SUPPORTING NEW SCHOOL LEADERS: THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE PEER COMMUNITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Although school leaders receive coursework and some practicum experience, there are gaps in their preparation that can only be filled on the job. Because the decisions made by new educational leaders are of great consequence to themselves and their school communities, an important goal should be the sharing of knowledge and support amongst a community of peers. This work reviews the challenges facing new administrators, critically reviews the training of educational administrators in Ontario, and recommends an in-service community method to supplement the support received by new administrators in their first several years. This document begins with an examination of relevant research literature in leadership development, online communities, the nature of expertise, and technology-enhanced learning with technology. One outcome of this review is a set of “knowledge dimensions” that are important to the development of leadership expertise. The dissertation then examines a three year journey of an online community of educational administrators who share in their journey toward expertise. The e-mails from the community were analyzed according to their function within the community and their relevant domain content. Of particular interest was the question of how such e-mail exchanges allowed members to develop in all five dimensions of school leadership knowledge. A coding of e-mail threads revealed that all
dimensions of leadership knowledge were represented in the content, and that the quality of e-mails improved in both content as well as knowledge building practices over the three years. The growth of the community as a whole and of individual members is examined through a set of individual case studies. Finally, the dissertation closes with a discussion of the future of this community, as well as the prospects that such an approach could be applied more widely in support of new school leaders.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Show me a good school and I’ll show you a good school leader...when you poke into the inner workings of a successful school, you will find without fail a skillful leader who understands how to transform educational practice, not just transact educational business” (Crews & Weakley, 1995, p. 5).

The role of the school principal used to be described in straightforward terms of management, power, behaviour style and instructional leadership (Normore, 2004). However, today this role is seen in much more nuanced terms -- sculpted by diverse student populations, political factors including unions, ministry and board policies, and stakeholder groups from parents to community interests to textbook publishers. Within this complex framework, school leaders are expected to foster an educational environment that prepares students for success within a challenging and ever changing world (Friedman, 2007). As school administrators begin their journey, they typically have few experiences and limited understanding of all the policies, management operations, and issues of curriculum, teaching and learning that await them at every turn. Indeed, as educational institutions evolve in response to the ever-changing spectrum of social and political pressures, school leaders are often left in relative isolation to forge the understandings and expertise that is essential for their schools to succeed.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This research addresses the need to support school leaders as they enter the profession, engaging them in learning and reflection activities as they develop expertise. It investigates an approach of establishing an online community of peers where new
school leaders interact and support one another as they develop greater knowledge and professional effectiveness (Fullan, 2000). This approach responds to the challenge of supporting educational leaders who are by most accounts isolated from mentors and peers yet have a real need for direct, immediate and candid support. Moreover, such support should be available continuously from the time of their initial entry into service, and indeed throughout their career, since change continues to be part of the leadership mandate.

Michael Fullan (2005) noted that while technology may not be the major driver of school change, it should be used in integrated ways to accelerate progress. The concept of developing leadership skills within a distributed online community is a relatively novel one. However, as technology continues to play a vital role in the world around us, and school leaders find themselves engaged in technology-enhanced practices, it is reasonable to consider the potential benefits of online networks. Indeed, in an educational climate that is consistently challenged for resources, we must consider any realistic approach that can support school leaders and connect them with peers and mentors in a learning community.

An important feature of online communities is that the participants can remain situated within the context of their daily lives and professional practice. This lends a vital aspect of realism and personal relevance, in terms of the problems addressed within the community. Any such approach could only be built upon a foundation of trust and confidentiality, because the candid sharing of experiences from a person’s actual work environment could expose sensitive issues or information that is potentially harmful to those involved. Thus, it is no simple task to envision or to create such a community.
This research relies upon my own personal access to an e-mail community of new school leaders that was started by myself and my peers at the time of our mutual entry into service. My membership and participation in the community was not initially the topic of any empirical study, but as the years of doctoral study progressed, so too did the community, and a genuine, valid program of research suggested itself. Clearly, this raises some potential concerns about the researcher-as-participant, as well as the ethics of such research. While such issues are addressed in Chapter 3 (Method), the next section describes my own background as an educator and researcher, and the broad characteristics of the study.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

Because I was a central participant in the professional community being studied, it is important to clarify my personal background as an educator and school leader, as well as my relationship to the other participants and my role within the community being studied. In Chapter 3 (Method) I will address the specific concerns that apply to any participant-researcher, including the validity of community interactions, as well as ethics considerations. Here, I provide a narrative about my own career trajectory, including how I came to join the community of leaders that will serve as the basis of my study.

As a new principal in 2004, there were many questions I had about the role in which I found myself. I had been a vice principal for almost two years before I found myself with sole responsibility for a school of my own. At that time, I found myself with very little support and very few resources that I could draw upon for mentorship or guidance in my development as a new school principal. This lack of support was challenging since there were many trials and tribulations in that first year, which
compromised my effectiveness and self confidence. In hindsight, it seems evident that the school principalship is not a position where doubt and confusion should have any role, but should instead be a position where decisions are made with confidence and a clear vision. There is very little room for errors or hesitation.

I was familiar with the notion of “trial by fire,” but there were so many nuanced aspects of this new job that were difficult for me to assimilate, without prior knowledge or direct access to veteran leaders who had been through similar experiences in the past. Right from the start, I struggled to determine the best course of action and best sources of information concerning some challenging scenarios. Situations such as handling disgruntled parents, developing staff motivation towards curriculum changes or even ways to carefully maneuver around management issues or the protocols and procedures in developing plans such as the school council constitution. Another persistent question at that time was, “How do I ask my questions of my superiors within the school board, without compromising their perceived confidence in the role?” I felt that I “should know this stuff,” …but there was so much to understand! My formal preparation in the form of principal’s qualification courses had only been a start, and any knowledge gained there seemed far removed from my current slate of concerns.

Fortunately, I was not alone in my quandary of making sense of the world around me. At the onset of my becoming a principal, I became friends with a colleague named Caren who had also just been promoted to principal and who, I discovered in casual conversation, had similar confusions and apprehensions to my own. We set out to find some common ground in determining the right course of action in our various daily conundrums. It didn’t take long before we were e-mailing each other with scenarios of
our current school situations and providing reassurance, and even some support – even if it was only from having a second opinion. At this point, Caren introduced the notion of inviting several others whom she had met in the course of her recent training, who were also feeling overwhelmed and in need of a support network. Caren put together a list of “her most trusted colleagues” into an e-mail group, and our online community was born.

At the outset, the ground rules and understandings of the community were clearly stated and also implicitly clear to all participants: The preservation of confidentiality and trust would be our highest priority. Conversations that occurred within the group would stay in the group, with no exceptions. As a general rule, the community would be closed to new members, although we decided that new members could be added with unanimous approval of the existing group. The third rule was that no questions were unreasonable. To whatever extent each member was able, she would be expected to help provide answers and discuss issues. Perhaps coincidentally, we were all women – a one-sided gender balance that clearly led a sense of stability, familiarity and comfort to the group. What began as an informal networking amongst a group of new school principals became the genesis of an ongoing e-mail network that persists to this day, even as most of our members have now achieved some level of confidence and even expertise in school leadership.

Becoming the principal of a school was an honour and immense responsibility for me. As a founding member of the online community of peers, I also felt a great deal of responsibility for the mutual growth and support of all members. At around this same time, I was also beginning to think of topics for my doctoral research, although my initial ideas were concerned with a possible survey of new school leaders in Ontario, to be
administered through face-to-face contact at a professional conference. I wanted to ascertain if others were also experiencing, as I was, a sense that we needed much more preparation, direction and guidance in our newly appointed roles. Thus, at the time the peer community was being formed, I never entertained the idea that it could actually serve as a focus for my dissertation study. Indeed, two more years progressed, during which time I was engaged in discussions with my graduate supervisors on one hand, and engaged as a participant in a peer e-mail community on the other – not even thinking to connect the two worlds.

If I had tried to initiate such an online community as a carefully designed research intervention, it would surely have affected the dynamics amongst participants. Instead, the community ran on its own internal incentives and evolving sense of dynamics, until finally I began to realize the profound influence it was having on all members’ in-service professional development. At that point – approximately two years into the e-mail community – it occurred to me that my research might focus on the role of such a community, including specific case studies of participants. My doctoral supervisor concurred that it would be an appropriate, if somewhat introspective design, but one that capitalizes on a fortuitous and legitimate circumstance.

Now three years further into my role as school leader, I look back on this peer community as one of the most important dimensions of my own professional growth over the past five years. I have developed a deep understanding of the value of in-service peer communities, as I have been the beneficiary of such an experience. I have come to understand the principal’s role as one that is complex and ever changing, and the role of such communities in helping principals respond to such changes. While leadership
preparation courses do provide a basic framework, it is the application of this framework within the context of day-to-day issues that helps one to develop expertise in school leadership. In addition to the strong bonds of friendship and trust that have formed, the members of our community have gained countless opportunities to share their experiences, and to learn from one another’s resolution of issues. This dissertation study reports on the content of those e-mail exchanges, and how they allowed members of our peer community to develop knowledge that is essential for expertise in school leadership.

1.2 Research Questions

This research explores the notion of a knowledge community for school leaders, supported by Internet technology that allows them to develop a persistent network of trust, support, and resource sharing. The study investigates a specific intervention, where a small group of eight new principals working within a common geographical region banded together to create such a network. The research questions below were addressed through analyses of the content of e-mails within the community: what role did the e-mail play? What specific knowledge did it contain? Who was offering information or ideas? Who was in need? To guide these analyses, I defined five dimensions of school leadership, informed by a literature review, to serve as the basis for interpreting this e-mail content. The following research questions were addressed by my study:

1. Does an online peer community help school principals respond to gaps in their pre-service preparation?

2. How does participation in the community enable individual growth? What do individual school leaders gain from their participation, personally and professionally?
3. How are leadership decisions affected by the community? Are there consequential impacts of such a community on the outcomes of important leadership activities?

4. What are the challenges to setting up a successful online community? What are the essential components that assure vibrant, sustained exchanges? What are those dynamics? What are the purposes or function of the e-mails?

5. How does the community itself come to develop and evolve as its participants mature? Does its role change as members mature? Is the importance of the community for its members expected to fade, so that the community eventually dies out?

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of 6 chapters, including this first one, which serves to provide details of the researcher’s background and the genesis of this work. Chapter two presents a discussion of leadership preparation, including its limitations, and reviews the relevant research literature concerned with leadership, expertise, technology-enhanced learning and online communities. The review produces a set of five dimensions of leadership knowledge that are relevant to the development of expertise: management of day to day operations; professional identity; knowledge and handling of policy issues; understanding the nature of leadership issues; and social identity within a community of peers. These dimensions will serve as a framework for analysis and discussion of the email exchanges that occurred within the online community, as well as the professional development of individual members of the community. Chapter 2 also discusses the development of school leaders in terms of a cognitive perspective, where expertise is seen as the development of relevant domain knowledge and problem solving skills. The qualities of
community and peer relationships will be explored through the lens of a social constructivist perspective, as established by Piaget (1977) and Vygotsky (1978; Luca & McLoughlin, 2000), and extended to the notion of communities of practice by Lave and Wegner (1990). A review of other in-service professional development communities and their effectiveness will also be provided.

Chapter three will outline the research method employed within this study, including discussion of participants, the factors outlining the coding system of the e-mail conversations, and the coding schemes of the e-mail that allow an examination of the knowledge contained within the hundreds of e-mail threads according to taxonomies of “Thread topics” and “Thread dynamics.” By extending the analysis to a coding of “Thread quality and coherence” as well as “Knowledge building processes,” the process of knowledge building within the community will also be explored. Methodological concerns about the researcher acting as an observational participant will be discussed, as well as ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and privacy of content from the community.

In Chapter Four, the e-mail conversations will be analyzed according to the coding schemes described in Chapter 3. This chapter will examine patterns of content and dynamics within the discussions, such as humor or social networking. It will also present evidence that the discussions help participants address gaps in the 5 dimensions of leadership knowledge identified in the literature review. These data will be presented and discussed in graphical form, as well as analyzed statistically for evidence of progress in the depth and coherence of knowledge.
Chapter Five will feature three case studies of community members. These cases have been prepared according to a clear structure that examines each member in terms of the five dimensions, in order to offer a detailed account of how the community contributed to their growth in these dimensions. The chapter concludes with a section that synthesizes the observations from the cases to draw conclusions about the cohesive factors of this community and the role it has played in participants’ journey to leadership expertise.

Finally, Chapter Six will offer a summative discussion, in terms of the specific research questions delineated above, as well as limitations of this research and possible future research opportunities. This chapter will conclude with statements about the implications of the research and a personal statement about the nature of school leadership.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The school principalship did not emerge as a formal role (in the North American context) until the 1920s (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). In its earliest conception, the principal was meant to facilitate pedagogy and ensure a close connection between schools and family values. In the 1930s, the role shifted to the scientific management of schools. “Just as our participation in World War II caused us to focus our attention on patriotic values, the principalship of the 1940s and early 50s stressed the importance of education in a democratic and strong society” (Lucas, 2001, p.28). The launch of Sputnik and the cold war in the 1950s and 1960s shifted the role of schools to one of developing academic excellence, particularly in math and science, and the role of the principal to one of developing effective management and instruction.

The late 1960s witnessed a philosophical change in education, as reflected by the Hall-Dennis report (1968) consistent with the anti-technocratic, anti-traditionalist perspectives advocated by John Dewey that the purpose of school is to learn how to learn, not simply to memorize (Dewey, 1938). However, in the 1970s, social upheavals led to new challenges within schools: “racial tension, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy, required principals…to turn their primary attention away from academic leadership” (Grogan & Andrews, 2002).

By the end of the twentieth century, public confidence in the educational system had declined. In the 1990s, the aggressive rise of international economic competitors such as Japan and Europe, together with an increasing level of international awareness led to an enhanced focus on accountability (Normore, 2004). Provincial and national
performance standards and high stakes testing were implemented in order to hold our educational systems accountable, such as the standardized assessment tests found in the Ontario such as EQAO- Education Quality and Accountability Office of Ontario). (Lucas, 2001), “Education had entered the political arena full swing, and politicians felt compelled to make their mark on education” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 28). Such pressures have led not only to a transformation of leadership practices (i.e., adding a focus on student achievement), but has also served to realign the political identity of education.

In Ontario, educational leadership has been heavily influenced by provincial politics, with legislation such as The Education Act exerting heavy expectations on performance and accountability (Roher & Wormwell, 2000). Much has been written about the substantial changes implemented during the “Harris years”, 1995-2002, which ushered in a new era of policy that took effect “swiftly, firmly and with little public debate” (Wallace, 2001, p. 1). In 1997, the Harris government ratified Bill 160, substantially altering all labour relationships, such that administrators (vice-principals and principals) could not be defined as teachers, which effectively prohibited their membership in any affiliate of the Ontario Teachers’ Federations (Wallace, 2001). As a result, any new administrator must leave behind the security of the Teachers’ Federation Union, embarking without organized labor protection in the role of middle manager, with less job security and little negotiating power.

The relationship of school leaders to labor unions and resulting policies will be discussed later in this dissertation as an important dimension of leadership development. The next section addresses the characteristics of expertise in school leadership.
2.1 Limitations of Leadership Preparation Programs

The significant investment in leadership development programs across North America has been well documented (Canadian Association of Principals, 1999; Educational Research Service, 1999, 2000). However, it has been generally recognized that these programs result in inadequate preparation of individuals within the ranks (Normore, 2004). In his book, *Leading for Change*, Michael Fullan states that both business and educational leadership preparation institutions must “become learning organizations or they will fail to survive. Thus, leaders in business and education face similar challenges-how to cultivate and sustain learning conditions of complex, rapid changes” (2001, p. xi).

Despite the training provided by preparation programs, new school administrators are often underprepared to handle the demands of their positions (Marshall, 1992a, Armstrong, 2004). The role of the principal today requires “highly specialized skills and knowledge, many of those skills having to do with negotiating interpersonal and political dynamics. Yet there seems to be little training that focuses specifically on the newer demands of the role and for school improvement efforts.” (Lazaridou, 2009, p.2). School leaders are not under any illusion that their training programs provided adequate preparation (Hallinger & McCary, 1990). Many principals report that the academic work in their principal’s training program did not prepare them for the practical problems they encountered in their work (Lazaridou, 2006). Adams & Townsend (2007) report that while administration graduates remember their training with some fondness, they do not believe it was relevant to the work they actually perform. While university curricula help candidates reflect about the importance of weighing the evidence, for example, the
problems that occur regularly in school settings require immediate responses to small and large emergencies with little time for deliberation. Such “crisis management” and the demands of “real time” face to face interactions with students, teachers and parents require quick thinking and the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives.

Researchers have portrayed the preparation of new administrators as a complex socio-emotional passage (Greenfield, 1985; Marshall, 1992a, 1992b, Armstrong, 2000) that extends beyond the physical location and duties of the job (Hartzell, 1991; Sigford, 1998). It involves giving up former teaching identities and orientations, and assuming new managerial roles, perspective and behaviours (Hartzell, 1991; Soggins & Bishop, 1993).

A report by the Florida Professors of Educational Leadership indicates that stronger links are needed between theoretical and practical preparations, particularly in critical areas such as “statistical analysis of students’ performance data, school-based management, budgeting, decision-making and community relations. (Florida OPPGA, 2000, p.5). Other scholars have suggested that management training is ideally grounded in a problem-based learning situation involving simulations, video examinations and critiques (Jonassen, 1991).

In the Ontario Principal’s Qualification Program, the term of the program is very short – only 135 hours – which clearly limits what can be learned about the complexities of leadership. “Programs that feature school-based inquiry, peer mediation, mentoring and more on-site interactions between principals, central office administrators and other educators would seem more likely to help more principals succeed than those that favour
training and dissemination strategies highlighted by large-group events in a central location.” (Adams & Townsend, 2007, p 54).

Most leadership preparation programs do include a practicum experience that is designed to provide opportunities for on-the-ground mentorship and contextualized learning. However, too often these experiences are not well managed, leading to a reduction in their overall value and effectiveness. Surveys by Turney (1988) Au Yeng et al, (1993) and Tisher, (1987), indicate that practicum experiences have a positive impact only with diligent supervision. However, in the real world of leadership practicum training, there is often a lack of emphasis on the connection of theory and practice, with a focus on a narrow range of technical skills. Further, it is impossible for practicum experiences to expose new leaders to the full range of issues and activities that are relevant to their future success. Finally, by definition of leadership (“the buck stops here”) it is not possible for trainees in any capacity to experience the most vital aspects of the position until they are actually occupying it.

Although principal training programs are devised to lay a foundation for administrative training, the day-to-day challenges encountered by principals cannot be met by limited course training and practicum experiences. For example, the development of “soft skills” such as mediating conflicts typically requires an understanding of all vantage points before determining a potential course of action; these are skills that can only be developed through experience with the specific stakeholders and all current policies, as well as the local school culture. Such skills cannot be expected to be innate within new school leaders, nor is it fair to expect them to arrive on the job with such capabilities.
School districts, professional associations, and institutions of higher education must seek new ways to ensure that these candidates are prepared for leadership positions, and any investment in programs that are successful would pay high dividends to our public schools and the children they serve (Bartel, 1994; Begley, 2000; Daresh, 1997; Dufour, 2001). The next section reviews several efforts that have succeeded in providing some level of support to new school leaders after they have entered their first school assignments.

2.2 **In-service Professional Development for School Leaders**

The rapid rise of vice-principals to the role of the principal (some serve as little as one year in the vice principal role) does not allow them adequate time as apprentices in all the relevant situations and circumstances. Hence, the need for further in-service support is critical – ideally in some capacity that allows for the development of a deep understanding of the relevant leadership knowledge. However, summer workshops or online courses cannot offer the access to rich, relevant problems that lead to deeply contextualized learning. Moreover, the principal’s role is highly individualized, and isolated from peers and possible mentors. Any program that would offer on-the-job professional development for school principals would likely be quite expensive and would need to be customized for each participant.

Sections below report on several initiatives that have met with some success, as well as two more general approaches -- case-based learning and online communities – that are promising, and relevant to the present research.
2.2.1 The National College of Leadership in London, England

The National College of Leadership in London, England was developed to produce expert leadership in schools. In his opening address to the college, Prime Minister Tony Blair stated, “One should never ignore the blindingly obvious, and the blindingly obvious about any good school is that it has got a good head” (p 2). This financial and personnel commitment to ensure principal development is a key example of carving the needs of expert development to the practical aspect of aspiring leaders.

The premise of NCSL is founded on contemporary research (Hallinger and Heck, 1999; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Southworth, 2004) and information from relationships involving school leaders and policies involving government accountability. The NCSL supports school leaders’ beliefs that they learn by being given opportunities to “lead through on the job learning”. Avoiding a purely academic slant, much of the development occurs within a problem based framework and reflections after (Southworth, 2004a, Blasé and Blasé, 2000). In 2004, the broad themes were: Leadership for sustainability; Distributed leadership; Learning-centred leadership; Leadership development; and Diversity and differentiation in leadership (NCSL, 2004).

The overall goals for NCSL include the development of transformational leadership skills through shared outcomes, looking at a problem from all stakeholder vantage points and student achievement and the development of public confidence through accountability and evidenced based data. Weaknesses of NCSL may include the political uncertainty, as well as its over emphasis on student outcomes, which could lead to unrealistic expectations. Further, the program is not serving to increase leadership capacity overall, which remains a challenge in the British educational system. Although
the premise of NCSL is based on educational leadership research, the lack of research into the program itself is not conducive to a wider scaling: “What is required is research that moves from a simplistic focus on different forms of adjectival leadership (distributive, transformational, and so on) to a more complex set of variables and their interrelationships” (Riley & Mulford, 2006, p. 90).

2.2.2 The National Commission for the advancement of leadership preparation program (NCAELP)

The National Commission for the Advancement of Leadership Preparation (NCAELP) is a program of affiliated private organizations and the US Department of education, which convenes workshops focused on educational leadership. The organization was designed to study the way changes in the way educational leadership is practiced and in how educational leaders are prepared and developed (Young and Peterson, 2002). The goals of the NCAELP include:

- Developing an understanding of the factors afflection educational leadership and leadership preparation;
- Examining exceptional practices and programs;
- Defining how educational leadership preparation and professional development can support learning-focused leadership;
- Creating a program for change, evaluation and continual improvement;
- Facilitating collaboration among all key stakeholders.

