Thesis paper, to be read by the Faculty Supervisor and two committee members, Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz and Dr. Ailie Cleghorn.
- The results of this research may also be presented in workshops or conferences.
- The presentation of the research will not identify me in any way. My name, as well as any information which could identify me, will be taken out of all presentation of the research (conferences and final papers)

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Signature of Participant

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Signature of Researcher

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Name of Participant (please print)

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Name of Researcher (Please print)

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Date

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Date

iii - "Field" Notes:

- The first round of interviews took place before the school year had ended (early May) and focused only on the three years we had actually worked together. I asked them not to consider the year that had been where we only managed to meet once due mostly to the fact that we did not renew our grant as we knew our facilitator, Megan, was not going to be available to us. All of the interviews took place on the same day. All but one of the current members of the group agreed to be interviewed. It is to be noted that she, "C", could not be interviewed because she was pressed for time as she was going off on sabbatical, rather than an unwillingness to be interviewed. Also, JB preferred to write his answers rather than have them tape recorded. A final member, "T", agreed to be interviewed but due to his relocation last year to Dubai, it was not practical to interview him.
- In the course of transcription it became more and more clear that there were two separate but interrelated ideas that dominated both my observations and questions. One, Professional Learning Communities (or PLC's), refers to the Strategy of organizing professional development based on mutual cooperation. The other, Whole Group Discussion (or WGD), is the in class tactic of exploring concepts collectively for deeper understanding. It seems to me that they are parallel ideas that can run concurrently to increase satisfaction and efficacy of learning. I do believe that it would be better to separate out the notes on each idea for greater ease in answering my specific research questions.
- Below are the notes/thoughts specifically about the efficacy of Professional Learning Communities that came to me as I was transcribing the first round of interviews:
  - We must understand our 'place within the class' as teachers
  - A better 'community' is being created (*both within the class and staffroom*)
  - As not much appears to have changed academically for her students, why does WB feel so very positive about the changes that she has made?
  - Is it the perception of making changes that gives us this positive feeling?
  - There is a sense of shared experience at work (*siege mentality?*)
  - Striving to get better in the company of others is a powerful experience (*ie. Working out with Randy & DJ*)
  - **Follow up question:** Are you still feeling fulfilled even after hiatus? (*not used*)
  - **Follow up question:** How do you feel now towards your colleagues? (*not used*)

- **Follow up question:** Is there a carryover from the previous three years? (*not used*)
  - **Follow up question:** Do we ‘get better’ just by trying to ‘get better’?
  - It seems Phoebe is feeling somewhat more confident about teaching as a result of working together with the group.
  - **Follow up question:** What do you miss most from our meetings this year?
  - **Follow up question:** How important was the process of watching video of each other teaching/watching each other teach in class to our success?
  - Was watching video simply our ‘task’ and did it really matter to the outcome?
  - **Follow up question:** Do you believe that the better we get, the better the kids get?
  - **Follow up question:** Has your original purpose of the Pdig shifted? (*not used*)
  - Wayne appears to have gone into the group work with a very tangible expectation. (*wanted to come out with concrete lesson ideas*)
  - Wayne does appear to have gotten more from the experience both professionally and socially than what he was looking for initially.
  - Does the experience allow each person to meet their own individual needs with the backdrop of best practices and a fellowship aspect on top?
  - What is it we are really gaining from the experience?
  - **Follow up question:** Did we set out to become better teachers by improving upon what we do and somehow become better because we were more engaged? (*What does that say about the very nature of PD?*)
  - Randy talks about the strength of “seeing what other people are doing in their class.” (that seems to require a certain amount of trust)
  - Both Randy and Wayne talk about wanting to ‘get better’. (*Isn’t that what we all want?*)
  - **Follow up question:** Did the Pdig improve your relationships with your colleagues? (*not used*)
- Below are the notes/thoughts specifically about the efficacy of Whole Group Discussion as a teaching tactic that came to me as I was transcribing the first round of interviews:

- Once you establish the routine, kids take to it very well (*referring to creation of pods and whole group discussion model*)
  - Why is it easier to establish whole group discussion with some groups over others?
  - “The students are better thinkers.” (*How do we know? Does it truly matter?*)
  - **Follow up question:** Are you still teaching the way you initially described despite the year ‘off’? (*provide specifics*)
  - We have seen changes other than in grades (*for our students*)
  - Phoebe can’t explain how can’t explain how she knows the kids are better learners, but she feels it. (*same as WB, should be a **Follow up question***)
  - **Follow up question:** If there is no tangible (marks) gain from our students can it still be considered worthwhile?
  - Is it just the more positive atmosphere of learning in the classroom that makes us feel like we are improving?
  - **Follow up question:** Why are we more comfortable with the new model with some groups over others? (*is it simply for control?*)
  - Does the relative strength (or personality) of a class have effects on the overall efficacy of the new teaching style/model?
- The second round of interviews took place after the school year had ended (late June). The questions are follow-up’s to things that came out in the first round. One of the members, Ella, could not be re-interviewed due to illness. Everyone else (including DJ) agreed to be interviewed on tape this time. All of the interviews took place on the same day, after exams and marks were done.
  - Below are the notes/thoughts specifically about the efficacy of Professional Learning Communities that came to me as I was transcribing the second, and final, round of interviews:

- We seem to have made changes to our instructional methods even though we found them difficult, because of a sense of group support/think. (*I don't think it would have happened otherwise, certainly not to so many people*)
- All of the participants are passionate (to varying degrees) about what we do. They all expressed an interest in improving. (*Is it possible to do this if not all are committed – ie. "A" & "B"*)
- Polly, the longest tenured teacher in our group, is having fun. (*That has to mean something*)
- We all seem to be struggling with how to best reach our students. (*is that what we mean when we say 'getting better'?*)
- Do teachers who stop caring about reaching their students and are simply focused on delivery of information, just not care anymore? (*Why/how does that happen? Can it be reignited when extinguished? Maybe – DJ*)
- Having someone else, who is struggling with the same difficulties in the classroom, to talk to and to strategize with is very hope-giving.
- Teaching is about more than conveying 'knowledge' and understanding concepts. It is about wrestling with life skills (decision making, organization etc...) and 'human skills' (empathy, connection, shared experience etc...)
- Why would with this model not be transferrable within disciplines? (*or is it? Palmer say it is*)
- The responses were very positive from all participants (*This can't be coincidence or simply interview bias? This was an important event for everyone involved.*)
- It just feels good to be working together with others towards a common goal of improving, especially for people who care already.
- You need a strong core to start such a project and then others, who are less sure or committed, will inevitably follow the group. (*It is enticing if you still have any belief that what you do could be better and aren't 'jaded'.*)
- Those that want no part of improving will stand out and be revealed. (*Accountability*)
- Accountability also occurs within the group in terms of staying on top of best practices knowing that you're about to meet. (*This was revealed when we didn't meet for the past year.*)

- Even when we weren't meeting there was still a strong positive feeling from all for the work that had gone on and a desire to continue the work next year.
- How do you 'sell' this as an alternative to PD? (*Teachers – cooperation, sharing and self-improvement. Admin – Improved 'product', accountability and morale*)
- Barriers to this type of PD? (*Costs, willingness, trust from teachers & admin, getting it out there*)
- This has been a shared experience/ journey for all involved. (*Palmer*)
- Each person seems to have taken exactly what they needed from the group. (*STRENGTH*)
- Megan was definitely a key to our overall success. (*Don't know what we could have accomplished on our own?*)
- It isn't all about technique in the class (*Passion, planning, delivery etc...*)
- PD needs to be on-going. (*There is a carry-over but it isn't infinite*)
- Can 'better' be just feeling better about yourself/what you do? (*Is that enough? Palmer*)
- There definitely seems to have been a permanent (positive) effect on every member's teaching practice as a result of whatever time people have put into the group despite the hiatus.
- Everyone missed the contact we had monthly as a result of the Pdig.
- It doesn't seem to be about what we were each aiming to change nearly as much as the desire to change something and to feel a sense of being part of a positive collective.
- I don't know that there is a way to bring in an "A" or a "B" into the group as there appears to be no desire to change the status quo for either. (*Is that OK? It may have to be.*)
- Can a PD model like this one thrive without a 'Megan'? (*That may be a key weakness. The core is as important to get started but may eventually lose momentum. Seems to have occurred this year.*)
- Different aspects of our sessions were more (or less) important to different teachers in the group. (*Each person seems to have taken what they needed more than emulating the same teaching style.*)