It is encouraging that organizations like NCAELP have been created to establish the best possible practice for educational administration.
2.2.3 The Institute for Education Leadership

In Ontario, the vision and language of leadership has been articulated in a recent document, “Ontario Leadership Framework” (2008). This document interprets leadership knowledge and development through the lens of student achievement. Several distinct categories are presented in terms of the relevant leadership skills, knowledge and attitudes: setting direction, building relationships, developing the organization, leading the instructional program and securing accountability. This framework will serve as the basis of developing principal performance standards and will also inform assessment instruments to help measure the achievement of leadership milestones.

The Institute of Education Leadership composed this document to provide an outline for educational systems practice and procedures. This responds to the Ontario government’s commitment to educational leaders in Bill 157, which states that terms and conditions for leaders must be in place before March 2011. This dedication to building and developing the capacity of leadership within the province has been a strong mandate. As the document iterates, leadership excellence is the driving force for successful student achievement.

2.2.4 Problem-based and Case-based Learning

A promising approach to providing rich, contextualized learning opportunities for new school principals is offered by problem-based learning (PBL). The goals of PBL (Hmelo et al, 1995) are to (1) Develop understanding through real world cases; (2) Develop reasoning strategies, and (3) develop self-directed learning strategies. Problem-based learning materials are constructed to provide multiple viewpoints relating to a central issue, so that learners can make decisions based on a wide range of information.
(Davie et al, 2001). Problem-based learning can thus help learners develop higher order skills for applying knowledge to a range of relevant situations that they may encounter. Problem-based approaches to learning have been used successfully in other fields to establish productive learning environments that make connections between instructional materials and problems found in the workplace (Prawat, 1989). In research studies exploring the teaching and training techniques used in medicine, for example, it was noted that those students taught in the problem based approach did better on exams, were more effective in their work environment and had a lower drop out rate as those taught in traditional settings (Bridges, 1992; Snow, 1984).

A much deeper and contextualized treatment of problems is provided in the method of case-based learning, where rich “cases” are constructed that capture the full context and interdependencies of domain knowledge, and allow the learner to apply knowledge in the solution of meaningful problems. Case-based learning is widely used in professions such as medicine, law and business, where success in depends on good decision making (Bridges and Hallinger, 1997; Savery & Duffy, 2001). This type of learning challenges the learners to understand what kinds of information they need for particular problems, and how to make use of that information constructively.

Case based scenarios differ from problem-based learning, in that they consist of richer set of dimensions around a single multi-faceted case, often derived from a real case or a realistic one. Discussion and deconstruction of this type of situation lends itself to a greater understanding of the relevant data and insight and development of potential solutions or responses to the case. In contrast, problem-based learning typically sets up
abstracted problems, which still have some context but not as much depth as case based learning.

Clearly, case-based learning has great potential as a method in leadership preparation. Complex problems such as those encountered by school principles typically require the skillful application of both general domain knowledge and subject-specific knowledge (Brown & Campione, 1981). Leithwood and Stager (1989) found that successful principals are more knowledgeable about school improvement and effective teaching practices, and are able to apply this domain knowledge to improve their schools and achieve their goals. Given that it would be impossible to expose a new school principal to all the possible situations and issues that could come up over the course of his or her first five years, an alternative might be to develop a library of pedagogical cases, where new leaders could reflect and respond.

Case-based learning offers a proven approach to embedding domain knowledge within meaningful problem contexts that demand strategic thinking. Bridges and Hallinger (1997) found that leadership candidates prepared using PBL methods retained their knowledge and applied it appropriately, demonstrated mastery of leadership skills, remained motivated, and made more informed decisions once they entered practice. Thus, engaging leadership candidates in decision making about rich cases can help prepare them to consider the wide range of factors that are relevant to the consequential decisions they must make on the job (Gladwell, 2005).

However, the use of artificial cases and inconsequential decisions can never fully replace the authentic source of learning that is provided by the real world context of a leader’s first school assignment (Rhem, 1998). Given the noted gaps in leadership
preparation, we must also consider how to support new principals as they encounter such real world problems. Clearly, there is ample opportunity to develop strategic thinking skills and rich contextualized knowledge while solving consequential problems on the job. However, the instructional context, support, and opportunity for reflection are typically nowhere to be found. The next two sections explore the potential of technology-based environments to support in-service communities: scaffolding problem solving, collaboration and reflection in order to capitalize on the powerful learning opportunities provided by on-the-job problem solving.

2.2.5 Online Communities

While the use of case-based instruction could help school leaders develop understanding by providing rich problems set in relevant contexts, even greater opportunities for meaningful learning are presented by the real-world situations confronted by school leaders during their actual job performance. To get the most out of such challenges, and not simply survive them, new leaders can benefit from support from their peers and mentors. However, since the very nature of school leadership is one of relative isolation from peers, technology-based communities suggest a possible opportunity for enabling such in-service support networks.

Gibson et al in “The Global Forum on School Leadership” (2002) suggest that technology can play a powerful mediating role in helping school leaders reflect on their knowledge, cultivate their skills and develop their dispositions as leaders. Technology can enable collaboration with other administrators through networking and professional conversations that could help in stressful decisions or other professional issues. Through collaborative exchanges and reflections enabled by an online environment, a sense of
community can emerge, leading to greater confidence, efficacy and deep learning of relevant content and strategic knowledge.

A community of peers could provide vital support to new administrators and serve to compensate for some of the aspects of training that are not – and perhaps cannot be -- addressed by any pre-service program. Barry Wellman’s (2009) research outlines the strength of “interest-based communities” in bonding and bridging the ties of work and understanding. He concludes that in this new age of technology, people function as networked individuals who are able to conduct business on their own, yet are still connected to others in case they need a ‘lifeline’ for support. This “virtual support” approach responds to the typical lack of peer contact experienced by leaders upon entry into service, adding a layer of community to an otherwise isolated practice. An online community could support a climate of mentoring and reflection -- two important dimensions for leadership training. The next section explores the potential for online communities to support school leaders once they have entered the profession.

2.3 The Benefits of Online Community for In-service School Leaders

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this doctoral thesis will investigate the benefits and challenges of an online community for in-service school leaders – particularly for new leaders who will encounter more unfamiliar problems in their first several years than familiar ones. The central notion is that by establishing a cohort of new leaders in a kind of online learning circle, they can share problems, discuss solutions, and build relevant knowledge within the various dimensions listed above. This section reviews the relevant literature on the nature of communities, technology environments for learning and knowledge building, and online professional development communities in particular.
2.3.1 Characteristics of Community

McMillan (1996) defines four elements of community: spirit, trust, trade and art. “Sense of community is a spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art.” (p. 315). The emotional safety developed in a community of learners nurtures the member to participate freely and openly. Empirical studies have documented that participants in a community disclose more when they feel safe (Canary and Spitzberg, 1989, Canary & Cupach, 1988; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). “In effect, when we believe that we will be welcome, that we fit or belong in a community, we have a stronger attraction to that community” (McMillan, 1996).

Communities (online or otherwise) require a sense of trust, leadership, and social stability in order to function effectively. In their study of successful online communities, Myllari, Ahlberg & Dillon (2010) note that “…a strong sense of trust is required. Trust takes time to build, virtually, especially so” (p. 384). Social norms or expectations emerge within the group, which allows a sense of cohesion to the community, as participants learn what to expect from one another (McMillan, 1996; Bettenhausen & Murigham, 1991). This creates order and a way to make decisions to develop the group structure. “Social scientists have demonstrated that communities and groups are more cohesive when leaders influence members and when members influence leaders concurrently” (McMillan, 1996). In addition to fundamental element of trust, a community is also strengthened by the mutual benefits that members provide one another. “It is taken for granted that individuals are attracted to groups as a direct
function of the satisfaction they are able to derive within them” (Lott and Lott, 1965, p. 285).

In a community, members participate only because they feel they are wanted and welcomed. This sense of belonging inspires faith and a strong attraction for investment into the community. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) In an empirical study, Grossack (1954), divided participants into two groups. For one, he designed a cooperative environment, for the other it was competitive. Those in the cooperative group made attempts to be accepting and conforming, unlike the selfish aspects that occurred on the competitive side.

In another study, Roark and Sharah (1989) compared various attributes such as empathy, self-disclosure, acceptance and trust to see which of these was deemed most important by the group. The concept of trust was perceived as the cornerstone to a healthy and nurturing community. “When a community has: 1) order, 2) decision making capacity 3) authority based on principle rather than person and 4) group norms that allow members and authority to influence each other reciprocally, then that community has trust that evolves into justice” (McMillan, 1996, p. 320). Knowledge building online “is likely to be most active when build-on comments arrive quickly, is related to a ‘hot topic’ and have practical benefits to professional practice…” (Myllari, Ahlberg & Dillon, 2010, p. 386). This collaboration of ideas and events becomes a key player in developing the confidence to speak freely and to learn vicariously from other real-time scenarios.

In sharing their feelings and reflections without trepidation, members are free to take risks, challenge their beliefs and discuss with confidence. Once this is established, “members have established their safety from shame and believe they can work, learn and
grow safely in their social exchanges” and can disclose differences of opinion, criticisms and personal feelings of uncertainty to increase high quality interaction. (McMillan, 1996, p 321)

2.3.2 Learning within a Community of Peers

Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of social constructivism asserts that the prime determinant of individual development is culture and social interaction. Learning develops in the context of a culture or community, and is best achieved when social and cognitive approaches are integrated. Sustained interaction between learners triggers the processes of argumentation, negotiation, discussion and joint construction of understanding (McLoughlin and Luca, 2000).

The concept of learning through the collective experience of community can be attributed to socially negotiated understanding, arrived through group interaction of team learning and discussion (Senge, 1990). When learners are interacting to create a collective solution to a problem or task, positive social interdependence forms. This situated form of learning is engaging because people are committed to the resolution of the problem, since they have a vested interest. The social aspects are important to developing a shared sense of the meanings and relevance of every problem solved. Through the “safe environment” established by a learning community, students develop the “trust factor” that allows them to state differences of opinions, defend and challenge each other’s assumptions; processes which lead to higher order thinking (McLoughlin and Luca, 2000).

…the intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in the team, and …teams develops extraordinary capacities for coordinated action. When teams are truly learning, not only are they
producing extraordinary results but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise” (Senge, 1990. p. 10).

Research on the forms of productive interaction in online environments has also been guided by the socio-cultural theory (McLoughlin & Oliver, 1998). The theoretical basis for such research is that cognition and communication are linked through social practices in most learning situations. Dialogue plays an important role in helping learners to internalize concepts and derive comprehension from a social plane. This is related to Vygotsky’s notion of “zone of proximal development”, which is the conceptual area between the students’ existing understandings or abilities and what they can achieve when provided with support or outside assistance. This “scaffolding” can be provided by peers or teachers, as well as by learning materials and technology environments that are carefully designed to scaffold learning (McAteer, Tolmie et al, 1997). Through explanation of ideas to each other within a learning community, irrespective of the relative abilities of those involved, a more coherent and complete understanding can result (Repman, 1993).

2.3.3 Providing rich sociocultural context through communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998, 2006) have explored the concept of learning through practice within a social context, stressing shared identity through active contributions and connections within a community dedicated to a common practice. They coined the term “Communities of practice” based on the notion that identifying with one’s peers on a social level will weave together personal histories and facilitate individual and community development (Allan & Lewis, 2006). This form of deeply situated (i.e., within a practice) and social (i.e., within a community) learning has the
potential to help participants achieve a deeper understanding of concepts related to the practice (Wertsch, 1995).

Etienne Wenger (1998) describes how communities of learning can provide a cultural setting for connecting thoughts, action and reflection of the action. He describes three characteristics that are essential to develop a community of practice: the domain, the community and the practice. The domain outlines a common area of interest; the community is the desire to build relationships and share this information with others; and the practice is an activity that is of direct personal relevance to participants’ daily lives. Through a community of practice, members develop “as set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice” (Wenger, 2006, p.2). Developing this sense of grounding and commitment is essential for the community to thrive and become a viable essence in knowledge construction.

Wenger (1998) describes the process of negotiating meaning as being essential to communities of practice, nurtured through participation, and discussion and previously shared understandings. This active engagement of discourse transforms an idea into common understandings within context of the situation. In this social constructivist framework, the evolution of knowledge is based on the internal processes of the learner, framed by the external factors of the environment in which this learning has transpired (Hutchins, 1995; Windschitl, 2002).

In a community of practice, all members are active and integral to the situated learning environment. They develop a personal identity in relation to this situated environment and work in conjunction with one another for the common vision (Wenger, 1998). A sense of increasing comfort in participation develops as a member moves from
“peripheral participation into full participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1990, p.37). This sense of social belonging gives rise to a common vision that is gradually realized in its complexity and in the engagement of all individual members. This collective dialogue plays an important part in internalizing ideas and knowledge for all members of the community. A zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) is provided by conversations with the peers in the community. Comparing and sharing information with peers’ results in the development of learning of skills and experiences for individuals, within the context of a group dynamic.

Such a sociocultural perspective of learning within a community provides a theoretical base for understanding the role that a learning community can play in helping a professional (e.g., school leader) develop deeper understandings through active participation and discourse. The active engagement with ideas, current information and discourse in a technology enhanced forum allows for professional development within a meaningful social context.

2.3.4 Technology Enhanced Communities for Professional Development

Educational researchers have built upon the sociocultural perspective of learning to developed technology-enhanced learning environments, such as the Knowledge Forum (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1992, 1996, 2000). These are software environments that support a community of learners to assemble its own knowledge and guide individual members of the community to develop a deep understanding of relevant topics. This work builds on a view of learning as deeply contextualized and dependent on the ideas and goals of the learner. In these environments, technology supports the organic growth of ideas, rather than a prescribed curricular flow. Guided by a sociocultural perspective,
learning in this tradition occurs through social dialog and sharing of experiences. (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Scott, Cole & Engel, 1992; Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Participants collaborate to understand concepts and develop their knowledge base in conjunction with one another. Technology environments thus foster the higher order communicative interactions and stimulate the social process of learning.

A substantial effort in the learning sciences (e.g., Shumar and Renninger, 2002) has investigated the use of computer-based learning environments for supporting communities of students, teachers or researchers. Such technology environments can include synchronous interactions (i.e., those occurring between participants in real-time, such as via chat or internet telephone) or asynchronous ones (i.e., those occurring over a span of time, such as via threaded e-mail or forum posts). There are advantages and disadvantages to both forms of communication systems, and they can be blended within a single environment in order to provide the best features where appropriate.

Asynchronous discussions permit greater freedom for participants to research and formulate statements before submitting them. This also allows for equitable access, as some participants would need more time to formulate and edit their responses than others. In asynchronous discussions, members can also read and post comments at their own convenience, eliminating the need to convene an online meeting at a common time. One potential disadvantage of asynchronous discussions is the need to wait for a response to one’s comments. Quite often once the response has finally been received, the participant has moved on to other thoughts, or is no longer online (Hewitt, 2001; Luca & McLoughlin, 2000). Thus, asynchronous discussions are not the best solution for many online exchanges, but are well suited for certain situations or communities.
Synchronous discussions offer the potential for immediate response and quick exchanges, leading to conversational continuity. Limitations of this approach are related to the structure of the discussion, where topical threads are replaced by a running stream of comments that can be very difficult for participants to follow if they enter the discussion late or become distracted. This type of discussion may also be ineffective in communities with a large number of participants. Synchronous discussions are more ephemeral, and are difficult to capture as lasting resources for purposes of subsequent learning and reflection. Thus, the two kinds of online exchanges each have their values, with synchronous chat allowing for immediate exchange and conversational flow, and asynchronous discussions allowing for topical threads, persistent representations, and equitable participation.

Applications of such learning environments have been studied in a wide range of contexts. Schlager and Shank (1998) developed a teacher professional development community called TAPPeD In that includes both synchronous and asynchronous features. In TAPPeD In, teachers interact with peers in real-time chat rooms, in the course of coordinated professional development programs. This has been one of the longest running successful online communities in the field of education. Another successful community is that of Math Forum – a community for mathematics educators (Renninger and Shumar, 2002). Most interactions in the Math Forum are asynchronous, with teachers and students exchanging solutions to math problems, and teachers exchanging curriculum lessons.

Educators have also begun studying the use of online environments in their course communities. Littlefield and Roberson (2005), discuss some of the advantages of
technology in a feminist course study. They conducted a study on a traditional face-to-face class of feminist social workers. The researchers implemented online learning as a pedagogical tool on social work topics. Although they found hesitation and resistance in the early stages of implementation, they found that the candidates did enjoy working with this medium and found that the “shy” ones tended to participate much more than in a traditional class. Littlefield and Roberson found that an online environment was well suited to collaborative, interactive learning and experiences that empower students to learn and grow from each other.

Another feature of online communities is their capacity to support an atmosphere of greater trust and equitable participation, where individuals can more freely express their experiences and points of view. Online environments are often cooperative in nature, and resistant to the all-too-human propensity for judgments based on visual appearances or other surface features. Confrontations and convictions must be kept in check, as in any community, and norms must be established related to what is acceptable in online exchanges. Participants who may be shy in real-life exchanges can find a greater sense of safety and tolerance in the online space (Linn and Hsi, 2000). They can lurk quietly without being as conspicuous, and can take their time composing their contributions. Knowledge grows within the community from connection with others, and cooperative learning derives from the shared values and equal contribution of ideas through open questioning and building.

Littlefield and Roberson (2005) employed an asynchronous collaborative environment to complement their graduate level course on social work. This class, whose focus was on topics of oppression and diversity, was interesting because a number of
candidates had great reservations about working with technology. Yet the authors cite an increase in class participation, enthusiasm for course content and enhanced relationships amongst students, including substantial opportunity to promote the empowerment of women. Based on the student satisfaction about the technology, the researchers conclude that (a) each member of the class has an important voice and something to contribute to all, (b) conflicts and challenges are best resolved in a collaborative group environment, and (c) the instructor must provide solid questioning methods to encourage those who do not contribute to add more to the discussion.

In 2002, the National College of School Leadership in England established the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) Program for research studies to examine how online networks can foster change in schools. This intentional effort to discuss and regulate knowledge in order to improve learning practice among teachers was closely examined by Katz & Earl (2010), who assessed six key features of a viable network community: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, enquiry, leadership and capacity building and support. They concluded that professional learning communities can change educational practice, resulting in positive changes for student learning: “Innovative solutions arise when people in networked learning communities draw on outside explicit knowledge and combine it with tacit knowledge in response to authentic problems” (Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 28). Community members would ideally deconstruct their ideas, values, thoughts and beliefs to create a knowledge building environment that stimulated best practice in authentic situations.

Thus, technology environments can support participants in working together to build knowledge and thereby develop a coherent understanding that is greater than the
sum of its parts. A learning community, defined by a common interest of professional practice, is a place where knowledge construction can occur as participants combine their strengths for the benefit of all. Such a community could clearly offer an important resource to new school administrators, who are so often isolated from peers or mentors, particularly as they encounter challenging problems and situations, when they advise and feedback about the various interdependencies of different possible solutions, precedents that will be set, or the impact of a decision on the school community.

This thesis investigates an online community that has seen a small group of leaders through their first 4 years of practice. It will analyze the effectiveness of the community in terms of its success in helping the participating leaders develop the kinds of rich, contextualized knowledge that typifies such complex practices. The next section explores the nature of school leadership knowledge, in order to inform the development of an analysis based on a set of dimensions that describe the knowledge held by school leaders. These dimensions, while by no means definitive, are based on a review of the literature, as well as a grounding in the content of the e-mail discussions within the community.

2.4 Dimensions of School Leadership Knowledge

This section will review the characteristics of effective school leadership in terms of five dimensions that have been distilled from reviews of leadership practice and professional development (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1996; Leithwood et al, 2009). These dimensions serve as a framework to define the kinds of knowledge and activities that are required by effective school leaders. They also allow a
means of evaluating an in-service intervention, and will serve to guide the analyses used within this research.

2.4.1 Management of day-to-day operations

This category encompasses the responsibility for effective and efficient school operations, including the local rules and policies that define and maintain the school environment so that teachers can teach effectively and learners can learn without distraction. Management also includes ensuring safe schools, emergency protocols and maintenance of the school building. Challenges within this category include the need to respond to the many urgent appeals or exceptions (with an eye toward precedence), to establish a school environment that is calm and structured, and to transfer this to staff and school community.

The task of managing a school entails many aspects of organizational management, budgetary decision making and control, setting rules and regulations, and ensuring that they are adhered to (Hallinger & Heck, 2001; Devos & Bouckenooght, 2009). Some empirical studies have treated management and leadership as competing ideas, while others regard them as complementary. For the purposes of this paper, management duties are interpreted as a fundamental aspect of leadership, as they constitute an important dimension of the knowledge and responsibilities of a school principal.

Grogan & Andrews (2002) state that the development of the leader has traditionally been seen as one of “management, such as planning, organizing, financing, supervising, budgeting, scheduling and so on, rather than the development of relationships and caring environments within schools that promote student learning” (p.
While many authors, such as Murphy (2002) recognize that principals now base their influence on notions of professional expertise and moral leadership more than on managerial prowess or authority, this dimension is still vital. The educational leader must often rely on his or her position of authority in order to fulfill the goals of the system (Buhler, 1995). Effective leaders clearly define the tasks required of staff members and offer detailed instructions and feedback along the way (Burns, 1978).

Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) examined a group of principals who centered their practice primarily around managerial tasks. This study found that such principals’ schools received the lowest scores on measures of “school climate,” and showed the weakest commitment by the teaching staff to generate a central vision. Thus, leadership is clearly more than effective management. As management is one domain where new school leaders may have the least direct experience, it is a vital area of knowledge growth, and one that could easily intrude to the exclusion of other domains (e.g., curriculum, teaching and learning).