- What did each of us get out of our shared experience as part of the group?
  - *Concrete ideas for lessons and launches*
  - *New approaches to old ideas*
  - *Validation for what we already do*
  - *A feeling of shared experience*
  - *Time to reflect on teaching*
- In order to move this PD idea forward I think you have to start with expanding it at our school now. (*Department by department and then, perhaps, interdepartmentally before other schools and possibly the Board*)
- How could you pay for Megan? How could you afford meeting time? (*Ped days and Grant seem most obvious avenues*)
- If you use Ped Days, what do you do with people like “A” and “B”? (*Can this be forced?*)
- We seem to pre-suppose that everyone (students included) are interested in improving. Does it matter that maybe not everyone does? Do you just move forward with those who are willing and leave the rest behind? (*Parallel between students and teachers*)
- It seems to me that most everyone feels better from improving themselves. Other factors may get in the way but everyone likes to feel that they are liked and doing well to a certain degree. (*No?!*)
- Is it possible to be more engaged but not really better at what you do or better but not that engaged? (*More the latter than the former, I think*)
- Is there a drop in the overall enthusiasm of the group over time? Does it matter or is the simple act of meeting as a group regularly enough to sustain momentum indefinitely? (*What could be done to spice things up over time?*)
- Can the group itself keep things fresh by constantly considering and reconsidering the general direction based on membership and interest?
- There is a clear distinction between the ‘mechanics’ of what we each changed and the actual model of the PD. (*I believe that what you change is far less important than actively trying to change in terms of satisfaction*)



- The PLC model works well within each department. The group establishes a clear set of ideals to work towards and then, each individual member, changes what they want, at their own comfort level and speed.
- Could the PLC model work for a whole staff if there were concrete goals? (*perhaps at the elementary level more easily*)
- I feel that I must convince admin that we need to continue to work as a group even without the grant next year. I must also talk to Randy and Wayne. (*What to do about other departments? Can we operate using only ped days?*)
- Accountability does come up quite often in interview, both directly and indirectly.
- The specific tasks (watching video, creating launches etc...) were not nearly as important to people as was having the time for discussions and to collaborate on the tasks.
- How do you handle the inevitable cynicism that many teachers will feel when confronted by yet another (untested) form of PD? (*Especially if brought in by the board*)
- This model does not work without a strong core of teachers and some sense of trust and respect amongst coworkers. (*Is that a negative?*)
- The permanence of the effect does seem to wear off quicker if you are not committed but are more of a follower. (*ie DJ*)
- With the PLC model, those that are resistant to change are inevitably exposed. It isn't purposeful but it does happen. (*I am not sure if this is a positive or a negative*)
- Polly felt that having to prep for Pdig days is a detriment. (*It is possible. It would be a reason to have them on Ped days*)
- How to separate what the teachers are working on with what the students are doing? (*Are they really working in parallel?*)
- A further benefit of PLC's is that when seasoned teachers work with newer teachers some of that enthusiasm rubs off and there is also an opportunity to pass on some of the wisdom of experience.
- Polly feels that only an outsider can lead this type of group (PLC).

- Below are the notes/thoughts specifically about the efficacy of Whole Group Discussion as a teaching tactic that came to me as I was transcribing the second, and final, round of interviews:
  - More planning may be required for weaker groups
  - Polly finds it tougher to ‘reel in’ the weaker groups or the ones with potential behavior problems (*is this based on her own bias and comfort level?*)
  - Is it really tougher (with the weaker groups) or do we simply try to protect ourselves as best we can?
  - It is difficult (I think) for all of us to give up ‘control’ of our classes. (*I would venture that the more secure you are in your abilities, and even yourself, the easier it is to let go of ‘control’.*)
  - Time is definitely a consideration when deciding on the methodology of our classes. (*Classroom discussion can be unpredictable, direct instruction less so. Do you want to get there fast, or do you want to get there safely?*)
  - Wayne says, “I don’t know that our assessments match how enriched the experience is for the kids.” (*Is that true? Does it matter?*)
  - Is improving as simple as having (getting) good ideas for how to improve? (I feel like there is more)
  - Wayne says, “The stronger classes just offer more immediate (and positive) feedback. The weaker classes, however, perhaps gain more from the process.” (*I agree with this and feel it is important for this point*)
  - It certainly seems to be about comfort level and giving up control of the class when deciding to change teaching tactics.
  - If the kids like coming to math class, wouldn’t that be a good reason to use whole class discussion with the most difficult classes? (Was not always the case)
  - I believe that time plays a big role in deciding what groups you explore concepts more with. With weaker groups, it may take longer than you feel you have the luxury of, so we default to ‘imparting information’ in order to save time. (*Not sure that is necessarily true however*)
  - Why is the ‘other way’ of teaching easier/more comfortable for all of us? (*Lack of accountability, tried and true, safe?*)