2.4.2 Knowledge of policies and union issues

Leaders must maintain an active understanding of policies from the Ministry and school board, as well as of collective bargaining agreements, protocols, and legislation such as the Education Act (Roher & Wormwell, 2000). Such knowledge will inform decisions regarding the implementation of protocols and policies concerning accountability and assessment. An awareness of such elements is essential to ensure a foundation for student achievement, as well as a work environment for staff and teachers that is equitable and minimizes distractions due to conflicts and confusions.
Understanding the governance and the educational policy issues plays a central role in understanding the workings of a larger institution of the educational organization. Most policies extend from the political, social and historical contextualized practice or sets of practices (Olssen, Codd, O’Neill, 2004, p.3), which play a key role in standardizing decisions and developing factors pertaining to equity. Understanding, addressing and maintaining policy practices is a critical piece of the administrative role since failure to do so may result in grievances and liabilities.

For school leaders, maintaining a balance between the roles of “manager” and “curriculum leader” is an ongoing challenge. And understanding policy issues and legal constructs are another intrinsic aspect of the position. Principals will be expected to make all decisions in full compliance with any number of overarching policies or collective bargaining agreements. Any mistake or omission could result in serious implications for the school, as well as loss of credibility for its leader. A wide range of issues are subject to policy implications, from mundane matters of deciding about snow days, parent conferences, or internet use, to more substantive ones concerning sectional instructors, field trip policies, or security protocols.

The complexity of the leadership position is well described in Roher’s and Wormwell’s (2001) guide to the “Role of the Principal.” They remark that as school boundaries have become more transparent, “the new curriculum, parent and community demands, government policy, changing technology and staff morale issues have all contributed to a complex school environment” (p.1). Hence, a thorough knowledge of policy, procedures and people, as well as a practiced facility in the areas of hard and soft skills are essential for leadership. Together, they provide the context of having the correct
tools when faced with challenges and situations in the role. The art of developing adequate problem solving abilities to meet the demanding complexity of the position are critical for leadership success.

### 2.4.3 Knowledge of Problem Solving

The role of administration is one in which the ability to solve problems successfully and to confront the continuous challenges are the key elements of the position. Leithwood and Stager (1989) determined that “the school administrator’s problem-solving processes (were) crucial to understanding why principals act as they do and why some principals are more effective than others” (p.127). In their 1987 empirical study based on the constructivist epistemological perspective of 22 elementary principals, Leithwood and Stager examined problem solving expertise through an analysis of the way principals solved unstructured problems. From the responses of a variety of problem solving scenarios, the researchers concluded that there were clear differences between the format that ‘expert’ and ‘typical’ principals conducted themselves. Experts 1) easily clarified the nature of the problem more easily, 2) assessed the goals to be achieved through the task 3) determined the principles to be used 4) did not identify any constraints in their task 5) provided more details about their solutions and most importantly 6) made fewer unclassifiable or irrelevant statements.

The ability to collect and analyze new information and relate it to prior experience led to more confidence in leaders’ abilities and led to better planning overall for addressing issues. When administrators reflectively discussed their particular situation requiring explicit knowledge, they remade “a part of their practice world and thereby
reveal(ed) the usual tacit processes of world-making that underlie all their practice” (Schon, 1987, p.6).

Greater problem solving ability was also marked by interrelatedness and coherence across all the pieces of information given to seek a viable solution. It was also noted that there was increased flexibility to assess multiple interpretations and the ability to articulate the novel features requiring attention from the expert learner. A large portion of the leadership role is characterized by making informed decisions within the context of analyzing a number of factors to ascertain the best way to handle difficult situations. Developing this ability to solve novel problems through prior experience and with confidence can be a learned form of knowledge (Leithwood and Stager, 1989). As confidence increases, so does a greater intuitive understanding and increased reflection to the impact of the decision and the consequence. The ability to master certain elements of solving problems can also manifest itself in the areas of curriculum, teaching and learning.

2.4.4 Knowledge of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

The ultimate focus for school leaders is to improve student achievement and to build the confidence of parents and the wider community. This vision statement of the school must emanate in policy and practice from the leader to all staff and even the students under their care, with a distributed sense of responsibility for student achievement (Spillane, 2006). This notion of distributed leadership can help guide the school community through an understanding of pedagogy, curriculum innovations and instructional philosophy which all underlie an effective administration of curriculum and assessments. Substantial knowledge of best practices and current innovations are required.
by the principal, in order to support effective communications and decision making. This category of knowledge can easily be subordinated by other management tasks that may override the administrator’s time and energy.

Tirozzi (2001) describes effective principals as being “leaders of curricular change, innovative and diversified instructional strategies, data-driven decision making and the implementation of accountability models for students and staff” (p.438). Marks and Printy (2003) explored the effectiveness of shared instructional leadership on school performance. Their empirical study examined the results of 24 mixed level schools, the interviews and surveys of over 1000 teachers and the administrators at the schools and the assessment of student assignments. In addition, assessment and instructional practices and discussions were also carefully scrutinized. Marks & Printy concluded that “transformational and shared instructional leadership are complementary…but neither conceptualization embraces the other” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 388).

2.4.5 Professional identity

This category is concerned with the notion of professional identity that is held by a school leader. If the previous category is concerned with the understandings of the leader’s role, this category has to do with a sense of self-as-school leader. Such understandings help give rise to the sense of confidence that is intangible, yet always present in the way effective leaders deal with staff, students and community. This confidence and sense of professional identity is also something that can only be gained through accumulated experience, discourse with peers, and ongoing reflection. It will be essential to effective engagement during times of conflict or confusion, and to sustaining a climate of confidence and success during all other times.
… one of the most powerful dimensions of effective school leadership was the establishment of a clear sense of direction and purpose for the school. All the heads had a very strong and clear vision for their school that heavily influenced their actions and the actions of others. Heads were instrumental in driving it forward. The vision was shared with the senior management team and was a central driver of all leadership activity, shared widely and clearly understood and also supported by all staff. It was a touchstone against which all new developments, policies or initiatives were tested. (Day et. al, 2009, p.111)

Devos and Bouckenooge (2004) observe that there is no simple recipe for successful school leadership. Since the 1980s the search to find the answer “What makes a school leader successful?” has led to the development of inventory of the characteristics of successful school administration. In the 1980s the body of research defined effective leadership as “strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and instruction from the principal (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982).

Principals’ active pursuit of relationships and team building is essential in their development of leadership values and abilities. Understanding the complexity of leadership (i.e., making sense of the complex issues, settings, perspectives, responsibilities and team building) is a dimension of growth that may begin in the pre-service preparation courses, but must be cultivated within the context of an in-service position in order for true meaning to develop (Tirozzi, 2001).

Devos & Boukenooghe (2009) concluded that the overall climate in a school was directly linked to the principals’ conceptions of themselves as school leaders:

For instance, we noticed that in the case of schools with a strong climate, none of their principals had an administrative-minded profile. In addition, school with weak climates did not have principals who were people minded … The collective sense of values, habits and assumed way of doing things are likely to affect and shape the principal’s own beliefs and role concepts (Devos & Boukenooghe, 2009, p.191).
Thus, sense of professional identity was a critical factor in determining the overall school environment and effectiveness. The development of this sense of identity can only happen over a span of years, and will be directly linked to the development of knowledge in the other dimensions listed above.

2.4.6 Balancing the different dimensions

School principals must serve as both the manager and instructional leader for the school body and community. Michael Fullan (2004) offers the following descriptors as attributes for successful leadership: (1) A strong sense of moral purpose; (2) Understanding of the change process; (3) Well-developed relational skills (emotional quotient); (4) Capacity to facilitate knowledge sharing; (4) Ability to help a group achieve coherence and connectedness. White (2004) identified a similar set of traits that are prominent in leaders: loyalty, courage, vision, confidence, calmness, humour and intelligence. Although leadership traits may be intrinsic within each candidate to a varying extent, the goal of leadership education should be to prepare candidates with the knowledge, experience, and critical thinking skills required to apply such attributes successfully. New school leaders must build on their existing strengths and understand where further growth is needed to foster improvement in their leadership practice (Fullan, 2004).

Principals need to plan ahead, set objectives and predict contingencies with regards to all stakeholders in the organization (Taylor, 1986) Such strategic thinking should be the goal of administrative training, to help leaders learn to “accumulate the effects of many seemingly trivial decisions” (Leithwood, 1987, p. 65). Developing strategic thinking should be a high priority in any leadership preparation curriculum.
There are strong demands placed upon new school leaders to learn in each of the 5 dimensions above. Immediately upon arrival in their first school assignment, new principals would be required to make numerous managerial decisions, respond to policy issues, plan curriculum, teaching and assessments, and consider how to instill a sense of vision and positive atmosphere in the school community. All of this would be demanded of a new leader with little or no practical experience, and very limited access to any mentor or knowledgeable expert. The stakes would be high, especially at the very outset, as a damaged school climate or personal reputation would be far more difficult to repair than to keep intact from the start. In general, a sense of balance is required of new school leaders, to attend to all areas in some measure, and to try to synthesize their knowledge across all dimensions.

The next section addresses the notion of expertise. If the five knowledge dimensions detailed above represent the space in which school leaders can grow, the development of expertise is the process by which that knowledge is gained, and integrated into professional practices. The section will begin by reviewing cognitive theories of expertise, followed by a review of recent research on professional development and expertise. It then explores how educational leaders develop expertise, examines several existing in-service programs, and reviews potential promising
approaches suggested by the learning sciences research (e.g., problem-based and case-based learning, as well as online communities).

2.5 The Development of Expertise in School Leaders

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1985) outline five developmental stages that form a continuum along which professionals develop, beginning with novice, then moving through stages of advanced beginner, competent practitioner, proficient, and finally to expert. In school leadership, these processes do not take place in a linear fashion but occur in a more cyclic, interactive manner (Ertmer & Newby, 1998) based on the evolving knowledge and skills in the various dimensions described above.

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) reported on several studies concerning effective school leadership. They entertain a cognitive perspective about the development of leadership, defining experts as “those who have acquired sufficient knowledge to respond successfully to challenges considered part of the domain” (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1996, p. 9). Good leaders set clear directions for their staff, and nurture relationships with members of their school and wider community (i.e., parents, school board members, etc). They ensure that the management of their school is sustained so that student and staff learning can take place without apprehension. They encourage teachers to collaborate, develop trust in learning with one another and maintain the direction of vision and mission as set about by the Ministry, Board and society so that academic capacity building for students can be achieved. They lead the discussion of instruction and assessment, and hold themselves and all members of their school accountable for student achievement (Schmoker, 2006).
In sum, good leaders demonstrate advanced knowledge in all the dimensions from the preceding section, and learn to apply that knowledge consistently within and across dimensions. Perhaps most importantly, they develop a sense of professional identity and achieve an environment of partnership with staff to bring about positive results, through their visible presence and through their curriculum involvement. (Fiore, 2000). The use of research-informed and data-driven practice is essential for developing a sense of overall direction (Marzano, 2003; Schmoker, 2006; Sagor, 2003).

2.5.1 Cognitive and Sociocultural Notions of Expertise

Cognitive psychology, an interdisciplinary domain that focuses on the structures and functions of the human mind, includes the work of psychologists, linguists, philosophers and neuroscientists. It is the examination of how the brain functions, reasons from the chemical functioning level to the theoretical model. Much research has been conducted in understanding the process of metacognition. There are many aspects of the study including, the neuroscientific study of the structure of the brain, the psychological study of mental abstractions, and the socio anthropological study of the shaped by our experience and culture (Lazaridou, 2006). This concept of how we acquire, transform and represent this knowledge becomes the essence of the way we develop solutions. Without ascribing completely to a cognitive perspective, it is still useful to consider the wealth of research conducted by cognitive psychologists in the area of expertise.

Ertmer & Newby (1996) emphasize the importance of metacognition. They described how expert learners understand their own level of knowledge and use that to inform their approach to solving novel problems. In going from the ‘known to the unknown,’ these researchers focus on the process of reflection as “the critical link
between the knowledge and control of the learning process” (p. 4). Weinstein & Van Mater Stone (1993) comment that “experts know more; their knowledge is better organized and integrated; they have better strategies and methods for getting to their knowledge, using it, applying it, ad integrating it; and they have different motivations. Moreover, they tend to do things in a more self-regulated manner” (p. 32). The term “self-regulated” refers to learners who are “metacognitively, motivationally or behaviourally active promoters of their academic achievement” (Zimmerman, 1990, 308). Thus, experts acquire knowledge and organize that knowledge “into schema (abstract structures built on connections between elements of knowledge and associating behaviour routines with those schemata.” (Lazaridou, 2009, 11)

Compared with novices, experts have a greater awareness of what are the important facets of the task (declarative knowledge), how to proceed (procedural knowledge), when they need to check for errors (conditional knowledge), why they might fail and how to revise their own self-assessments of their performance (reflection and evaluation) (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Chi, 2006). Cognitive scientists have described this implicit concept of ‘expertise’ as a heightened awareness of process and procedure based on a foundation of declarative and procedural knowledge (Chi, Glaser and Rees, 1982). This knowledge is constructed through the integration of experiences and reflections, which results in the particular characteristics of how experts handle new problems or unfamiliar situations (Daley, 1998).

One way in which expertise can be assessed is through their process of responding to problems of situations. Chi (2006) notes that traditional measures of expertise have focused on rather absolute measures relating to the outcomes of a
cognitive process, revealing greater memory capacity or ‘global qualities of their thinking’ (Minsky & Papert, 1974, p. 54). A more relativistic measure of performance is concerned with the process by which the expert studies and learns about a certain topic, and is then able to provide valid decisions to problems that may occur. Chi (2006) outlines three fundamental assertions about experts

1) They have acquired more knowledge in a particular domain.

2) The fundamental capabilities of novice and experts are generally identical. They both have the same capacity to learn.

3) The difference of performance from experts and novices is in the way they represent their knowledge.

To relate this back to education leadership, Leithwood and Stager (1989) focus on problem solving as a defining characteristic of expertise in leaders. They note that “the school administrator’s problem-solving processes as crucial to an understanding of why principals act as they do and why some principals are more effective than others.” (p. 127). Based on Chi’s perspective, acquiring the “knowledge and skills involved in expert learning will influence not only our idea of what it means to learn, but also our conception of what (and perhaps how) it means to teach” these specific skills (Ertmer & Newby, 1996, p 22). With this cognitive perspective, the development of understanding through social interaction and personal reflections is seen to be at the heart of expertise. Experts begin to understand the demands of the task, understand themselves as the learner and apply their knowledge (build strategies) to the situation (Paris & Winograd, 1990). In the case of school leaders, growth or development of expertise is linked directly to the development of problem solving capabilities.
As described above, Lave and Wenger (1991) observed that much of our knowledge is gained through participation in practices, which are themselves characteristic of a wider “community of practice.” This process of building and sharing of knowledge with others involves three aspects: like-minded objectives (continually re-negotiated by its members), mutual engagement embedded into a social entity and a shared repertoire (routines, vocabulary, style) which members have developed over time (Wenger, 1998). Development of expertise, from this viewpoint, is one of reflective engagement in practice, and movement from peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to a more central role within the community.

The process of reflection can help promote the construction of knowledge and the growth of expertise (Chi, 2006). Allan & Lewis (2006) state that, “discourse on identity, talking about who we are and how we change through our learning experiences, helps us create personal histories and facilitates community and individual development” (p.844). Thus, while educational leadership training might prepare individuals to be top-down managers (Grogan & Andrews, 2002), it is a far cry from assuring any level of expertise amongst trainees. The theoretical notions of expertise described here suggest that school leaders develop expertise primarily through the acquisition of important declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as through metacognitive reflections and social exchange. A situated cognitive view would argue even more stringently that expertise can only be developed through legitimate participation in contextualized practices, within a community of peers.
2.5.2 Development of professional expertise

What are the implications of such research for the development of expertise within a professional context? In the ‘technical rationality’ model of expertise, Schon (1987) believes that expertise is developed through the processes of becoming aware of the skill, seeing it demonstrated, practicing the skill with critique and eventually assisting others in the process. Expert learners have the “skill, will and a systematic approach to studying and learning” (Weinstein & Van Mater Stone, 1993, p. 35). Educational leaders do experience this through the routine type tasks, and can build upon it, only if reflection and understanding has been gained from that experience (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). However, experience alone cannot ensure growth, without a process of reflection. Experts self regulate their own problem solving abilities through “reflecting in action” and “reflecting on action” (Schon, 1983).

The development of expertise has been a source of interest for leadership and professional faculties (Lindner & Harris, 1992). Anders Ericsson writes in the introduction to Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance (2006), that expertise is not necessarily related to the number of years of experience. In fact, “Experience in a particular task frees space in your mind for other cognitive pursuits…but those things can distract you” (Cloud, 2008) causing overconfidence and ineffectiveness.

The specific cognitive skills and learning strategies that novices have available to them may be more important than the limited content knowledge they posses (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). Daley (1998) collected semi-structured interviews and clinical narratives from twenty nurses (ten novice and ten expert). This study found that experts would
actively seek to understand the larger perspective of new areas they were trying to master. Through an active and self-initiated process, they would read, research and discuss with colleagues areas of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. One expert nurse remarked, “I am at a point in my career where I really teach myself what I need to know” (Daley, 1998, p. 4). Experts created their own knowledge base by seeking out information and assimilating that information with their current understanding, so that a deeper level of meaning can be constructed. Once learned, most experts felt responsible for sharing their knowledge with others. Novice nurses, on the other hand, preferred more formal learning opportunities, such as “having a nurse educator available, having textbooks on their unit and attending care conferences were supportive” (Daley, 1998, p. 5). Experts also decried the lack of collaborative learning that typically characterized their service oriented profession, citing the lack of shared ideas and strategies.

From Daley’s (1998) study of expert nurses, it is clear that not only does research and theory, but the professionals themselves acknowledge that learning needs to be grounded in real practice, “not the decontextualized case studies that are often used in continuing education programs” (Daley, 1998, p. 6). The section on problem based learning models will be discussed below as a possible approach to creating a better learning environment for school leaders.

2.5.3 Expertise in School Leadership

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) conducted a series of monthly interviews with 52 elementary and secondary school principals to determine the types of problems they encountered and how they addressed them. Problems were assessed in terms of whether
they was routine or original in nature, and the extent of the administrator’s expertise involved in solving the situation. Four questions were addressed by this research:

1) What types of problems do principals’ encounter?

2) How routine are these problems?

3) Do some problems occur at different points in the year?

4) Are there different kinds of problems encountered by secondary and elementary principals?

Participants in this research included 27 elementary and 25 secondary administrators. The half hour interviews were conducted once a month during the school year, and the results indicated that 2/3 of the problems revolved around school operations, staff and the students. The researchers noted that the principals would try to apply a fresh perspective to situations, even though they appeared routine. Expert administrators from this study were highly flexible, quick to identify special characteristics about the problem, and proceeded to plan very carefully. They did use intuitive responses, perhaps spawned by self-confidence, more so than novices who were more anxious.

The development of school leadership expertise needs to be carefully crafted in order to maximize public confidence and cultivate student achievement. In comparing expert and typical principals’ problem solving method, Leithwood and Steinbach (1997) noted that expert principals had a clear interpretation and understanding of the problems in the way they impacted upon their staff and other stakeholders. Their desire for the best solution was embedded in the group’s needs, not their own. In addition, they check their solutions with those of others who they are leading, so that everyone has involvement on
the direction of the solution. The novice leader, on the other hand, has limited understanding of the impact of the solution of the problem and the long range effects on various stakeholders. Their possible frustration with staff who do not buy into their solutions may limit their overall effectiveness in handling the problem. Novices also do not generally anticipate nor respond to all the obstacles in a clear and logical fashion.

Expert principals demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive control, which allowed them to monitor their own behaviour and change it when it did not align with the needs of those they led. This was not apparent in typical principals. In a clear contrast, typical principals practiced a more “oppressive leadership model” (Brolin, 1989, 86), discounting the needs of collaboration and ignoring the needs of leading through careful problem analysis and understanding of the deeper issues of the situation. Assisting leaders to reach this stage of ‘higher order’ transformational leadership skills is an area of challenge in our current professional training.

2.6 Supporting New School Leaders through Online Community

This doctoral thesis investigates one possible approach to offering new school leaders a source of private, secure and confidential peer support, in the form of an online e-mail community. While grouping peers together in the absence of any mentor could be construed as a case of “the blind leading the blind,” it will be argued here that by sharing their problems and solutions with peers who are in a similar position, the participants create a knowledge building community. New school leaders can check in with peers in the course of the myriad problems they encounter, consulting with trusted colleagues in “real time” as issues come up, and developing a corpus of solutions and conventional wisdom about a wide range of issues. In this way, a school leader can develop
knowledge across many vital categories, build trust and confidence amongst peers, and engage in critical reflection and social discourse within the context of their professional practices. This doctoral thesis investigates one such community that has demonstrated the potential promise of this approach by its very existence, and through the analysis of its content presented below.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research investigates the role of technology-based communities for in-service school leaders by examining an existing community in terms of the professional growth of community members over a three year time period. The author was fortunate to join such a community on entering her first professional leadership position, which coincided with this doctoral research program. The community was created by a group of seven to nine (based on those present at the time) of active members who are graduates of a Principal’s Qualification program. The members wanted to make sure they stayed in contact, and had the idea that they might be of service to one another if they did so. The community proceeded in the form of threaded e-mail correspondence, with occasional face-to-face gatherings. These e-mail threads offer a written record of community transactions, which can serve as a source of measures for the content and context of professional exchanges that occur within such a community. While the community itself was formed without any cognizance of being part of a research study (it was not my original topic of study, all participants are amenable to a study of their group and individual progress.

This research seeks to address the following questions, as presented in Chapter 1:

1. Does an online peer community help school principals respond to gaps in their pre-service preparation?

2. How does participation in the community enable individual growth? What do individual school leaders gain from their participation, personally and professionally?
3. How are leadership decisions affected by the community? Are there consequential impacts of such a community on the outcomes of important leadership activities?

4. What are the challenges to setting up a successful online community? What are the essential components that assure vibrant, sustained exchanges? What are those dynamics? What are the purpose or function of the e-mails?

5. How does the community itself come to develop and evolve as its participants mature? Does its role change as members mature? Is the importance of the community for its members expected to fade, so that the community eventually dies out?

3.1 Methodological Approach

The primary method used in this research was a qualitative analysis of the content of online conversations that occurred within the community. These e-mail exchanges will be coded according to several taxonomies (coding schemes) in order to reveal the role played by the community in the development of leadership expertise amongst participants. Analysis of coded e-mails will address questions such as whether in the discussions responded the gaps in leadership preparation, whether they helped members develop new or deeper understanding of core concepts, and whether they led to greater confidence and competency in participants’ practices. These analyses will be combined with interviews and case studies of participants that explore their professional development. The interviews provide a secondary source of qualitative data that can be combined with the analysis of e-mail exchanges and the case studies to ensure accuracy of interpretations and provide further detail.
In their book *Interpreting Educational Research*, Hittleman and Simon (2002) observe, “the standards remind us that we are involved not only in research but in education. It is, therefore, essential that we continually reflect on our research to be sure that it is not only sound scientifically but that it makes a positive contribution to the educational enterprise” (p. 413). The present dissertation research involves practicing Ontario administrators, with the goal of making a positive contribution to their professional development. It is hoped that this research will ultimately suggest a practicable approach to responding to gaps in leadership training, and to supporting new leaders as they enter service, thereby increasing the confidence and effectiveness of new leaders and contributing to our educational system.

3.2  **Data Sources**

Table 1 summarizes the data source, collection method, frequency and length of time in which the data was collected.

**Table 1**

*Collection Method, Frequency and Duration for Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Collection Method</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrators throughout Ontario</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Once</td>
<td>Half hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years of e-mail conversations</td>
<td>Coding of the email conversations</td>
<td>3 selected months (Nov., Feb, and April) over 3 years</td>
<td>ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews of online participants</td>
<td>Face to face interview</td>
<td>Once</td>
<td>60-90 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.1  **Survey of Administrators**

A survey was administered to a broad sample of school administrators from across Ontario with a wide range of experience and variety of expertise. The survey was designed to assess the extent to which leaders feel there is a gap in their leadership
preparation, and to collect specific examples of problems and possible solutions. The survey (provided in Appendix A) also collects demographic data about the twenty nine respondents (e.g., dates of training, years in service).

3.2.3 E-mail conversations

E-mail communications from a 34-month span of time (September, 2005 until June, 2008) have been collated for analysis. These e-mails comprise an ongoing series of conversations about a wide range of issues that are important to participants. These conversations were typically initiated because a problem or question arose from one participant that led to a sequence of e-mail exchanges amongst all participants. These exchanges sometimes resulted in lengthy threads with many participants, but were often short sequences with fewer participants as well. Taken together, they represent the content of the online community, including the nature of problems confronted by members, the style of communication, and the forms of support provided by these communications. Overall, there are over 2000 individual e-mails, with more than 500 threads within the 9 months selected for analysis. The level of e-mail activity grew fairly consistent over the 34-month period, with some quieter periods during summers and holiday breaks.

3.2.4 Interviews of Community Participants

To obtain a deeper understanding of the experience, each participant was interviewed face to face using set questions. The purpose of the interview questions to the group was to gain understanding of the questions (see Table 3) that were designed to gain further insight into the experience of group members’ e-mail group composition and
the individual member conversations. These interviews served to clarify the group

dynamics and the community members’ conceptualizations of the role of the
“community” construct in helping sustain the e-mail thread community. Finally, the
interview questions were to reveal the members’ perspectives about how the community

How did this network enable and empower the participants in their professional and

personal growth?

**Table 2**

*Interview Questions Asked of Online Community Participants.*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Why did you join this group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>What have you gained from this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What would you like to change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What would you like to add?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>As part of group presence, do you feel the personalities online? How would you describe them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Do you feel you contribute to the group with your knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Although it is hard to estimate completely, without the group, what disadvantage do you think you might have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Since joining, describe your growth in the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>How often do you feel you have to log in, in order to feel like a viable part of the group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Are there any aspects that annoy you about the group? Any personalities, topics, types of conversation mode?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Do you feel you read every, all, most, hardly e-mails in the group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>How do you see the group evolving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>What aspects about this construct do feel can be replicated with other professionals in our system?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Would you like to add anything to our conversation?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3 Participants

Active participants of this group (there were others who have since retired) include at least nine school leaders who have graduated from the Ontario Principal’s Qualification program at various university sites around the province. Since this is a standardized program, the educational base was similar amongst all. Eight participants were part of the original cohort, with one member retiring from administration and the board (and hence leaving the online community) in 2005 and one additional member joining in 2007. Table 3 shows a list of all participants, including a comment on their background or other distinguishing characteristics.

Table 3
Names (pseudo) and Descriptions of All Community Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudo)</th>
<th>Leadership Position (in 2005)</th>
<th>Biographical comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caren</td>
<td>Newly appointed Principal after 2.0 years in the VP role. Administrator in 2005</td>
<td>Caren taught French and Special Education in the Public system for 14 years. In addition, she was on the Board for Social Services. The best way to describe Caren is that she is a “connector.” Her understanding and fluency of technology has been highly desired and regarded with the rest of the group. Caren was the one who initially decided on the group members by building a common e-mailing address list. She was pivotal as the “friend connector” to all. Caren has been the one to initiate most questions for conversation and community development. She was often the one to stimulate group conversations, “roll calls” and quick to express concern over our welfare on inclement days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Vice Principal for one year in another Board.</td>
<td>In 2005, Nina was a newly appointed Vice Principal in another board. She moved to join ours as her husband’s job relocated to our area. Her initiation to our board was one of a Vice Principal in 2006, and then to a Principal position in 2007. Nina contribution to the group is based on bringing another provincial perspective to our team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Newly appointed Vice Principal</td>
<td>Julie started her career as an educational assistant, moved on as a teacher for 8 years, Board consultant for literacy for 2 years, vice principal for 2 years and then a principal in 2006. Her understanding at all levels of the system enables her to speak with conviction on some of the topics which we had.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcia</td>
<td>Newly appointed Vice Principal</td>
<td>Marcia went into the educational system as a third career move. She was in her early 40s when she became a teacher for 8 years, vice principal for 2 and then a principal in 2006. Marcia’s contribution to the group is one of understanding how things work outside of the educational world. Her no nonsense approach and limited understanding of technology were both key factors in raising the bar in our knowledge building as a group. With her questions and urgent desire to understand the fundamentals behind certain decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
helped us to all ponder why we were doing what we did.

| Candice | Principal for the past 5 years in 2005. Went through the short listing process several times in the 90’s before becoming a vice principal | Originally Candice was our “sage”; the ‘go to’ person to ask our remedial questions and to understand the background of some of our policies and procedures. Although Candice had the most experience, she was also fearless in her administrative efforts. It was fascinating to watch how Candice maneuvered through some of the situations at her school. We learned a great deal from her stories and advice. She had been in administration the longest of all and had the most experience in the educational system with our particular board. She also had the most contacts as well, which became invaluable when we had questions of which we didn’t readily know the answers. |
| Lori | Newly appointed Principal | Lori had taught for only 5 years, before she became a vice principal for 2 and then a Principal in 2005. Lori is the youngest of all of us (early 30’s) with young children at home. Despite limited experience in the system, she is well read and has quickly become our philosopher in the understanding of the curriculum, methodology and operation management. |
| Patricia | Vice Principal-Then Principal in 2006 | A dynamic single parent, Patricia has been in the system as a teacher for 7 years, vice principal for 2, before becoming a Principal in 2006. Patricia was undergoing personal and professional transitions at the outset of the community, and desired to be at a senior administration level some day. Patricia’s incredible energy level extends to other areas of the educational system through committee and part time work. |
| June | Principal since 2003. | June was in our group for a short while before leaving our Board in 2007. She was a teacher for the past 7 years, Vice Principal for 3 and mother of 2 special needs children herself. Her impact to the group was to foster a greater personal understanding of the special needs component of our students and the impact we can make in this area in our role. |
| Lianne | Joined our group in 2007 | Lianne came to our group as a Principal from another Board. Her different board perspective and views gave rise to some valid discussion pieces. Lianne was also one of our oldest members, since she had been in the system for the past 30 years as a teacher and administrator. She was hired immediately at our board due to her extensive experience in her other Board. She brought experience, age and a desire to develop a network of friendships in our system. |
| Katy | Principal since 2004 | Katy gave her best 5 years to administration. She was a teacher for 25 years before going into administration. Katy was definitely the calming presence of our group. She possessed much wisdom and self assurance and brought these qualities to our network. |
| Linda | Early 30s (youngest member of our group). First joined our group as a vice principal in 2007. | Linda is a very young administrator who joined our group because of her expertise as a board curriculum consultant. Through her extensive ministry training on assessment and instruction, she possesses knowledge of current research of assessment and evaluation and direction to our group. |
3.4 Procedure and Data Analysis

3.4.1 Coding of Survey Data

Surveys were administered in conjunction with an annual Province-wide conference of administrators. The paper survey was delivered to individuals, who voluntarily completed the survey items in a single session and returned them to the researcher. Survey responses were coded according to a scheme that is based on the 5 gaps in leadership preparation identified in the review above. The purpose of the analysis will be to provide a second form of evidence that supplements the review, and serves to inform analysis of the online community.

3.4.2 Coding of E-mail Conversations

The corpus of e-mail conversation provides the most important source of data for this research. While the investigator was an active participant in these discussions, all e-mail comments used within this research were completed before any progress was made in the present research, occurring from September, 2005 until June, 2008. One basic goal of analysis will be to discover whether the community was serving to fill the gaps identified by the review of leadership preparation. Thus, analysis should examine the content of e-mail conversations in terms of the specific dimensions, and determine whether the conversations were of high quality, and if they were productive within the knowledge dimensions.

The coding of e-mail conversations was guided by the research questions, in conjunction with a close reading of the e-mail conversations themselves. For example, in order to address the research questions “What are the dynamics within the
community? What kinds of exchanges occur? What are the purpose or function of e-mails?” (question #4 above), a coding scheme would include the various ways in which e-mail threads served the community: Norming, Sharing Experiences, Humor or Sarcasm, Operational Support. After a partial coding of e-mail threads for these categories, the researcher determined whether new categories needed to be added or existing ones deleted. This approach is consistent with a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2002) as well as Chi’s (1997) method of content analysis. Two coding schemes were developed in this way. First, Thread Function (see Table 4) captures the style or mechanism of the thread. How is it achieving its goal, through what style of communication or mechanism of support? Second, Thread Content (see Table 5) served to capture the specific knowledge dimensions addressed by the e-mail threads.

Table 4

Coding Scheme for Thread Function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Function Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Humour or sarcasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Norming (safety in numbers, not looking ‘stupid’ in front of peers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Social and cultural connections (Social comments, death and personal tragedy, support for one another’s ventures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EX</td>
<td>Sharing relevant experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Operational support such as, “where can I find the Memo?” or day to day operation questions such as locating information regarding policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Coding Scheme for Thread Content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Content description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td><strong>Management.</strong> Operations of running the school, including operations, facility, budget, meetings, community relations, computer programs, discipline/morale and school administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUB</td>
<td><strong>Knowledge of Union and Board Policy.</strong> Understanding the legalities around government and board policies. Knowing the process, procedures and protocols of Board and Ministry directives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTL</td>
<td><strong>Curriculum Teaching and Learning.</strong> Knowledge of program planning, current pedagogical trends and research, being a motivator and enabler in order to promote student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td><strong>Professional Identity.</strong> Developing a sense of what it means to be a school leader, why this is import, and what the goals are for professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td><strong>Problem Solving Ability or Phronesis</strong> (practical wisdom) The process of solving problems based on the primary objective of student achievement, doing what is best for the community and maintaining the vision for the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.3 Coding of thread quality and coherence

All e-mail threads were scored in terms of the quality and coherence of the knowledge contained within the e-mail threads. Threads were scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being rudimentary and 4 being mastery level content, as specified in the rubric below. Each thread was coded in terms of its initiating question as well as its component e-mails in order to provide some measure the effectiveness of the discussion, the level of knowledge it contained, and the coherence and level of synthesis offered by the thread. Table 6 shows the scoring rubric for email thread content and coherence.
Table 6

Scoring Rubric for email Content and Coherence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Level 1 (rudimentary)</th>
<th>Level 2 (emerging)</th>
<th>Level 3 (coherent)</th>
<th>Level 4 (mastery-level)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question posed - does it address knowledge dimensions and include accurate assertions and rationale?</td>
<td>Asks a question with limited rationale or limited explanation of why it is important</td>
<td>Includes an engaging rationale and some connections to the theme (to help others see the relevance of the question)</td>
<td>Asks a question in order to demonstrate a point in a way that provokes reflection and deeper discussion</td>
<td>Synthesizes experiences thoroughly, makes connections across knowledge dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email responses (within thread) Do they address the thread topic, offer productive assistance and insight, and lead to deeper insight about leadership?</td>
<td>Makes an off base or unproductive comment. No relevance to other aspects of leadership</td>
<td>Offers a related anecdote, with no conclusive reflections, or makes a related point that does not move the discussion forward. Little connections made to other dimensions, and little reflection.</td>
<td>Provides a probing comment that furthers or focuses the discussion; provokes thought and reflection.</td>
<td>Comment probes and reflects; promotes discussion within the group; helps resolve issue and make connection to deeper questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.4 Coding of Thread Knowledge Building Processes

A fourth coding of thread content was conducted to capture the quality of knowledge building within the thread, as evident within the patterns of exchange amongst participants: Were participants building on one another’s ideas? Did the thread make progress, becoming more sophisticated over time, and more general in terms of its implications for leadership? Threads were coded on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being rudimentary and 4 being expert level of knowledge building, as specified in the rubric below.

Table 7

Scoring Rubric for Knowledge Building Processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Level 1 (rudimentary)</th>
<th>Level 2 (emerging)</th>
<th>Level 3 (coherent)</th>
<th>Level 4 (mastery-level)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question posed - does it promote growth and cohesion of the community?</td>
<td>Demonstrates a lack of knowledge or inaccuracy that is evident in the statement</td>
<td>Offers some personal experience or knowledge that can be built upon within the thread</td>
<td>Poses a question that leads to effective discussions which advance the group’s knowledge</td>
<td>Applies relevant experiences to a thread topic that brings the group to a deeper understanding of the leadership role. Synthesizes across the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.5 Inter-rater reliability of coding for thread content

To establish the reliability of the coding schemes used in this analysis, two additional raters were engaged in scoring 10% of the discussion threads (n=40) for Knowledge Coherence and Connections (KCC) and Knowledge Building Processes (KBP). The initial agreement of the first rater for KCC was 94% and for KBP was 82%. The initial agreement for the second rater, for KCC was 87% and for KBP was 78%. After the initial rating, all three raters sat down to discuss discrepancies, and the two raters again evaluated a new set of discussion threads (6%, or n=25 threads). This time, the agreement of the first rater for KCC was 100% and for KBP was 88% and the agreement of the second rater for KCC was 92% and for KBP was 96%. Overall, these values suggest that a scoring of discussion threads according to the rubrics provided above is quite reliable.

3.4.5 Interview Procedure

Interviews are an important complement to the e-mail conversations because they allow for a level of candor and confidentiality that is not provided by the context of written e-mails. These interview sessions allowed for a specific kind of reflection that is not well suited for the e-mail community. Participants were asked to reflect about their own professional growth, the role of the community in that growth, and their own role
within the community as well. The interview sessions were held in a neutral, non-threatening environment, convenient to the participants so that they felt comfortable and are freely able to converse. This qualitative data were examined according to categories and themes and analysis of experience and opinions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and e-mailed back to the respondent to ensure accuracy and detail.

3.4.6 Case Studies of Community Members

In order to provide a richer description of how the community enabled development in each of the 5 knowledge dimensions and supported professional development, several case studies were prepared. Participants were chosen to represent a breadth of experience and participation within the community. Each case study begins with a description of the participant in terms of her background, leadership preparation, job characteristics, and participation in the community. Next, the case studies describe the individual’s growth within each of the 5 dimensions of leadership knowledge, then closes with a discussion of their contribution to the community, and their overall professional development. Measures used within the case studies included all e-mail records, as well as interviews.

3.5 Theoretical Perspective

Analysis and coding were guided by a grounded theory perspective, where the content of e-mail threads is coded according to the hypothesis that the community must address the five dimensions identified as gaps in leadership preparation. The researcher begins with a theoretical conjecture about a causal mechanism or model that is usually embedded within a sociocultural context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this case, the
qualitative data were coded under a hypothesis that the online community is helping participants develop knowledge and expertise in the five dimensions of leadership. The researcher then pursues a set of steps with the aim of leading to a good theoretical description and fit of the model, beginning with an open coding of the data, where a set of codes are enumerated, with the understanding that new codes could be added as further review takes place. Determining causal relationships between categories of data, or finding a temporal sequence within such categories, or differences across participants will help inform the model (in this case: of how the community is enabling participants to develop expertise).

3.6 Methodological Concerns

One methodological issue in this form of research is the fact that the investigator is herself an active participant in the study, and is fully invested in the growth and health of the community. Several authors have addressed this issue from a methodological perspective (Creswell, 1998), arguing the validity of this form of research as a means of providing contextualized access and insight into the object of study. Of course, the investigator’s experience as a new school leader is valid, as she has occupied the position of school principal throughout the period of analysis, and frequently relied on the community as a source of professional support. Moreover, the entire corpus of e-mail exchanges that were analyzed was completed before this research project took form, which helps respond to possible concerns that the researcher may have biased the content of interactions. Indeed, it was the experience of participating in this community that motivated the research. As DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002 note, “all humans are participants and observers in all of their everyday interactions, but few individuals actually engage in
the systematic use of this information for social scientific purpose” (p.2). The analytic framework that addresses the targeting of the five gaps in leadership preparation was influenced by the e-mail conversations within the community, consistent with a grounded theory approach.

Another methodological issue is whether new emerging techniques for social network analysis might allow a deeper analysis of the relationships within the community and patterns of interaction. However, while such analytic methods are attractive, they are not well suited for analysis of a small group of participants where every communications is broadcast to all members (Krebs, 2007; Wellman, 2009, Freeman, 2004). The investment of time resources in a social network analysis for such data would not likely yield conclusive findings about patterns of social interaction within the group. A more effective approach would be the detailed case study of specific individuals within the group who were of interest in terms of their developing understanding of the five targeted leadership areas. Thus, while advances in social network analysis are attractive, the present research method will focus on more detailed content analysis of the contributions and understandings within the group as a whole and within individual members.

3.7 Ethics

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the information discussed through interviews and survey, pseudonyms were chosen to protect the identity of the university, boards, schools and participants. The interviews were transcribed and examined, again, with the highlighted issue of confidentiality. My letters of permission to all participants (see Appendix B) clearly described my role and the participants’ right to withdrawal from the study at any time. The letters of consent also state that all participants would be
assigned a pseudonym and all transcriptions would be made using this name rather than their real identity in an effort to distance myself from making connections to the specific individuals during the research analysis. All references to schools, school boards, or other names that occurred during the interviews were eliminated during the transcription and replaced with non-identifying words, such as ‘school’, ‘school board’, or ‘person’.
4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will present findings as examined through various sources of data. At the beginning of this thesis work, a survey was designed for Ontario principals and vice principals and administered at an Ontario conference for leaders in our educational system. The candidates represented regions throughout the province of Ontario, including the First Nations in Northern Ontario. The survey results were examined in order to develop a baseline understanding of administrators’ satisfaction in their role preparation and the current level of support they feel they have. While not specifically connected to the design or enactment of our online community, these survey findings add insight to the e-mail group featured in this work, as they reveal the values and perceptions of a broader group of practicing school leaders.

The online community will be analyzed primarily in terms of the corpus of e-mails that were contributed by members over a 3 year span of time. Overall levels of participation will be measured (i.e., numbers of e-mails sent by various members) as well as the content of participation, which will be analyzed primarily through a coding of the e-mail threads, which offers a suitable level of granularity for capturing the context of e-mail conversations. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

E-mail conversations will be coded in terms of thread function and thread content. The thread function refers to the function played by the thread within the community, often concerned with its style or purpose. The categories here include humour, validation, providing experience and/or advice, or asking a question. Coding of thread content is concerned with the five dimensions of leadership knowledge: board and policy issues,
curriculum; assessment and teaching; management; problem solving; and professional identity. While some threads were outside these dimensions (e.g., purely focused on humour or news topics), the vast majority of threads were coded as relevant to one or more of the dimensions.

Next, a coding of email threads is presented according to the coherence and sophistication of their content, in order to reveal patterns of growth over a three year span (see rubric presented in Chapter 3). Finally, the threads will be assessed to determine their contribution to the overall group’s knowledge development. Analysis of email thread content and coherence and knowledge building process will help to develop a story of the leadership journey experienced by this group. Finally, a short summary of the interviews will be presented, in order to complement the coding results, and incorporate the voices of community members into the overall analysis. Interview questions served to capture the perspectives of members concerning their individual participation, their personal role in the community, and the impact of their participation on their professional development.

4.2 Survey of Administrators

This survey of administrators was conceptualized prior to the decision to focus the research on the online community. The full survey is provided in Appendix A. Because ethics permission had already been approved for this survey, and data had been collected, it is appropriate to report some of the results, as they are relevant to the present research. Indeed, because the survey responses were collected from veteran school leaders from across Ontario, they represent a somewhat distinct viewpoint from that of the novice leaders from the e-mail community. Survey responses can be seen to reflect the
importance of peer exchanges, as well as the emphasis placed by these leaders on the
dimensions of leadership knowledge identified in the review. All survey responses were
collected in the context of an annual professional conference, held in November, 2006.
Table 8 displays the respondents to the survey, who were a mix of principals and vice
principals.