- Why do some feel that the WGD model works better with strong groups while others feel that it works better with weaker groups? (*Polly vs DJ*)
  - Is it ok that some groups seem to respond better to a more traditional teaching model? Do all groups necessarily benefit equally from the WGD model? (*ultimately you should pick the strategy that best suits the group and the teacher*)
  - If the above is true, does that also parallel with teacher's teaching styles? (*in my mind, it makes the strategy (PLC) more important than the tactic (WGD). No?*)
  - Does your class require a strong core (as with PLC group) in order to be successful with WGD model? (*I believe so*)
- The following notes are based on the actual writing of the thesis itself, but emerged during both transcription sessions:
    - Should I give my impressions of each participant as part of my 'Field' notes? (*I decided against this as I do not believe it gives real value to the comments made by my colleagues.*)
    - Be sure to mention time and place in field notes and some contextual discussion.
    - Remember to give some context to each teacher's current load.
    - In Field notes, be sure to explain that second round of questions are the result of answers given in the first round.
    - For the follow-up questions do I let them read the transcripts? (*I did not end up doing this as I didn't see the value*)
    - Be sure to add a biographical portion to the follow up questions to give more of a sense of where the person is coming from (*context*)
    - Give speaker adequate time before moving things along in the interview (*I struggled with this in both interviews although it was not clear until I was transcribing the interviews*)
    - Are my colleagues answering a certain way because they feel a certain way towards me? (*How do I know? Is it still valid?*)
    - Really try to pay attention to what the person is trying to say before asking follow-up questions. (*again, I struggled with this in both interviews. Very hard.*)

- Don't give my opinion during interview (*bias*).
- I need to reflect on each of these questions myself and write down my thoughts/beliefs. (*many of my thoughts/beliefs come out in these notes. I think it is better to inject my specific input during the final writing process*)
- At some point maybe discuss the daily grind of being a teacher in the latter stages of your career (*adds the necessity of continuously reflecting and improving on what you do to keep it fresh and enjoyable*)
- Interviewing without leading is very hard. (*Is this appropriate to reflect on in the actual thesis?*)
- I was too impatient and even leading at times with Polly in particular. (*likely due to my personal perception of her*)
- Should I mention that the science department has adopted the model this year to some success also? (*despite the lack of testimonial proof*)
- I feel that I tended to narrow the focus of my questions too much when I wrote them and then actually asked the participants. (*this may have been too leading to get accurate results*)
- Need to send first two sections to both Ayaz and Cheryl as soon as the first drafts are finished.
- For the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> sections (Analysis and Conclusions) I believe that I need to segregate myself. When I'm done, I will send those parts to Cheryl and Ayaz.
- Once I have all parts written and back I will add Title page, Abstract, Acknowledgements, Contents Pages, References and Appendices.
- Goal is still to be finished, finished by August 15<sup>th</sup>.
- The hiatus is important to give context to the experience. Be sure to include in the introduction.
- Go back to Research Questions and make sure they are the basis for the whole discussion that follows.
- Should I organize the notes above to reflect the two separate, but related, topics of: 1) Whole Group Discussion and 2) Professional Learning Community? (*WGD is just a tactic whereas PLC is a strategy*)
- Add Ginott quote about teachers setting the tone in class.

- The following notes are teaching notes that came out in my interviews and will not actually appear as part of my data. They are, however, examples of ideas that I had as a result of collaboration with my colleagues that will improve what I do in the classroom next year that only happened because of this collaboration:
  - Build on the launch throughout each unit (ie Exponents)
  - For Intensive group cover all parts of Sec 3 curriculum but gloss over the three sections that they don't need for Sec 4.
  - Do a 2-3 day algebra refresher for 306/333/433 at start of the year.
  - The Four Question Routine (which I will continue to use) is:
    - What did you get?
    - How did you get it?
    - Did anyone get something different?
    - Did anyone get the same answer but in a different way?
  - Even during the interviews I was still trying to fill any 'empty space' with talking. Give everyone the time to get to where they want to go. Don't try to drive it forward to where I want to go.
  - The 3 act math clip "Glow sticks" would be a good exploratory activity for Quadratic Expressions.