**Table 8**

*Survey Respondents: Years Since Completing Principal’s Qualification Training.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vice Principals</th>
<th>Principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 Years ago</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 5-9 years ago</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 1-4 Years ago</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey responses can be clustered in groups of items that share a common theme.
Items 3 through 6 (see Appendix A) were concerned with the leaders’ perception of their
own preparation for the profession of educational administration, and their preferred
source of learning for in-service professional development. A summary of their
responses shows that most felt they had been adequately prepared. Figure 1 summarizes
their preferred professional development formats, with peer support and “on the job”
learning considered as the most effective means of professional learning. Learning
through peer exchanges and mentoring were greatly preferred over workshops, which had
the least attraction.
Table 9 provides a summary of responses concerning the need for improvements in the principal’s training program. Survey responses are synthesized into a set of four main areas for improvement, which are consistent with the overall interpretation that more practical or hands-on experience is needed, and more instruction concerning problem solving and conflict resolution techniques.
Table 9

Areas in Need for Improvement or Change in the PQP Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas in need for program changes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for more hands on and job embedded experiences</td>
<td>The need for real case scenarios taken from day to day dilemmas illustrating the best way to handle complex situations was cited. The importance of shadowing administration and asking questions on the job with a mentor nearby. Some cited that more consistency of PQP courses needed to be in place throughout the province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More time for training and practicum discussion</td>
<td>Most people felt that the length of the time for the course was much too short and that more administration mentorship needed to be in place. This mentorship would be provided to discuss the key elements of leadership in the practicum and enable the time and energy here to evolve into a worthwhile experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical applications of the job needed to be highlighted.</td>
<td>Learning more about the “hard skills” such as understanding the legal context of the position, budgeting, health and safety and emergency applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict dispute resolution techniques needed to be provided and practiced.</td>
<td>Learning more about the “soft skills” in the profession, such as how to conduct “courageous conversations” with teachers and parents. Further information and understanding about the role of human resources, and working with unions in the building and understanding more about progressive discipline were clearly cited as areas in need of explicit instruction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items 7 through 13 focused on the leaders’ experience with their current position, in terms of their most important sources of communication and support, as well as their feelings of preparedness and excitement about the job. When asked about areas of the profession where they feel a current need for more understanding, a majority of the applicants cited issues of conflict with parents, student discipline and keeping abreast of legal issues and guidelines. Negotiating with union issues and collective agreements were also cited by the majority as areas in need of extra assistance and understanding. When asked about aspects of their job where they see opportunities for improved support, they responded with a variety of ideas, mostly related to mentorship and collegial support, as described in Table 10.
Table 10

Ideas for Improved Support for School Leaders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Ideas</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship</td>
<td>Finding release time to meet with a mentor who is an active listener and was a veteran in the job was cited as the best idea for job support. Job shadowing and discussion time as support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional learning communities with colleagues</td>
<td>Finding time to meet with colleagues to discuss ideas, strategies and case based issues. Continued support from colleagues during the job, even after the official meeting time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More administrative support</td>
<td>Full time administrative colleague to discuss concepts and cover the details of the job. Support to help cover the many aspects and responsibilities of the position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less “busy work” tasks</td>
<td>Time better spent on meaningful school based issues and concerns instead of completing short time lined tasks of no ‘apparent’ school benefit. Filter e-mails which are redundant or mean little in terms of wasted time in reading them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The administrators who had completed the survey responded overwhelmingly (85%) that they considered collegial conversations as a significant support system for their job. Thus, when surveyed independently about the limitations of their training, as well as current gaps in their understandings and support mechanisms, practicing school leaders reveal clear disposition toward social forms of learning in a community of peers. For the purposes of this survey, it was not clarified whether this was an online community or not, which in hindsight could have been a good question. It was this same need for peer support that led the small group of new leaders to participate in the e-mail community, which will serve as the basis for the remainder of the analysis.

4.2 Participation in the e-mail discussions

As mentioned earlier, all e-mail conversations were coded and analyzed in terms of “threads.” A thread was interpreted in terms of the subject heading of the “thread initiator” e-mail, and all relevant responses to that heading. Occasionally, but not often,
more than one thread was determined within a single subject heading, for example, when the topic of discussion changed but nobody thought to change the heading. In such cases, a second thread was defined with the same heading as the first.

The level of e-mail thread was chosen as a basis for content analysis in part to reduce the burden of individually coding over two thousands e-mails. However, it also provides a coherent focus within the discussions, allowing the topic and purpose of the thread to be coded, accurately. If individual e-mails had been coded, many would be very short and not clearly focused on any particular topic. Even if the individual e-mails had been analyzed, it would have been important (adding further complexity) to code them with respect to the context of their thread. For example, if a terse e-mail had been contributed from a member saying, “I have checked with one of the PE teachers – she said she will get back to me” – this e-mail would be very difficult to code in the absence of the broader thread context. Thus, the e-mail thread was determined to be the most suitable “grain size” for the analysis of community content.

Figure 2 displays the total number of e-mails graphically, as a function of time (by month). Clearly, some months saw a surge in the number of e-mails, due partly to the annual periodicity of certain activities (e.g., evaluations of teachers, or student assessments) and partly to incidental occurrence of rich discussions. The most obvious trend in the occurrence of e-mails is the dramatic increase in the level of e-mail activity over the 3-year span.
Out of a total sum of 5820 e-mails sent in the first 3 years of the community (totaling 30 months, since July and August were vacation months), there were 981 threads, with the average thread therefore containing 5.9 e-mails. Interestingly, the average number of e-mails per thread increased from an average of 5.1 e-mails per thread in Year 1 (a total of 151 threads) to 5.7 e-mails per thread in Year 2 (total of 248 threads). In Year 3, the number e-mails and threads grew further, with the average thread length being 6.25 e-mails, over a total of 580 threads. Overall, there are over 2000 individual e-mails, with more than 500 threads within the 9 months selected for analysis. Thus, there were many more e-mails sent with each successive year, and somewhat longer e-mail threads. This strongly suggests a pattern of increased usage, and certainly not one of fading usage.

Sections below discuss the topics and function of e-mail threads, in order to explore whether they were focused on development of leadership knowledge. Because of the volume of e-mails (and threads) it was not possible, nor was it necessary to code
every thread from every month. In order to reduce the volume of e-mails read and threads coded, a sample of 3 months per year was chosen: November, February and April. These months were selected because they were in the middle of the school year, and thus representative of the normal ongoing discourse within the community.

It is important to note that not every member of the community was equally active, although all members were active, and certainly read all the e-mails (as confirmed in the interviews). In the beginning of the community, two or three members typically started the threads, and others responded as they were able. Because the analysis of e-mail thread content is not concerned with individual members’ growth as much as it is with the contents of the community as a whole, it was decided not to analyze individual differences in terms of the number of e-mails contributed or whether a person was more of an “initiator” or a “responder.”

Figure 3 presents one interesting view of participation, which was available as a result of the focus on threads as the level of analysis. Because each thread from the 3-year sample (of 9 month) was represented in a dataset, including the initiator of the thread and how many e-mails are in the thread, it is possible to generate a graph of the number of e-mails that resulted from threads started by each individual contributor. This measure represents, in effect, the number of e-mails that each person was responsible for evoking, from the community members, as a result of threads she initiated. It does not explicitly reflect the quantity of e-mails that person actually contributed (i.e., in response to another’s thread).

In general, Figure 3 shows a positive pattern. At the outset of the community, just two or three members initiated most of the threads. But as the months progressed, all
members began to initiate threads more equally. This is reminiscent of Lave and Wenger’s (1990) notion of legitimate peripheral participation, where members like Lorrie and Patricia were not initially active in starting new discussions, but became much more active in starting threads as the community matured.

![Graph showing increasing level of participation in community for all members.](image)

**Figure 3.** Increasing Level of Participation in Community for all Members, Measured in Terms of the Number of E-mails that Resulted From Threads Initiated.

4.3 Thread Topics: Leadership Knowledge

Nearly all e-mail threads began as a shared point of contact into an authentic, consequential issue that was relevant to all members because of our common vocation. Because of the commitment that members had to one another and to the community as a whole, there was a high level of perceived responsibility, felt by everyone, to read and attend to all threads. The stakes were high and the trust was high. Hence, the learning opportunities were at a premium.
While not a universal characterization, the typical thread had the following features: one member (the thread initiator) had an issue, which was framed for discussion (e.g. as a question for quick answer, a problem to resolve, a curious puzzle or anecdote for open discussion, or a general issue of professional consequence). Depending on the framing, the discussion would progress to a quick resolution, or dive into the deeper meaning and implications surrounding the issue. There would be some evidence that the thread was coming to a close (e.g., in the content of e-mails), that allowed participants to know that it has been resolved to some extent. The episode or issue would then continue on, within the real life of the thread initiator, playing out within the leader’s professional context. Depending on whether or not any further interesting or important issues came of it, a new thread would be launched to provide updates or gain further support for decisions.

In this way, through the e-mail threads, the community is able to broaden its base of experience-through direct access to the various individual members’ issues and experiences. Sharing questions, problems and issues with the wider community greatly affected the initiator’s efficacy in problem solving or management, because of the collaborative exchange, peer reflections, shared experiences and generally broader resource pool that were available.

An important question in this research is whether the thread topics in the e-mail discussions were focused on the dimensions of leadership knowledge that were identified above as being important to the development of leadership expertise. It has been argued that an asynchronous e-mail community of in-service leaders should serve the purpose of
helping school leaders respond to gaps in their knowledge, and provide opportunities for
the overall community to build such knowledge.

For each thread within the 3-Year sample, the following coding process was pursued.
The entire e-mail thread was read carefully by the researcher, and then coded for an
emphasis on any of the 5 knowledge dimensions: (1) Management, (2) Curriculum,
Teaching and Learning (CTL), (3) Policies of Unions and Boards, (4) Professional
Identity, and (5) Problem Solving. While the threads were coded for other sets of
categories as well (discussed below), this was the first and perhaps most important
analysis. It determines whether the e-mail community was focused on the relevant
professional knowledge, rather than off-topic or peripheral subject matters.

Table 11 presents a summary of the contents of the e-mail threads within the 3-year
sample. For each dimension, the Table presents the percentage of all threads in each year
of the study that were coded as being relevant to that dimension. It is important to note
that a thread could have more than a single knowledge focus, as some issues are
concerned with more than one dimension (e.g., Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, and
Problem Solving). While not surprising, it is reassuring to observe that all five categories
are represented very strongly across all three years. Management is particularly strong in
its presence within the threads, with nearly twice as many threads being coded as related
to management as any other dimension.

There are some interesting patterns in these coded results, although interpreting them is
a matter of some speculation. The percentage of threads that were coded with the
Management dimension jumps dramatically in Year 3, which could be seen as surprising
(given that the knowledge and experience of all members is steadily increasing with each
passing year). Perhaps the increased awareness, knowledge of management or experience in the community led participants to be even more interested and engaged in that topic of discussion. In a similar sense, it was reassuring to see that the emphasis on the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning dimension, which had dropped in Year two, grew dramatically in the third year – even as the number of e-mail threads and overall e-mails also roughly doubled from year one. The participants in the community were having many more exchanges, and they were having those exchanges about important professional topics. Note that the total value exceeds 100% due to multiple categories evident in one e-mail thread.

Table 11

Percentage of all Threads Related to Each Knowledge Dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>CTL</th>
<th>Union and Boards</th>
<th>Professional Identity</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was also of interest to see if there was systematic variation in the focus or topic of threads, according to the month in which those discussions occurred. After all, the work with a school principal’s life varies systematically within the year, as different activities happen predictably at different times of the year. Table 12 shows the percentage of threads coded for each knowledge dimension according to the month in which they occurred, collapsed across the three years. While there are some interesting variations, it did not appear that there was any pattern worth investigating in greater detail – at least with regard to the research questions being addressed in this study. Why are fewer threads tagged with problem solving in February? Why do conversations about
professional identity rise in the month of April? These questions are interesting, but will remain a matter of discussion and speculation until more detailed analysis can be conducted (e.g., on the specific contents of e-mail threads, not just their knowledge dimensions).

**Table 12**

*Percentage of All Threads Related to Each Knowledge Dimension, by Month.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>CTL</th>
<th>Union and Boards</th>
<th>Professional Identity</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.4 Thread Function: The role of discussions within the community**

As outlined in Chapter 3, all discussion threads within the 3-Year sample were coded according to a scheme that captured the possible functions of discussion threads: (1) Humour, (2) Norming within the community (i.e., to make sure others felt the same way or would respond in similar ways), (3) Social context (i.e., connecting to social and cultural variables or factors within the group), (4) Sharing experiences (i.e., adding a relevant experience to the discussion, typically including some rationale or context about the experience), and (5) Operational support (i.e., either requesting assistance in coming to a solution about some procedural or operational problem, or contributing insight to such a request). This scheme was determined based on a preliminary reading of discussions, where taxonomy of functions was generated, then refined after a preliminary coding of some threads to determine whether the scheme was sufficient.

Table 13 presents the percentage of all threads in the 3-year sample, according to the thread functions. Just as in the case of the thread topics in the previous section, there
are some interesting patterns of means in this Table, reflecting shifts within the kind of
discussions that were happening within the community across the years. Notably, the
percentage of threads whose primary function was humour was higher in Year 1 than it
was in Years 2 or 3. Similarly, social context – the sharing of social or cultural
connections – was evidently quite important in the first year, comprising more than 60%
of all threads. Sharing relevant experiences, and requesting operational support are both
functions that grew more important with the passing of time.

**Table 13.**

*Percentage of All Threads, by Month, Coded for Thread Function.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Humour</th>
<th>Norming</th>
<th>Social Context</th>
<th>Sharing Experience</th>
<th>Operational Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.6 Analysis of Knowledge Content and Coherence**

Each thread was scored on a 1-4 scale in order to provide some measure of the
effectiveness of the discussion, the level of knowledge it contained, and the coherence
and level of synthesis offered by the thread.

Figure 4 reveals the patterns of means of this scoring, which shows a clear
increase in the average score across the three years. This difference is statistically
significant, with $F (2, 343) = 12.05, p< 0.0001$. While the average knowledge coherence
score is still relatively low in comparison with the highest possible score of 4, it is
important to remember that, first, the top score was determined as being at a “mastery” or
expert level, and many of the e-mail threads were simply not highly sophisticated.
Indeed in the first year, many illustrated a fairly low level of coherence and quality.
Hence, the growth demonstrated in this measure appears realistic, in terms of what would be expected of a group of early career professionals. This is positive indication that the discussions within the community were not only targeting the important dimensions of leadership knowledge, but they were also enabling this knowledge to become more coherent and mature as evidenced between years one to year three.

Figure 4. Increase in Knowledge Coherence and Quality of E-mail Discussion Threads

4.7 Analysis of the Knowledge Building Process

A further analysis of the email threads was conducted to investigate the relative success of knowledge building processes within the community. Do threads achieve some resolution or outcome? Does the community achieve a deeper level of insight, or capture some important potential misstep? Are comments promoting reflection amongst members, adding resources to our knowledge base, and engaging us in discussing transformational leadership?
Figure 5 shows the growth in the knowledge building processes within the e-mail threads as a function of time. Clearly, the scores for threads improve from each year to the next. Indeed, in contrast to the knowledge coherence graph above, which seems to be leveling off somewhat in Year 3, the growth in knowledge building processes appears to be quite strong even between Years 2 and 3. This difference is statistically significant, with $F(2, 343) = 15.84, p < 0.0001$. Consistent with the perceived growth in sophistication and depth of discussions (discussed further in the next chapter) the measure of knowledge building illustrates clear growth in the kinds of knowledge building processes that occurred within our discussions. This is also quite an intuitive finding, as it would be expected that any active e-mail community would mature in terms of the quality and productivity of its discussions.

*Figure 5. Growth in Knowledge Building Processes Within E-mail Discussion Threads*
4.8 Interviews of Community Participants

Interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding and some insight into the experiences of participants. Chapter 3 provided details about the interview items and protocol. While not all members were readily available for face-to-face interviews, five interviews were conducted in total. Three were selected for a review and synthesis according to 4 cross-cutting themes which serve to capture the interview questions:

1. Individual participation inventory: Why did you join this group, how often do you participate, and what are some specific contributions or disadvantages that you have noted as a group member?

2. Knowledge building: How has the community experience aided in your professional growth process? What knowledge, emotional or social growth do you believe you have garnered from the experience?

3. Community processes: What processes are working well within the way the group stands and what do you believe can be changed?

4. Growth of community: How has this group matured and do you believe it could be replicated elsewhere?

The responses from these three participants, who differ greatly in terms of their own personal background and professional experience, thus providing greater contrast, will be summarized here, and will also inform the case studies provided in Chapter 5, combined with other sources, to reveal insights about the growth of individuals in the
various dimensions of leadership knowledge. The three community members to be presented are as follows:

- Caren was a newly appointed Principal after 1.5 years as a vice principal. She had taught French and Special Education in the Public system for 14 years, and was on the Board for the Children Aids Society. The best description of Caren is that of “connector.” Her fluency with information technology was highly regarded with the group, and of great importance to our success. Caren was the one who decided to for an e-mail list, and was one of the most active contributors in the early days of the group.

- Marcia was a newly appointed vice principal who started her career as an educational assistant, and was then a teacher for 8 years. She was a board consultant on literacy for 2 years, a vice principal for 2 years and became a principal in 2006. Her understanding at all levels of the system enabled her to speak with conviction on many of the discussion topics.

- Patricia was newly appointed vice principal, in the system as a teacher for the previous 6 years, she was a vice principal for 3 years, before becoming a Principal in 2007. Patricia was undergoing personal transitions in her life and was seen by the other members as being young and ambitious.

4.8.1 Individual participation inventory

Caren is recognized by everyone in the community as the creator or initiator of the group, resulting from her invitation of a carefully selected group of colleagues and friends to participate in an email list serve. In her interview, Caren recognizes her own expertise in
technology and organization: “I’m a good filter of online information, that’s my strength. I’ve got a great system. I can pull up…it’s on such and such date….” (Caren: Interview, item 5). Caren also noted that one of her reasons for creating the group was to address some of overwhelming management challenges she had encountered as a new school leader. She has also noted that she hopes that she adds an element of fun and humour in her answers to keep others going. (Caren: Interview, 8)

Caren noted that since her computer is always online, she participates with great frequency. With the current situation where members are constantly connected through the BlackBerry, connection to others is now even more immediate. During our face-to-face meetings, it’s “almost like a summer camp” (Caren: Interview, item 3) in that we are all having fun and have developed a great connection and relationship with each other.

Both Patricia and Marcia remarked that they joined the group through an invitation from Caren. They also stated that the group has been instrumental in their development and aiding in their professional growth. For Patricia, she has acknowledged that due to her newness to administration, she has used the group to ask questions of all sorts. “…I could ask in case I didn’t understand something or needed to get something done which were beyond my capabilities.” (Patricia: Interview, item 1)

As the group has evolved over the years, and in addition to Patricia’s own development on various committees and liaisons, Patricia’s contribution to the group has been in the areas of being a Board expert through some of her committee work. She has developed a greater network with key connections, which she has used and probed for the benefit of answering some of the group questions.
Marcia, as an older member of the group, also has a passion for developing good character and reminders of “putting children first” have contributed to the philosophical basis of the group’s development. This contribution has also aided in her own job development of using the group to help her through some of the queries and eliminate some of the isolation felt in this position. *(Marcia: Interview, item 6)*

Both Marcia and Patricia acknowledged that the main cause of worry for the group is to replace those who are retiring from administrative work. In order to maintain the viability of the community, a certain number of individuals need to be part of the group in order to create a healthy and productive environment. Recruitment for succession needs to be part of each participant’s mandate, as the veteran members continue to retire and leave the group presence.

This healthy group participation is imperative for the overall development of the group dynamics to create and perpetuate the knowledge building found within the group structure, as concisely stated in this comment from a group member, “I think we need more members now. So many of us are retiring, and you need a certain number to keep it alive.” *(Julie: Interview, item 4)*

### 4.8.2 Knowledge building

Caren’s dedication, as demonstrated through her keen participation in leadership conferences, workshops and reading material, has been a mainstay of the group mandate. “I would say that a huge percentage (of our e-mails) is to help us become better leaders” *(Caren: Interview, item 2)*. The altruistic sharing of information acquired through various conferences and workshops, sharing of resources, ideas and read material contribute to
the fact that the knowledge building of all members means a great deal to Caren. It is interesting to note that whenever participating members “divide” into smaller groups for conversation, Caren is quick to put all members back into the discussion format. Her great desire to keep the group members together and move the learning forward as a collective journey, outlined her knowledge building foundation for the purpose of the initiation of the group.

When asked why she developed the group, Caren was quick to respond, “there is no manual” (e-mail, Nov. 2007) for this job, and having “eight mentors at your fingertips” (Caren: Interview, item 10) has been incredibly valuable. It is interesting to note that each member of the group was chosen for their particular asset and potential contribution to the group learning. The collective intelligence and friendship of having people working together for the good of the whole was often cited in Caren’s interview. “We all have divergent experiences. When it’s out there…we gather all the minds. Well trained, experienced administrators. Put all the years of experience together, and then we have lots. Our friendships is solid more so than relationships with other people. Lots of sisterhood.” (Caren: Interview, item 2)

Learning through each other’s experiences and with each other’s guidance has been referred as important factors of the group’s success. For Patricia, the group has been an instrumental factor in the development of her professional identity and to “keep up with so much information and accountability” (Patricia: Interview, item 4). She believes that now after several years of being immersed in administration she believes that the knowledge building in the group has moved past the management issues and into
“practicalities related to the philosophies” (Patricia: Interview, item 6). Her great desire, as expressed through the e-mail questions, have pointed to her need to now focus on the essence of leadership and development of leadership expertise through understanding the core nature of the work. “I think I’ve grown a lot because of this group and now I’m ready for the next step in my development of being a principal.” (Patricia: Interview, item 6)

Marcia’s attachment to the group lies in her self assessed value in promoting each other through questions. She appreciates the group solidarity and respects the fact that “I never felt less because I have a different background (not as many years in education or formal education background)” (Marcia, interview #8). Her appreciation of the knowledge building of the group was frequently outlined in her statements about using the group as a venue for moral strength, since her life without the group would be “isolating” (Marcia, Interview, item 7) and “very lonely” (Marcia, Interview, item 7). Marcia’s knowledge extracted from group conversations were well stated when she remarked, “I don’t know what I would do with myself without the group….but here I am, and I’m so happy to have support to keep getting better everyday (Marcia, Interview, item 8).

4.8.3 Community processes

It was evident that Caren’s examination and reflection of the group structure were always on her mind. She often cites caution to the group of noting that e-mails can and will be read by the Board, so be careful what you say and how you phrase things (Caren e-mail, 2006). However, when asked if the group would ever evolve into another
electronic format, Caren didn’t believe this was possible, since other members were apprehensive of new technology. “Besides, we can’t log into facebook from school. E-mail is part of our job culture. It’s the ease of use and it’s readily accessible. We are logged on all the time anyway, just to get information from the Board about all the stuff we have to be aware of. (Caren: Interview, item 8). Since changing the technology format was not a reality, the use of Blackberry as instated by the Board has only made the immediacy and closeness of relationships within the group even more viable.

Both Marcia and Patricia cited the need for succession planning as an area of immediate concern. Since the initial development of the group, 4 members have retired, with another 3 heading this way within the next six months of writing this work. Since then, over time, 5 new members (from the original) have become part of the group. However, the essence of this part of the interview conversation was that the group functions most effectively with a dynamic of various view points and regional area representation. The emphasis from both Marcia and Patricia was to keep the group large enough for a constant stream of interactions, thoughts and individuals to share with the leadership building process.

4.8.4 Growth of community

The idea of group replication was not a viable concept from Caren, Patricia’s and Marcia’s point of view. In order for such a group to exist, you need a “maverick a connector, like Caren,” (Candice: Interview, item 8) to formulate such a framework. Caren brought up the point that the board has tried to artificially have an open site for asking questions and relating information. However without a “concept of trust and
confidentiality” *(Caren: Interview, item 7)* this was ineffective and went defunct after only a few posts.

Caren likened the replication of a group such as this when she stated that it was much like team teaching. “You could write a book about how wonderful and great it is, but I think it has a lot to do with the combination of personalities. Sometimes it works (just like team teaching) and other times it doesn’t.” *(Caren: Interview, item 8)*

According to Patricia, the group has evolved from the more tangible aspects such as development of basis knowledge information, such as management, to being a viable source of developing and articulating philosophy and leadership growth. For Marcia, the maturity of the group has been in the development of friendships and moral support. The security of discussions of all sorts and support of colleagues, who have now become friends, have been the best aspect of the group’s dynamics *(Marcia: Interview, item 8)*.

The replication of a group such as this has to be initiated through a sense of common purpose and urgency. The people connecting a group such as this type, have to have the common understanding of a collective philosophy of building together and providing unconditional support. Growing pains are hard and the process of trial and error even harder, but working and supporting each other through this process through friendship and guidance are key elements into the success of a group of this nature.

**4.9 Growth and sustainability of the community**

Taken together, the analyses of email transactions reported above reveal a stable pattern of discourse that actually increases over the years. Unlike many e-mail lists or online communities that report initial activity levels, followed by a quick descent into relative silence, this community clearly found a resonant note with participants, who
continued to exchange e-mail at an increasing rate. Indeed, there were twice as many e-mails in Year 3 as in Year 2, with an increasing focus on problem solving, curriculum, teaching and learning, and operational support. Moreover, the quality of the e-mail threads increased each year, as well as the quality of knowledge building processes.

Of course, an important question that must be considered is concerned with the reasons for our success as a sharing community, the factors that may have been responsible, the conditions under which we were able to succeed, and the likelihood of our continuation, or graceful demise. These questions are relevant to any potential application of this approach for in-service professional development. In other words, now that we have established that a sharing community for in-service leaders addresses key aspects of knowledge, and supports the growth of knowledge and problem solving skills amongst its members, we must try to understand what factors were essential to that success, and what factors are important for its sustainability.

4.9.1 Sociocultural factors that enable the community

As noted by Wenger (1998), nearly every community is situated within a sociocultural context that enables the members to identify with one another and with the purposes of the practices that they hold in common. In the case of our leadership community, we were able to develop a shared understanding of and commitment to the leadership role, and to co-develop our understandings in relation to the sharing of richly contextualized problems. Thus, Wenger’s three elements of the domain, community and practice were integral to the understanding of our success. Our shared interests, together with our relationship of “trust amongst friends” enabled the meaningful sharing of stories, ideas and resources that were relevant to everyone’s pursuit of understanding.
more about the leadership context. More importantly, they were not irrelevant to
anyone’s pursuits, in part because all of our personal trajectories were so similar.

This sociocultural context of the group was grounded in the fact that all the
members were women, non-immigrants and new or relatively new, to the administration
role. All members were vested in the idea that they wanted to use this community of
practice to become better leaders. Although the data for this thesis evolved over a period
of three years, the investment of friendship and commitment to one another was
longitudinal, extending before the three years and in some cases with a common history.
This evoked a stronger sense of ties to one another and a deep sense of building each
other towards the common goal of success. Our drive for shared community knowledge
building was supported by a shared sense of “all for one and one for all,” which was
reflected in the e-mails, which revealed a deep, altruistic dedication to strengthening our
ties with one another. All of these factors contributed to the coherence and the success of
the community structure.

Of course, while these socio-cultural elements worked together in support of this
one group, one must wonder if we would have succeeded, for example, if we had been of
mixed gender or ethnicity – i.e., if the sociocultural elements weren’t as homogenous.
This must unfortunately remain as an open question, and one that could be addressed,
perhaps, in the context of a more scaled application of these ideas.

4.9.2 Sustainability of the Community

Perhaps the most important evidence from this body of e-mails is the success of
the participants in their respective leadership positions. Nobody failed in their jobs, and
most have remained in active pursuit of careers in school administration. All five
members who were interviewed stated that the community was vital to their success, and countless e-mails giving thanks for the community discussions. As time went on, the community progressed as participants recognized that it was not going to disappear and would be an ongoing resource. Members began referring to the community as a permanent fixture of their professional lives, and even began orienting toward one another professionally in contexts outside the world of e-mails. Several face-to-face gatherings were held, usually of a subset of the membership. Thus, the community appears to be solidly entrenched in all of our professional practices.

Perhaps the only question in regard to sustainability has to do with retirement of members, and the lack of newcomers to the group. Indeed, it is not clear how we would incorporate a newcomer, as one of the reasons this community effort succeeded was that all members were in the early stages of their leadership service. The present group has not discussed taking on any new members, although it seems likely that it will need to do so at some point in the future. In general, it may be that the model played out in this study may be suitable for in-service professional development, where groups of new leaders are formed, to offer peer guidance as they move forward into their professional lives. The issue of sustainability and scalability will be discussed below in Chapter 6. The next chapter offers an account of the professional growth of three members of the community in the form of case studies that focus on the growth of leadership knowledge.
CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

In order to enrich our understanding of the function of the community, several case studies were conducted to create a deep description of individual participants in terms of their background, leadership preparation, job characteristics, participation in the community, and professional growth throughout the time of the study. The purpose of these case studies is to enrich the description of how individuals came to benefit from their experiences and grow as a result of the online community. They can be taken as offering supportive evidence to the analyses of knowledge growth provided in the previous chapter, which documented the improvement of numerical scores but do not illustrate what that looks like in the professional context, nor in the deeply personal context of the individual participants.

This chapter will present three case studies of individual members of the community, in order to provide a deeper qualitative description of the impact of participation on the growth of leadership knowledge within the five dimensions. Each case will begin with a description of the individual’s background and leadership preparation, based in part on the member’s reflections, as provided in a post-interview (see Appendix 2 for full drafts), as well as on content from their e-mail comments. Next, the case study presents an analysis of the leader’s knowledge trajectory within each of the five dimensions of leadership, drawing on interviews, e-mails comments, and a wider analysis of professional episodes that are reflected in multiple e-mail threads within the community. Two additional sections on the member’s relationship with the community, and an overview of his or her professional growth, including expertise in leadership, will
be examined. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the cross-cutting themes within these cases, and any overarching interpretations.

Wherever possible, excerpts from the community’s e-mail threads will be employed. However, no e-mail content will be quoted if there is any possible compromise of confidentiality or personal privacy. In some cases, e-mails will be paraphrased in terms of their content and context.

5.1 Caren

Caren had been teaching for 14 years prior to going into administration. She is a talented and intelligent woman who has a deep curiosity for life and cares greatly about others. By all accounts, she is a nurturer and ‘giver.’ In her personal life, Caren has assumed positions on charity and social service boards. Her passion for disadvantaged children continues to be a focus in some of her work outside her role as a Principal, even today. As a teacher, Caren taught French and Special Education at three different schools. She was also the computer site administrator for the school, helping teachers and administrators navigate new software applications and computer set up. This confidence with technology is instrumental to Caren’s professional life.

After spending 2 years as a vice-principal, Caren was promoted to role of Principal, where she found that she really had no one in the building with whom she could discuss the challenges or even the simple queries of the day to day position. “Sometimes, you need to say all this stuff to someone…You can’t say it to anyone in the building…secretary, teacher.” (Caren: Interview 1, item 2)
Caren’s altruistic nature was an important characteristic for her role as the “connector” within our group. She put together an e-mail list consisting of a group of friends, both old and new – each of whom brought their own strengths and background to the community. Caren’s understanding of technology led to a list serve community several years before the rise in popularity of Wiki or Google groups. From time to time, throughout the 3 years in which data was analyzed, there were numerous e-mails from group members, expressing gratitude to her for assembling the group. When Caren was questioned on her purpose for creating the group in the first place, she responded as follows:

Initially it started out as connecting with individual people. Professional friendships were embellished and grew from the nature of the position of being an administrator. I had several individual friends in the MSN world as well as friends from other areas, and I wanted to bring them together. I was friends with all of you guys separately. If I wanted to know a question, I would have to e-mail everyone separately and for me, that would be a great waste of time. (Caren: Interview, item 1).

Caren had been very deliberate in composing the group, included those already in the leadership system and those had just become administrators. She had known that there needed to be a group chemistry and was conscious of blending various personalities, strengths and people of like minded purpose into the group. Minimizing potential personality conflict was a main consideration as Caren expressed in this interview statement.

We also had to think strongly about the vice principal and principal in the same school that were part of the group, would they be able to participate with complete honesty, or be forced to compromise because of their close working relationship? I had to think about who
was going to work with whom when I started to get my list together. *(Caren: Interview, item 1)*

In addition to developing a place to air out confidence, insecurities and validation, the group was also designed as a place for gathering and promoting knowledge about the leadership framework. Caution was extended to all members around the need for keeping the postings free of excessive complaining and to assume that those guiding the rights to review the contents could view any postings at anytime.

The group was a place of asking questions and airing ideas to colleagues before acknowledging the limitations of these ideas to others in a more public and unforgiving forum.

I would say that 80% of our conversation is peers helping peers...”I forgot to look at Memo X” “what is the best way....” “does someone have it filed?”...and invariably someone can produce it in 10sec. I would say 5-10% is about mindless complaining, and the remaining 5% is about “I need someone to talk to.” *(Caren: Interview, item 1)*

The following sections examine Caren’s own knowledge development according to the five leadership dimensions outlined throughout this work.

**Caren’s knowledge of management**

During her interview, Caren mentioned that she had foreseen the group as a place where the specific topics related to management would be a central focus.

I guess I would say (that our e-mails are), 70% managerial, 10% complaining, and 5% rest of the stuff ...A huge percentage is to help us become better leaders. *(Caren: Interview, item 2)*

In terms of her own personal understanding of the management dimension, Caren’s early e-mails revealed a rudimentary knowledge, with questions such as:
“What is the hard cap on grade 1 and grade ¾ classes? It’s better to know now than learn it through the hard way, as some of our colleagues have. (General e-mails, October, 2006)

Her early questions in this dimension were quite simple, such as “When are reports due?” (e-mail, November, 2005). In later years, such questions evolved to more nuanced inquiries, such as: “What area do you read with most care on the report cards?” (May, 2008). This simple, yet thought provoking question for the group provoked others to examine and discuss the various philosophies of management that existed within the community.

Despite some of the simple questions asked by Caren at the beginning of the e-mail community, it was obvious even at the start that Caren possessed an intuitive understanding of management issues. For example, in a series of e-mails outlining errors on previous e-mails from the system, (e-mails, November, 2005), Caren was the first to ascertain that there were errors in memos or information being passed along to the rest of us before this fact was made known to the public. As leaders, we were instructed to develop the communication of the frequent and revised e-mail content to our staff, but through Caren’s wise guidance, she encouraged us to practice restraint and “just wait a bit” (e-mails, November, 2005).

“I think we should wait until some of this back and forth is really concluded before telling this to our staff. It doesn’t look very good on us! (e-mail, November, 2005)

This cautionary or reserved approach has been noted in several literature reviews, where fostering an aura of leadership confidence is a significant factor of success. When discussing indecisive plans and goals, for example, Foster and Young (2004) remark that
people lose confidence, and tend to blame those people believed to be responsible for leadership” (p.29).

In the early months of our community, Caren was still struggling with some basic aspects of management within her Principalship. For example, in month 2, she found herself at a loss in her understanding of the basic role of an occasional teacher. She knew there were policies and implications around the role and decided to ask the group as a resource: “What are LTOs allowed to do?” (October, 2005). Policy and precedent implications around such ‘expected’ events such as the grade 8 dance (“Who can run Grade 8 dances?” -- February, 2006) and the role of the school council (“What is the role of the School Council?” -- March 2006) were areas with a management component where she felt the need to address a very basic level of understanding. In these cases, Caren recognized that she did not have a ready response for her staff and community, and approached the community with her concerns, in order to make sure that she was prepared and perceived as knowledgeable.

As the months progressed, Caren became more capable of dealing with such situations. In part, this was due to her interactions within the community and in part simply a result of her increased experience. It is difficult to even imagine teasing those two factors apart, because over the duration of the community every time we were met with challenge in our experience the e-mail list became an essential part of those experiences. Caren continued to exchange important knowledge with peers relating to the Management category. For example, she often mentioned that she was on yard duty at every recess in order “to avoid the discipline line ups at her door after the event…. Besides, I am there watching first hand how situations are dealt and the antecedents
before the crisis.” (e-mail, June, 2008). This proactive aspect of her management style spoke to the rest of us as an important reminder to be there ‘first hand’ and to be a visual presence to demonstrate our leadership and to gather the “heart and pulse” of our schools.

### 5.1.2 Caren’s knowledge of curriculum, teaching and learning

At the beginning, Caren posed questions to the community in the area of curriculum, teaching and learning that induced reflection and served as a thoughtful catalyst for community discussion, such as “Should retest marks be averaged, or stand as they are?” (November, 2005). However, initially, her questions reflected a lack of knowledge, such as “How do you move teachers forward when they don’t want to go there?” (February, 2006), whereas in later years it became clear that Caren had developed a deeper understanding in this dimension: “There’s not much in my day that I think makes a real difference, but I do love being part of teacher’s meetings and trying to figure out how to work on the next steps” (March 2008). This growth, in terms of being part of the curriculum and implementation team, was quite evident. Not only had Caren grown into the leadership role in this dimension, but she had also developed the confidence and fortitude to enjoy being part of it.

Throughout her leadership journey, in order to prepare herself for future development and growth, Caren joined various leadership committees, and frequently attended curriculum based workshops and attended guest presentations. She quite often brought this experience to others in the group and made it known that she valued it above all else. The e-mail below is an example of Caren’s frequent invitations to other members to join her in keeping abreast of current curriculum trends and expanding her knowledge.
of this subject through professional workshops – even if it meant giving your own personal time on the weekend.

Is anyone going to the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) convention this weekend? I’m going and would love to have some company. (Caren’s e-mail, April 2008)

Caren had the opportunity to have a Ministry intervention to promote student achievement at her school through the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). Through extensive and deliberate curriculum goal setting from the Ministry, Caren’s understanding of this subject area continued to grow and this in turn continue to impact the rest of the group.

In one of Caren’s excursions to a “school on the move” (exemplary school with increasing student achievement scores), she uploaded and shared pictures of the school giving examples of its philosophy, direction and reasons for its success (May, 2008). She transferred these pictures to a power point and movie presentation, in order to demonstrate at staff meetings and to provide inspiration. Overall, the community felt very fortunate to be part of Caren’s learning and to have her sharing her experiences and insights within our environment.

5.1.3 Caren’s knowledge of policy, union and school boards

Deriving in part from her growing sense of confidence of working successfully with a school team and developing collaborative goals, Caren’s understanding of policy, union and school boards were also nurtured. Cultivating this leadership foundation for staff development was integral to Caren’s understanding of school leadership.
In the early stages of the community, Caren asked questions again that reflected some fundamental limitations in her knowledge, such as “what is the APM for school boating trips?” (March 2006). The motivation for this question later emerged to be concerned with the liability issues of taking students into deep waters during excursions. It is interesting that instead of using the “search” function for leadership memos, she felt that a “call out” to the group would be more effective and expedient.

In evidence of her development in this area, almost a year later, Caren asked, “How do you make sure that staff understands the needs of special education students, while they are on duty?” (February 2007). This question came from an occasion when she was frustrated at some of the escalations of student behaviour after recess. Almost a year after asking this question, Caren’s confidence had developed to the point that she sought out a special program to initiate at her school. She had established enough confidence in her abilities and vision to implement a prudent pedagogical program for school inclusiveness and staff connection to students in March 2008. The following e-mail illustrates her efforts to communicate this conversation to the group:

“I’m going to implement some of Connie Dembrowsky’s ideas into my Friday Flyers and staff meetings to get the staff moving in this area.” (March 2008)

In her interview, Caren’s was acutely aware of the gamut of personalities within the group. In this statement about how another member handled her own staff and school, Caren’s maturity in understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic pieces on handling policy, procedures and people are outlined:

(One of the members) has definite courageous conversations with her students and adults. She offers the perspective from hard experience and we work backwards from there. Her honesty and level of sharing
makes her a great value to the group and through some of her own mis-steps and harsh steps, we've learned both what and what not to do. *(Caren: Interview, item 3)*

This wisdom to ascertain the contributions of group members is likely related to Caren’s growth of experiences in going through both success and trials on a personal and collective level. In the segment below, Caren’s understanding of people management also reflected a cautionary and pensive note:

> You have huge levels (amongst the group) of various understandings of certain topics, tolerance and “aggressive levels” with their staff. There is a huge range of suggestions. For example, “I couldn’t do that, but I could do that...You take the group thoughts and treat it with care”. *(Caren: Interview, item 1)*

When Caren asked, “How do I change the way people do duty?”(June 2007), ensuing discussions revealed that this question was really concerned with developing staff understanding of student needs. Caren was especially aware of the changing policy on mandatory designated supervision minutes for school staff. Through this question, Caren addressed the fact that changing school climate and culture is a daunting challenge for school leaders. Changing perceptions concerning something like doing yard duty can be ambitious, especially when people do not understand the urgency, need or the consequences for the change, despite the fact that carelessness in this area can lead to serious problems. Caren’s question to the group reflected the concern she felt towards the safety of all students, especially those with specialized needs. Students with various special needs are vulnerable due to potential bullying from other children and also through their lack of social awareness in the presence of others. Her growth in this area of policy and procedures was evident through her frequent introduction of such thought provoking question, and her careful considerations of the ensuing discussions.
This thoughtful consideration, carved in a careful and cautionary approach to leadership, has formed the basis of Caren’s professional identity. The growth in her knowledge and awareness of this dimension is discussed next.

5.1.4 Caren’s knowledge of professional identity

Professional Identity develops along with wisdom, which depends in turn upon experience, and in the beginning of our community, most members had very little experience in most of these dimensions of leadership. In the early phases of the community, Caren was seen to ask introspective questions, such as the following:

“Why is it that the publishers always know about the funding before we do? We got a fax today, and I haven’t yet heard officially about this at all.” (December, 2006)

Since “there is no manual” for the job of school principal, with all the myriad individual cases and scenarios that demand attention, the lack of knowledge can lead to uncertainty and frustration, which was quite often redirected to the group, e.g., “Does anyone know who is in charge of Board student transportation?” (November, 2007). Leadership identity was sometimes reflected through comparisons with the staff with whom we served. In this e-mail, Caren is questioning the concept of professionalism when dealing with daybook issues.

“What do teachers have to have in their daybook? Are they even required to have a daybook? Where is the professionalism when someone else covers for the teacher?” (February, 2007)

The weight of responsibility of the leadership role was questioned through this comment, to the group: “How often do you leave your school? Do you feel guilty when you leave it?” (April, 2006). She also periodically engaged the group in conversations
relating to her feelings that resulted from different experiences. For example, she once acknowledged, “never feeling exactly at ease leaving the school premises during the day”, which generated quite a bit of ensuing e-mail discussion (April 2006 and March 2007). However, as time passed, her frequent forays outside the school to attend leadership workshops altered this point of view to an extent. In this case, Caren’s professional identity of leadership moved away from being a ‘baby sitter’ (sic), to one where the inclusion of new programs and ideas became a paramount consideration of the job. When asked about the way she saw her leadership identity, Caren replied:

Our group presents a great learning opportunity. It’s so different when it is fabricated at the board. We all ponder about the answer and finally we add to assist each other. It’s like ‘In basket activity’ on a regular basis and this is all because of the people who we trust with our insecurities. We are developing together; each giving a bit to the overall growth. (Caren: Interview, item 6)

This community development was something that Caren nurtured very deliberatively. For example, she once asked the group:

“Which subjects on the report card do you dislike reading the most?” (November, 2007)

While this question was seemingly simple, it prompted a good deal of reflection and considerable group conversation. Some members provided answers based on the frustrations that every report card sounded the same, due to the reliance of the canned library comments, and that the only area demonstrating individualization of growth was found in the “Learning Skills” section, since most staff take the liberty to free compose their ideas based on the student’s individual demonstration of critical skills (i.e.- conflict resolution, participation, homework completion, organization etc.). This example
illustrates how several dimensions of leadership knowledge (in this case, CTL, policy and professional identity) typically converge.

One response to this question from Patricia, demonstrated a development of her personal journey. She emphasized that she enjoyed reading the comments in the Language Arts or English literature section. At this point, Caren gave her a “Bravo, you get a level 4” (November, 2007) since she too had developed this understanding for the importance of literacy and character education as also being the essential components for students. The importance of her role in developing the area of literacy and critical thinking skills of her students also defined her professional identity. Thus, Caren’s contribution of this comment prompted reflection and re-affirmed the goal for everyone in the group: to promote student achievement. Due to the group’s high acclaim of Caren’s leadership within our own community, her voice was a reminder to everyone that professional identity should be firmly set as the central goal. Caren’s own sense of professional identity is evidently tied to her leadership of the community, particularly in this dimension of professional identity, which has indeed begun to emerge as a primary group philosophy, which will be as highlighted by future interview samples in this paper.

Throughout this thread, Caren demonstrated some principles of being a worthy facilitator for our group learning. She posted encouraging responses to each comment through quips, like “sounds like a level 4 comment to me” and “next?” This strong sense of professional identity and deliberate emphasis on knowledge building threads within the community reflected her own growing development in this area. The reflection and thought we had after this thread promoted greater observation and clarification of our primary role, in the otherwise mundane task of reading hundreds of reports and dealing
with seemingly “insignificant” tasks which seem to take a great deal of time and sense away from the overall primary directive and purpose of being an educational leader.

Professional identity and problem solving are closely linked. How well you can handle unexpected situations and crises is quite connected to your sense of priorities and vision, which in turn defines your leadership values. In this era of collaborative leadership, staff only accepts change when it occurs through leadership trust and confidence. The primary reason for this collaboration is to promote curriculum and critical thinking in order to increase student achievement, which requires a well managed school, free from extraneous discipline and interference. Therefore, the development of problem solving abilities is an essential piece to educational leadership, since repeated situations do not usually occur and each case has its own particular base. The next section describes Caren’s growth in problem solving, which is clearly rooted in her sense of caring and understanding, and inspiring those around her. Her background in social service provided the foundation for her people management skills, and her ability to reflect has enabled her to develop some solid problem solving strategies.

5.1.5 Caren’s knowledge of problem solving

Caren’s growth in the area of problem solving was evident through her comments during the first few months of group e-mails. For example, when she was trying to sort out budget matters to allocate funds at her school, Caren observed that “there isn’t much money to do anything of importance in the school” (October, 2005). Years later, referring back to the topic of budget, she demonstrated creative problem solving by generating school funds through the (then novel) idea of encouraging a collection of electronic waste disposal at the school (May 2009). In addition, Caren presented the idea to the group of
developing a positive and collaborative culture within the school by “feeding her leadership team for work ‘n lunch sessions” (April 2007),

Caren used her creative ideas to stimulate anticipation and excitement for her leadership directives. In her interview, she was quick to point out that part of her positive development in the area of problem solving has occurred due to the support from the group, as illustrated by the following quote:

There is a lot of professional knowledge growth occurring as our group develops. We have daily in-basket type of activity and learning. “This is what is happening in my school”...”.this is what is happening in my school”...”.I would never do that” These examples bring about online professional development which are ‘in house’ and relevant to our current position. There is a great deal of things I have learned from all members. This peer knowledge base is terrific because it is the knowledge of the group. This is how this supervisory officer handles this, and “holy smokes I’ve missed this memo, glad someone reminded me.” These are the important learning parts to our job. It seems as though every e-mail outlines something about questions we may have such as, “what would you do if...” (Caren: Interview, item 6)

Throughout the duration of our e-mail community, Caren expressed great creativity and always maintained that a great deal of her ideas and success are due to the support of friendship and ideas developed from the e-mail group. Without any doubt, all the other members feel exactly the same way – that our knowledge and expertise in the area of problem solving has been directly influenced by Caren’s good example and creative positions.

5.1.6 Caren’s relationship to the community

Quite often throughout the 3 years in which e-mails were analyzed, our group’s discussions were punctuated with Caren’s comments like, “Just checking in to see who is around” (Sept. 5, 2005) or “Snow day roll call~ is everyone safe at school?” (February,
2008). Caren always exercised a great sense of responsibility and care for all members. She would often say, that “we are truly blessed with our circle of friends….” (December, 2006)

On Fridays, especially during very exhausting weeks, Caren was quick to post a visual of a happy hamster celebrating the coming of the weekend, with a caption of “Can you smell Friday?” (2007-2008). Sometimes, her deliberate attempts to sustain the group were generated through simple but compelling comments, such as: “Did everyone see the grammatically incorrect headlines announcing our school initiatives?” (December, 2006). She also frequently sent interesting Web links and highlights of news items to the rest of the group, which often served to inform and prepare us for coming policy issues or instructional innovations.

In her interview, Caren described her contribution to the group in the following way:

Well, I think that I keep everything in my head. Requirements, I know where information is found. I’m a good filter of online information, that’s my strength. I’ve got a great system. I can pull up…it’s on such and such date. (Caren: Interview, item 4)

When asked why the group hadn’t really evolved, technologically or functionally from its foundation as an asynchronous e-mail list, Caren responded:

It’s easier by e-mail….we all know it. “Reply to all” is easy. Some in our group are fearful of the technology. Besides, we can’t log into facebook from school (due to all the electronic restriction barriers). E-mail is part of our job culture. It’s the ease of use and it’s readily accessible. We are logged on all the time anyway, just to get information from the Board about all the stuff we have to be aware of. (Caren: Interview, item 5)
Even at the beginning, the focus of the group was to develop a system of asking questions, clarifying and encouragement based in a social context, as the interview statement below outlines.

It is great to share our like and unlike experiences with each other, whether it relates to children, staff or an operational issue. We all have divergent experiences. When it's out there...we gather all the minds. We are well trained and experienced administrators. If you put all the years of experience together then we have lots. Our friendship together is solid; more so than the relationships we have with other people. There is a lot of sisterhood in our group! There is great depth of relationship within the group. I have the great pride of being part of these relationships. *(Caren: Interview, item 1)*

Caren’s understanding of collecting like minds with a like purpose (first, of survival, then, of development) was evident from the beginning of the group formation. She often reflected that she wanted to have a group with members whose talents complementing and inspired each other.

I’d say that all of us have a strength and understanding in areas that makes us a valued member. For example, some understand the concept of confidentiality and freedom as per their involvement in the group work for the board, others have connections to various focus groups like the School Council initiative or even the teacher’s performance appraisal. Each of us is on some committee or another and we bring back information and advice to our group. *(Caren: Interview, item 3)*

As far as her own sense of contribution to the group, Caren responded: “I hope that I contribute to the group in some manner. I know that I have provided others with technical support. I know I’ve brought all of us together and I hope I add a bit of fun to conversations. *(Caren: Interview, item 4)*. In the words of another group member, the success of the group and Caren’s contribution were summed up as follows:
I think you really need a connector or a maverick (like Gladwell says in his book). In our case it was Caren who was our glue, our driving force. I don’t think a group like this can be mandated. It’s based on trust, and confidentiality. And that gets us through this tough job of being leaders. *(Candice: Interview, item 8)*

### 5.1.7 Caren’s professional growth.

In the formal interviews collected for this research, Caren’s leadership was cited by nearly every member as being a key factor for this group’s success. Caren’s understanding of technology has been steadily developing not only in the way she has carved this online group, but also through her systems leadership role. Her understanding of extracting data analysis from online means has been beneficial to the rest so that we too can thrive under her expertise. From her desire to share with the rest, she has been a solid support to increase our awareness and facility in the area of using data to drive school leadership.

Caren’s leadership has also been noted from the senior team as well. She is now a bonifide principal mentor (with extensive formal training) assisting other new administrators in our system. She has often been asked to be part of the development of leadership expertise for new principals. In spite of being the recognized leader in our system, she often says, that it has been the community which has helped her to arrive at this professional milestone, as noted in her interview quote below:

> Well it falls into the category of an amazing team teaching situation. This group works in terms of dynamics, comfort around technology.... Now I have 8 mentors here. There are some who haven’t been in the role as long as the rest of us, but everyone has something to offer. Differing mentoring happens all the time, and I’m just glad to be part of it. *(Caren: Interview, item 9)*
5.2 Patricia

Patricia had been teaching for 7 years prior to going into administration. She is a young, ambitious single parent who is raising two junior children mostly on her own. Patricia is an avid runner who is a physically active and dynamic woman. Her long term future goals include moving up into senior administration and having a bigger part of the management team role of the whole system. Here are some of Patricia’s thoughts on how she joined the group:

I joined because I was invited. I was new to the role and I needed a network to call my own. I needed an affiliation somewhere. If I didn’t have that I wouldn’t know what to do or who I could ask in case I didn’t understand something or needed to get something done which was beyond my capabilities. I already had connection with Caren, and when she had me on a joint e-mail with others, the group was born and I was fortunate enough to be part of it. *(Patricia: Interview, item 1)*

Through the years, Patricia asked a lot of questions and participated in almost every discussion. She knows how to use e-mail and her multi-tasking skills were obvious as she had been an influential member of the group from the beginning, as the following sections will outline.

5.2.1 Patricia’s knowledge of management

When Patricia first became a part of the group, she was a vice principal, which was her role for 2 years, prior to becoming a principal. As vice principal, she worked under an administrator who was a firm manager and didn’t really have the time or the determination to couch things in a subdued manner. Considering this was Patricia’s first forum into a management role, she was sensitive and felt out of place as she handled some of the issues and concerns which came along in her very challenging school. At the
beginning, her questions regarding management were based on first principles such as “how much responsibility do we assume for occasional teachers report cards?” (e-mail, February, 2006) or “When can a teacher come back from maternity leave?” (e-mail, February, 2007). As time for consolidation continued, her questions demonstrated a greater understanding in the depth of some of the issues around confidentiality and liability. “Should teachers get an actual copy of the suspension letter? What would that imply in terms of sloppy filing if the information was misplaced or in the wrong hands?” (e-mail, February, 2008). This was the dominant topic of concern regarding some of the features brought about with the newly framed (at that time) Bill 212 on Safe Schools act. It was a good example of the group developing an understanding of a new legislation and its practical implication for current practice.

5.2.2 Patricia’s knowledge of curriculum, teaching and learning

In the area of curriculum, teaching and learning, Patricia, unlike some of the others in the group, did not have many years of actual teaching experience in the public system. Some of her questions were quite basic, such as “What are the report card math qualifiers?” (e-mail, November, 2005) and “What are the dates for report cards?” (e-mail, November, 2006). However, as time progressed, her questions began to stimulate group discussion, and it was obvious that a deeper sense of understanding was starting to form in this dimension. Her questions became more thought provoking, “What are some of the implementation ideas that you have in your school around the workshop we had on Crevola?” (e-mail, March 2006). Another discussion catalyst that Patricia initiated occurred in the form of this question: “Do you find that more take home assessments are being done?” (e-mail, February, 2007). Over the course of the group’s time together,
Patricia typically generated more questions than others and used these points to stimulate group discussion and growth. Her knowledge of curriculum and curriculum leadership continued to develop.

5.2.3 Patricia’s knowledge of policy, union and school boards

As time went on, it was evident that Patricia’s questions contained a reflective understanding and deconstruction of the situations found in the role. She quite often threw a question for a group ‘call out’ to encourage others to think and ponder. This is exemplified in this early statement, “What kinds of standards do you have for yard duty? Do you state any specific expectations with your staff?” (E-mail, February, 2006). This question inspired eight responses from the group with a fair bit of discussion. The policy and procedures of supervision and statement of duty were key elements on everyone’s agenda. The team responses included everything from including expectations on the staff weekly communication flyer to monitoring closely when on duty as administration. This type of conversation developed into “are balls banned from the school bus” (E-mail, April 2006) and conversations on relating school area and bus line policy on this also discussed as a group.

5.2.4 Patricia’s knowledge of professional identity

In her interview, Patricia claimed that the group has been instrumental in the development of her professional identity. Patricia stated her personal belief that due to the support of the community, she had an opportunity to establish her professional identity. Depending on the physical proximity of “neighbouring” administrators wasn’t always a
dependable way of establishing this support, since so much of it was dependent on confidence as a result of familiarity.

I know some of our members have other friends and colleague e-mail groups, which is great, but I only have you guys. It was helpful when I had other administrators right in my neighbourhood (schools), but that is not the case for me any longer, so you guys are it. (Patricia: Interview, item 5)

In this quickly changing world of educational administration, Patricia’s following statement of her place in the system is the fact that this “newbie” is now a veteran after three short years.

It’s hard to believe that once upon a time we were the ‘newbies’ and that was only a couple of years ago. Now we are the mentors and the veterans. It’s really quite hard to believe. (Patricia: Interview item #5)

The constant reminder of the complexity of this role and her need to find a way to deconstruct personal expectations were brought out at several points during the interview session. In this following comment, Patricia mentions the significant intricacies of this job which she is still trying to handle and understand.

I don’t know how we can be accountable for things when we know that it would require much more effort and support in order to make it meaningful. It’s hard to keep up with so much information and sometimes the accountability is incredibly immense in so many directions. (Patricia: Interview, item 4)

5.2.5 Patricia’s knowledge of problem solving

This desire for understanding information and aligning accountability, were especially evident in the early e-mail correspondences. Patricia’s primary comments to the group were based around basic knowledge, such as “Where can I get more
information on this memo?” (e-mail, February, 2007). Probing questions (outside of the immediate relevance of one’s own immediate circumstance) evolved, such as “What is an anchor chart?” (e-mail, April 2008), outlining her great desire to understand more about her role as a curriculum leader. Her questions were posed after a few of the others were discussing Ministry intervention at their schools to improve student scores. Not all administrators had access to the strategies and information, but thanks to the dynamics of the group, it was a perfect venue for all to have this knowledge without actually being a school nurtured by this government support.

The support that Patricia received from the group occurred after being in the group for 2 years as a Vice Principal, and then in her new role as a principal. In one particular situation, Patricia had to deal with “proper etiquette when dealing with the grave illness of a student’s parent. She provoked excellent conversation when she asked, “What do I do as a Principal when I am aware that a student has a dying parent?” (e-mail, April 2007). Since there are no ‘hard and fast’ rules on this, and no memos to really support the soft skills needed to exhibit the quality of compassion and support needed. What one needed was support of past experience and advice from those in the role. The advice which Patricia sought was fulfilled through eight group responses that included items such as paying for the hospital parking and gas vouchers to providing casseroles, babysitting opportunities and using the Board crisis response intervention team. Patricia noted in conversation that this advice gave her the confidence and the suggestions needed to assist in a traumatic situation such as this.

New principal are also placed in situations where policy may not be known, but public perceptions have high consequences. In one such incident, Patricia’s knowledge of
handling more complex situations with her parent group was related to creating a
constitution for her School Council Parent group. In the early stages, Patricia asked
questions from the community on best ways to create a working document. Later (e-mail,
April, 2008) she was the one giving advice to others who posed the same question
outlining her growing knowledge and experience in this area.

With the growth of knowledge and experience, the realization of the intensity of
the role also becomes more evident. At one point in the interview, Patricia remarked:

There is so much accountability as an administrator today. It’s hard to
know what to do in certain circumstances and to work around the
areas we have no control over. (Patricia: Interview item #3)

Through her participation in committees and Board liaisons, Patricia has become
an incredibly valuable member of the group, and her expertise has continued to develop,
partly due to her desire to keep current of new ideas and strategies related to her career,
and also because of her sharp intelligence in putting all the pieces into place as she moves
forward.

5.2.6 Patricia’s relationship to the community

Throughout her interview, Patricia made it known that one of the primary reasons
for her continuing growth in confidence and capability is the security of being in this
community of learners. Being part of the group has led her to air her questions, queries on
what she “should” know and manage at her school. The interesting piece here is that
Patricia’s confidence in the management of her role has now developed into her keen
interest in the philosophy and larger impact of the role. In the following statement,
Patricia points out how the community has been instrumental in assisting her with
constructing meaning and support to her venture as a principal. There are no opportunities to make errors in this role and having as many correct answers as possible, without the trial and error element, is essential into the success of formulating leadership confidence of the school community.

When I was the lone administrator in the middle of the countryside, it (the community) was a source of support when I felt isolated. I didn’t know the first thing about my community environment. It was a different placement to what I had experienced before. I didn’t know what support I had available to me nor what I could ask anybody without feeling as if I was exposing my ignorance. I was part of the old mentor program, but I needed more. I needed to know that when I needed someone they would be there. I had a supportive staff, but I was still alone as the administrator. I never worked with a team before. The e-mail group was my extended team. (Patricia: Interview item 2)

This position in the extended team has been reciprocal. The team has also benefited from Patricia’s input and her constant, probing questions. One such question she posed to the community was “I’m on the supply teacher hiring team. Hopefully we can find more qualified staff to alleviate some of our staffing needs.” (E-mail, April 2008). Her confidence in the group was also evident in the following e-mail, “I’m dealing with a ‘new to me’ situation here. Can someone call me?” (E-mail, November 2007).

This confidence that someone in the group will respond with encouragement, advice or support indicated that Patricia was not afraid of using the valued group resources or experience pool. She needed the support and was not afraid to ask for this, as also referenced in the following quote from her interview:

When we share our common frustrations it is encouraging in a way because you realize that you are not the only one who feels this way. This sometimes provides a bit of the reassurance to go on and have faith that what you are feeling is not so far off the base mark. (Patricia: Interview, item 3)
Reassurance and validation of the constant decision making one finds in the leadership role becomes especially important when one contemplates if others are experiencing a similar state. Thus, Patricia’s propensity to ask questions served a very important role within the community, letting everyone see the kinds of questions that are likely out there in others’ minds, and allowing a credible role for a less knowledgeable person.

The state of isolation experienced as a leader is partly rendered by the grave confidentiality of the position. It is impossible to give all the details to anyone outside the role, yet all the pieces are so important when making decisions. “I always know that there is someone close by, if I need to talk” (Patricia: Interview item 2). The incredible time and dedication to the role also reinforces some of the significant time commitment away from other aspects of life. Hence, the group friendship and networking have become a major source of reassurance in both professional and social terms, as Patricia emphasizes in the quote below

We haven’t’ got together face to face for a long time, which has been hard on us. But we just don’t seem to get the time, since we all have busy lives and families. We really need to make a date. Having an online group is just like an online course, you need to meet face to face to really connect and watch each other's expressions and get to know who the other person really is. You just make a date and go for it. I was desperate for that connection at my last school, but I feel like now I want to talk about the practicalities related to the philosophies. (Patricia: Interview, item 6)

5.2.7 Patricia’s professional growth

The “newbie” administrator who had grown from her supporting role as a vice principal to being a successful principal of her school, Patricia remarked of her own
journey, that at one point conversations in the group tended to revolve around basic knowledge and policy queries, but now questions have generated into understanding the essence of the leadership role and structure, and using the group collective intelligence for just that purpose, as she mentions in the following quote:

Now I’m looking for what are you doing with XYZ, vs. how does this work at school X. How do you make this work with your philosophy? How do you play with the shades of grey? Sometimes I find it interesting how differently we all think and as it matches up with where we are and where we’ve changed. (Patricia: Interview, item 8)

It is her growing confidence in herself and her allegiance to the group in which she remarked in this statement about her own administration journey: “I think I’ve grown a lot because of this group and now I’m ready for the next step in my development of being a principal. (Patricia: Interview, item 6). Although, this “next step” for this development had not been clearly defined, it was obvious through this statement that the generation of confidence and courage are definitely there in order to embark on this path.

With some people you ask questions like understanding more about transition into secondary school. With this group we are getting to talk more about philosophies which I really appreciate. “Why do we do what we do?” What is the reason we are doing it? I think these questions help keep us grounded. They certainly add a depth to my day, which sometimes can get lost since we are always spinning around doing something or putting out fires. (Patricia: Interview, item 6)

It was clear throughout the interview that Patricia’s value of the online community was to be used as an opportunity to challenge her own personal and professional growth through collaborative discussions on philosophy and best practice. In many ways the group provided the foundation for Patricia to develop her craft even
further in a safe and secure environment before the actual implementation of her ideas as a leader in her school community.

5.3 Marcia

Marcia began in the education system as a second, or even third career. She came into the field with business experience and prior knowledge garnered through wisdom and worldly opportunities. She did not have many years in the classroom, but had four children of her own who were now young adults. Although Marcia went through the ranks of leadership, she still doubted confidence in her abilities and was quick to state this hesitation to others, even though she has a great deal of common sense.

5.3.1 Marcia’s knowledge of management

Initially Marcia asked simple questions for basic guidance during her first year, such as, “I’m looking for a reference letter template for a staff member. Does anyone have one I could use?” (e-mail, April 2006). Others included, “can I move an educational assistant around if they are not the most suited for the special needs child?” (November, 2007). With experience in the role over the course of three years, it was evident that her understanding of management continued. For example, in her remark “Do you think we should give a copy of the suspension letters to all teachers” and “What happens if they get misplaced or misfiled? Where will the responsibility lie?” (Marcia, e-mail, February 2008) she demonstrates continuing nervousness. Still, these questions provoked great thought on the accountability of the management of information and working to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are upheld. The group benefited from the mere fact that such a question was raised for consideration.
5.3.2 Marcia’s knowledge of curriculum, teaching and learning

Although Marcia did not have many years of experience in the classroom working with different ages and levels of students, there was evidence of growth and understanding.

In one e-mail (February, 2006) she asked, “What strands should a teacher do each reporting term?” This type of question was easy to “look up” and should have been known since all teachers do reports every term. Advice came from our group assessment experts, and knowledge was referenced with an attachment of the ministry report guidelines and document. Knowledge in curriculum evolved as cased in this question, asked on December 2007, “I had a staff meeting with some excellent work on promoting balanced literacy for all grades.” Her enthusiasm and leadership direction to promote a solid curriculum base in her school was evident. By 2008, Marcia was sharing EQAO anchor charts and word wall strategies to others in the group.

5.3.3 Marcia’s knowledge of policy, union and school boards

In order to situate curriculum in a more beneficial format, approximately 5 years ago, the notion of balanced school day took root in our board as an answer to addressing the uninterrupted minutes of literacy and numeracy. The conventional day of 90 minutes, 15 min. recess…100 minutes instruction then to 90 minutes lunch/recess…to another 15 minutes in the afternoon, was proven to be inefficient in the whole student achievement process. There were too many disruptions and interruptions throughout the day. If you taught primary, you spent a good portion of your 15 minutes trying to get the children ready for recess outside, or stole from the valuable instructional minutes prior to the recess.
The Balanced School Day consists of 3 sets of 100 minutes punctuated by 2 sets of 40 minute nutritional/recess breaks. Although this has demonstrated more consistency of programming and calm in the school, it has not been mandated as policy for the board. Hence, each school community is responsible for activating this process. At the time of Marcia’s question on how to move her school community towards a balanced school day, a few of us had taken the leap towards this process. Sometimes, however, the understanding or the rationale of this process is deemed suspicious for the community at large, and there is a reluctance of embracing this idea. Marcia’s school was in that situation.

In May 2006, when Marcia wanted help from the group to convince her parent and community group of this concept, those of us who have had success with it, were quite willing to share our battle plans, success’ and do-overs. Through group advice and experience sharing, when Marcia decided to implement the balanced day policy at her school, she had all the attachments, conversations to couch this piece as well the advantages from those who had gone through this situation. In fact, Marcia success at her school was so smooth that she soon found herself on Board’s advisory team for Balanced School Day implementation in February 2008. When Marcia was asked how she managed so successfully, she replied that it was because of our collective wisdom that she acquired to help her in this area, without having to go through the painful trials and tribulations of a novice learner. Changing this schedule at her very traditional school in such a successful format was a great accomplishment for Marcia.
5.3.4 Marcia’s knowledge of professional identity

The development of professional identity grows through successive challenges and gaining both wisdom and experience in achieving the goals sought. In her interview statement, Marcia said,

I always come with the approach that I always do what is good for kids. Sometimes, I believe I’m drowning in paperwork. I believe that the rest of others have the paper knowledge, legal knowledge or even kid knowledge (*Marcia: Interview, item 6*)

Focusing the leadership role around the child is an admirable way of maintaining the vision and purpose of all events surrounding decisions and actions of the role. Perhaps more than any other participant, Marcia’s level of both professional and personal confidence has increased during the period of this study. She has now become the one giving advice and sharing resources for others in the group. For example, in one conversation about saving some budget money by restraining the amount of paper one uses, Marcia’s comment to the rest was “How much do you spend per term? We have 'free paper'” (e-mail, February. 2007). She then proceeded to tell the rest her ideas of paper and money conservation. It was evident that Confidence has also been noted through body language at face to face meetings and in the positive manner in which she speaks about her school and role. For example in a group e-mail (e-mail, November, 2007), in a conversation regarding the overwhelming accountability of the role, Marcia stated with authority, “We have to cover the legal stuff, but trust the staff with doing what is needed for student achievement.” This confident remark quelled the anxiety and brought perspective to the situation for the rest of the group.
Through it all, Marcia’s focus on the joys of being an administrator always centered on the attributes of being with students, as demonstrated in this frequently themed e-mail, “I’m having a ball with the kids outside!” (e-mail, April 2008). To the rest of us, this professional acclamation reaffirmed our reasons for going into education and helped to foster our deeper enjoyment and understanding of our role within the system.

5.3.5 Marcia’s knowledge of problem solving

Having a child centered philosophy enlightens problem solving strategies to a way to reach this goal of being a protector and benefactor. Marcia asked, “What types of safety and character education plan do you have in place at school?” (e-mail, November 2007) to “What type of safety team do you have at your school, what qualities are you looking for in the team?” (e-mail, May 2008). At this point, it was evident that collaboration and team responsibility were necessary in most areas of school functions. The interesting feature of this question was that Marcia was actively seeking a solid team to assist in her in emergencies and to follow all the protocol. The growth of this area of logistics and emergencies is an area of continual renewal and understanding.

5.3.6 Marcia’s relationship to the community

There were quite a few times when Marcia “We learn so much from each other!” (e-mail, April 2007). Her respect and need for the community is also highlighted in this interview comment below:

Is there isolation? Absolutely. We get a cross section of what is going on in each other’s area. I love the diversity of the types of schools we are all involved in. Small and large groups, rural and urban. We extend over areas. I like the people in our group and respect them greatly. The experience we each share is amazing. I don’t know what I would
do with myself without the group, I would be very lonely. (*Marcia: Interview, item 7*)

As a new administrator, but one closer to retirement, Marcia continued to be a visible presence in the e-mail community with daily interactions with the rest of the group. Her questions were initially based on management queries; trying to get a good grasp of the position. “What are you doing to cover for kindergarten interviews?” (e-mail, November, 2005), “Is there a manual for this job?” (e-mail, November, 2006) “When can a teacher come back from maternity leave?” (e-mail, February, 2007) and frequent questions around technology and software (April, 2007). Marcia’s genuine and kind nature to the rest placed her in positive stead with the group. We enjoyed her “no nonsense” approach and her frequent acclamation of appreciation to the community for their friendship and support. (e-mail, April, 2008). Her passionate and genuine nature has endeared her to the rest of us, so that her place in the community is a secure one.

### 5.3.7 Marcia’s professional growth

Marcia’s development of leadership growth continues to be evident as time goes on. She has been at the same school and her latitude of comfort and security is now there. There is a perception that her staff knows and appreciates her ways and her knowledge of her home community is evident. In the interview she discussed her increasing confidence and happiness in her overall professional growth from the beginning:

> Now having asked lots of stupid questions, or others encouraging me to ask questions, I feel that I have more confidence. I don’t have a B.Ed., I don’t have a masters, PhD….when I was developing my portfolio for the principal application, Caren said to me, “Just say what you do”….“everything you got in this portfolio talks about your integrity…Speak about it”. (*Marcia: Interview, item 8*)
Marcia always seemed to be searching for a sense of professional identity and was frequently self-deprecating with her own awareness of her limited years of educational experience. Without prompts, she attempted to justify the nature of her questions to the group,

Generally people are supportive of what you have to contribute. I feel that I don’t ask stupid questions, and when I do, I call it a “Marcia moment” or a “Senior moment.” I don’t think I’m coming at it from a weird angle. I have never felt less because I have a different background. Coming to education as an older teacher and with a different background, set me apart from a lot of others. *(Marcia: Interview, item 8)*

As her retirement continues to approach (over the next few months of writing this work), it is obvious that Marcia’s sense of professional identity and job satisfaction are securely in place. The growth in Marcia has been defined as huge personal one; a renewed sense of confidence and pride in the job she has done and the accomplishments she has made as a leader.

In the beginning it took a while since I never thought I’d become a principal~ ever. But here I am, and I’m so happy to have the support to keep on going and keep getting better everyday! *(Marcia: Interview, item 8)*

5.4 The growth of a knowledge community: Interpretations from the case studies

The growth of the community has been mentioned by all members throughout their personal interviews and through selected e-mail comments. The group developed due to a need to discuss, validate and articulate to someone else about the climate and challenges of the job. As Caren pointed out, “You need to say this stuff to someone. You can’t say it to anyone in the building like the secretary, teacher or even the vice principal
at times.” (Caren: Interview, item 1). It is hard to let the general public know of your inner struggles and doubts, but a group like this provides the forum for a celebration of questioning and support with one another as this quote from Caren outlines:

This is not for public consumption, for example, ”I’m struggling with this, I don’t understand this,” but it is a forum for us to help each other through a very difficult and sometimes stressful job. (Caren: Interview, item 1).

All those in our group when interviewed (formally and informally) believed that the group was instrumental in their progressive confidence in their abilities and in their accomplishments thus far in this professional field. The concept of developing solid friendships to ease the loneliness of the role was also cited as important factors for job satisfaction.

5.4.1 Our knowledge of management

Management was originally the essence of the group formation. It was a way to understand “how” to run the school operations with better awareness of information through vicarious experiences. At times the overwhelming information of rules and expectations seem a bit large to comprehend, especially when there are additions and deletions to the overall scheme depending on current development of politics and policy.

In her explanation of how she saw the merit of the group, Caren said, “I would say that 80% of our conversation consists of peers helping peers (in the area of management)…”I forgot to look at Memo X” “what is the best way?” “does someone have it filed?” and invariably someone can produce it in 10 seconds.” (Caren: Interview, item 1).
In one case, there were a number of successive erroneous memos that were sent to us, which we are supposed to relay to the staff. Unfortunately the errors caused both confusion of information in terms of how to proceed, as the direction on the memo stated. As a group there was reliance on each other to avoid missteps that would have made us seem indecisive and uncertain. In this case, the inaccuracy of the e-mails and timing of staff communication were essential. A few of the group guided the rest to guard against the perception of indecisiveness. Although as middle managers we weren’t directly in charge of the decision changes, we did have a responsibility in the way we communicated this to staff and maintained their confidence. Through this incident, a few of us cited the fact that we needed to proceed with caution and timing as critical elements. The leadership principle here was to be a filter and keeper of managing communication. The group benefited from collective conversation in a situation such as this enabled the rest of us to be aware of these discrepancies, even if we were unaware of the current e-mail or memo conversation. We all learned a great deal from this episode, reflected about it together, and value that learning experience to this day.

5.4.2 Our knowledge of curriculum, teaching and learning

Membership in this community has crystallized the fact that we are here because of our commitment to student achievement. In fact, there are a few in the group who actually wear a pin saying, “Students First” - providing a constant and visual reminder that this should always be the focus of our decisions. Sharing attachments with one another whether it is one member sharing a document called “Goldie Locks and Blooms” to highlight effective ways of producing better questioning techniques by staff, or another member sharing a power point presentation of photographs from a “school on the move”
that demonstrated enriched ways of attaining better student results. Throughout, the group’s quest to work together in this area of building knowledge about curriculum, assessment and instruction as a community are evident. Sharing staff meeting and Professional development day agendas and ideas are another way in which we collaborated to promote school excellence.

In one of her e-mails, Candice was so inspired by the group’s curriculum collaboration, she asked, “Is anyone interested in forming a principal’s professional learning community group, where we can actually visit each others’ schools and provide ideas?” (Candice, e-mail, April 2008). This was a significant e-mail, not only for its content, but also for the suggestion of extending the group collaboration outside of the email forum, to meet more regularly with purpose face to face to promote further growth through suggestions and advice.

5.4.3 Our knowledge of policy, union and school boards

Development of knowledge in this dimension was highly contextualized in the current challenge or case that any particular member was facing. For example, one e-mail question outlined a situation, beginning with, “how many days should I suspend?” In the situation where Patricia needed assistance in how best to demonstrate professional compassion and caring for the dying parent of one of her students, the group came together to provide advice and suggestions. In the area of special education, the group developed from a very basic level, such as “Should I include severe facts in school committee reports on students?” (e-mail, December, 2006) to the development to “How can I provide guidance (and monitor expectations) to staff about students with special needs?” (e-mail, June, 2007). Some in the group have experience in this area and others
were not as strong in their understanding. There were several members in our group who had special needs children of their own, so their perspectives encompassed both the administrator role and the role through the eyes of a parent, which can be powerful and grounding.

5.4.4 Our knowledge of problem solving

Understanding situations through both the eyes of the administrator and that of a parent added a great deal to our group’s development of problem solving expertise. The comfort of confidentiality, where we could ask questions without worry, enabled honest and candid dialogue. This was iterated from all group members, as illustrated by the following quotes:

The best part of our group is that we can ask all “stupid” questions without judgment. Sometimes the communal questions, are asked by one of us to the main source, and we all derive the answer. Sometimes the person who asks it maybe closer to the person creating the issue of the question and it is easier to get the answer (Caren: Interview, item 8)

Wisdom and knowledge are the key experience pieces from this group. The ability to say “I don’t know”...When we say this, we usually have an honest answer. The feeling that you have no stupid questions is incredible. We can ask each other with freedom without being evaluated or demeaned. (Julie, Interview, item 2)

People have expertise in different things and their agendas are different... If I was really busy, I always knew someone would answer me or that I could count on others for help when I needed it. (Candice: Interview, item 3)

Group members who were on a liaison team were also able to ask the group candid questions related to their responses, such as how they felt about the roll out of certain policies or situations. The honesty and integrity of the group was a reflection on what could be changed and altered in order to develop better understanding. For example
in this question from one group member, “How did you find our group’s process on determining the number of personnel per school?” (e-mail, April 2008) the answer from one person was a candid visual depiction of seagulls all diving into the same box of fries, much to the affirmation from the rest of us.

5.4.5 Our knowledge of professional identity

The development of professional identity was also cultivated by the group as a whole. In addition to the honesty experienced within our group, there is also a keen sense of validation and keeping up the support – even on the rough days, or especially on the rough days. Statements such as “unless you are in this role, you have no idea of how difficult it is” were common during the interviews. Here is one example of how the group has assisted our member to stay motivated and enthused about the role, and to build a sense of identity.

I can’t even begin to tell you how great the group is to me! They also kept me on an even keel… When I feel like I am going to explode, I know that I have the group to get through this together. Everyone was experiencing some part of the experience towards it. If something wasn’t working completely, I know I had my friends to help me understand and work through it. There is also a source of validation that others are going through it. This is a hard job, and not everyone knows that, except those who are in this. (Candice: Interview item, 8)

The group was also able to effectively regulate itself in relation to the content and the attitude of our comments. With so much stress and expectations placed upon us, it is easy to become negative and discouraged. This attitude is kept in check by others, so that the group as a whole stays positive and constructive.

The only one that ever bothers me…is if people start to drift into a bad topic or when people get negative, which could get us into trouble. Like off cuff comments…. But we are cautious...most times.... But then
again, I don’t have to read it...and I don’t have to expose myself to anything that I don’t want to participate. (*Caren: Interview, item 8*)

The support of the group extends beyond the e-mail realm, so that social connections are also an integral part of the group connection, whether it is to “give me a call, I need to talk to someone” or it is to provide friendship.

There is fear of crossing the line with a question which may be tenuous. Sometimes I get a message like, “Call me”...so that we can delve into an issue on a deeper level. (*Caren: Interview item, 8*)

The sense of social connection, friendship joined through humour and wit have all added together to bring about the deep level of trust and confidence which is the strong foundation of the group’s success. Bryk and colleagues (1999) determined that social trust was “considerably the strongest facilitator of a professional community” (Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 30). Indeed, one member described the primary mandate of the group to “think like one giant being” (*Julie: Interview, item 4*). This notion of collective intelligence leads to the essence of knowledge building and ultimately success and job satisfaction.

I believe that my relationship with other members has grown. (One other member) has been delightful with a great sense of humour. The growth and the professional feeling of belonging are wonderful. We also think together like one giant being. Some people have more thinking or academic approach than I do. I feel that I wasn’t a teacher as long, and I went into teaching late in my life. I have this group to help me through. The common sense prevails and the reassurance from one another is immeasurable (*Julie: Interview, item 4*)

**5.5 Conclusions**

The importance of humour in times of stress cannot be over stated. There are a number in the group who are very witty and cultivate humourous responses. Not only are
the comments immediately identifiable, but also great sources of laughter. As one member pointed out in her interview, she recruited her then-principal into the group due to her constant laughter and delight when reading the e-mails.

One of our members was originally my principal and always wanted to know what I was laughing about. That sense of my humour from our members was my lifeline. *(Julie: Interview, item 9)*

Developing a sense of solidarity through common events also is another key to our success. During those common long nights of Winter performances, connecting online to each other offered a sort of comfort – just knowing that others are with you, still working late into the evening. In the following e-mail, the common thread of doing the same things and being in the same situation together is undeniable. “I am so glad my seasonal celebration (by any other name Xmas concert) is happening tonight. Next week should be peaceful until we get our break.” *(e-mail December 2006)*. This produced a whopping 16 responses from all the others who were staying late at their concerts as well!

Staying in touch with another through the asynchronous online format has some definite advantages. You can read the content or not, depending on your state of mind or your time restraints. Reading the e-mails after hours is another option, which some of the members clearly do practice. With the added functionality of mobile telephones that allow e-mails to be read outside the home or office, one is now logged on everywhere, and immediate responses are now the norm – even on holidays and weekends.

I don’t think there is a magic number of connection times which we need in order to strengthen our bonds. If you walked away, for a week then you feel behind. But if you are behind, you go to the last e-mail and read up and you get the gist of the conversation. It’s not unlike face book. It is a part of our culture to have those types of
conversations. It’s not unlike a Wiki or first class technologies to be in groups where we can talk, or have a “reply to all” where we can solve the problem together. *(Caren: Interview item 7)*

Saving the group growth through attachments and filing all of them for future reference is also a key element of personal and professional development.

I read nearly all of the e-mails.... I keep the attachments. I have an e-mail group Professional learning attachments. Under my e-mail is my professional learning group. *(Lori: Interview item 8)*

The social element of the group’s success is truly the foundation. At board meetings and now in social venues, the group members meet face to face, re-establishing their bonds and continuing discussions which are not always possible online. The extension of these discussions in a more confidential environment brings to light some of the comments and situations that may be alluded to during the course of the e-mail conversations. Although face-to-face contact was never a big part of the group’s formation, it has nevertheless become important to our further development of friendships and connection, as this quote describes:

I would say that our face to face meetings are becoming a big part of the group conversations, and meetings. We can say things not on e-mail, which adds to our understanding of certain issues. *(Caren: Interview item 8)*

The next chapter will examine how a group like this could be formulated in another situation, and the implications for in-service professional development of school leaders.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research explored the notion of a knowledge community for school leaders, supported by internet technology that allowed them to develop a persistent network of trust, support, and resource sharing. The study investigated a specific intervention, where a small group of eight new principals from a common geographical region created an e-mail exchange community, with very few rules except for that of absolute confidentiality and privacy of information, as well as that “no question is too stupid or silly.” The study investigated 3 years of e-mail exchanges, to address several research questions concerning the content of community exchanges, the growth of individual knowledge, and the dynamics of the community. The next several sections will discuss the research questions specifically. Subsequent sections will discuss the current state of the online community, as well as implications of this study and possible topics for future research.

6.1 The Content of Community Exchanges

The first major category of interest to the present research was simply whether an online peer community could address the specific dimensions of knowledge that were found to be under-represented in leadership preparation. The following research question was posed in Chapter 1:

1. Does an online peer community help school principals respond to gaps in their pre-service and post service preparation?

The theoretical conversations in the pre-service courses are quite often forgotten when one goes into authentic, real time cases. The advantages of having a community to discuss information based on real time and specific cultural environment enables the luxury of creating a more accurate knowledge picture to produce decisions based on the
information possible. Another pre-service gap is derived from the fact that policy, protocol and legislations continue to change. Keeping abreast of current changes is imperative for ensuring problem solving skills are at their best in order for effective leadership to emerge. The moral support provided from group discussions creates an environment of security and confidence through collaboration with critical colleagues and friends. This creative process sometimes brings forth insight and aspects to situations, which can produce alternative vantage points for decisions to be made. The analysis of contents of e-mails showed representation from all 5 categories through these conversations.

Growth in curriculum, learning and teaching of current practices can also be shared as a group through both philosophical and practical conversations, hence encouraging growth of the group. According to Peter Senge, a community of learners create a ‘learning organization’ where, “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” (Senge, 1990, p.3)

Sometimes it feels as there is just too much information to process all at once and may become overwhelming to process all at once. Advances in current pedagogy and application continue to evolve as research expands. In the dimension of management the procedures, protocols and legislations continue to constantly change as determined by the politics and current research of the time. Issues of health and safety, emergency policies, area of special education, staffing, amongst others, continue to change as committees endorse new practices to benefit students in our educational system. Through the
ratification of current collective agreements, understanding of terms and conditions requires constant updating of information and implementation according to the union involved. The assimilation of this information creates a rich environment for expert problem solving which in turn can create the conditions to build professional identity and personal confidence. The advantage of such learning structures is that they promote “a shift of minds from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future.” (Senge, 1990, p. 69). As described by Katz and Earl (2010), “When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out and/or create supporting activities, people and opportunities to push them beyond the status quo” within their immediate boundaries (p. 32).

The analysis of dynamics of discussions showed growth in sophistication of ideas through the three years of data collection. This type of novice to expert growth was framed by both experience and increased confidence in abilities as priorities were aligned. This “shifting of minds” was initially spawned by a desire to succeed in the profession but framed by a collective group need to comprehend the value of decisions in order to move towards the ultimate result of effective leadership.

Case studies highlighted individuals who posed initial questions benefited from the community response and enacted decisions according to the content of the discussions, but in turn developed expertise in those areas, in order to benefit both themselves and others. The next section examines that growth in greater detail.
6.2 The Growth of Leadership Knowledge and Expertise

Based on a review of the cognitive psychology literature on human expertise, this research interpreted the development of leadership expertise as the acquisition of important domain knowledge, linked to the application of that knowledge within meaningful disciplinary practices. Five dimensions of leadership knowledge were identified within the literature review in Chapter 2, which were all seen as important areas where new school leaders would have a lack of knowledge and little to no experience in applying such knowledge within meaningful practices. This section interprets the role of the online community in helping the individual members of the community develop greater levels of expertise. Chapter 1 introduced the following research question:

2. How does participation in the community enable individual growth? What do individual school leaders gain from their participation, personally and professionally?

The collaboration of community members enabled each administrator to cite their concerns and grow from the collective experience. This shift results to “seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world” (Senge, 1996, p. 37). Building this type of expertise through practical, situation-based learning has enabled the basis for this professional growth to occur. In a model designed by Church et al (2002), collaboration of networked members are referred to as ‘threads and knots.’ “The threads represent the relationship; the knots represent the activities, the structures, and content of collaboration.” (Katz & Earl, 2010, p. 30). Connecting the practice to the development of ideas discussed develops the thrust of community conversation. The group builds this
understanding through group sharing of ideas, stories, aiding and assisting others to facilitate a tacit comprehension of situations experienced from more than one lens.

Individual growth discussions of three participants, Caren, Patricia and Marcia were tracked through anecdotal analysis over the three years. Caren grew from a new administrator to one that is now a key coach and mentor for others in our system. She has now assumed an important portfolio on the Principal Performance appraisal team, and serving as a “go to” person for new administrators. Patricia is now spear heading the portfolio on curriculum writing and implementation strategies for mature students and through her many committees has become a key person at the organization to address issues such as Board Improvement Goals. Marcia has now successfully administered at two schools and is in the process of planning for her up-coming retirement. All three are still members of this group and write online almost everyday. The group is still an organic and active place of meeting, learning and most of all, support and friendship.

A question asked in Chapter 1, which was not subject to any specific analyses (in part because of confidentiality concerns), but addressed within the case studies, and through many anecdotal episodes within the community exchanges is as follow:

3. How are leadership decisions affected by the community? Are there consequential impacts of such a community on the outcomes of important leadership activities?

As described in the case studies, community exchanges had frequent consequential impacts on participants’ specific leadership decisions and enactments. This was particularly true in the areas of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning (CTL), and management, where numerous important decisions were required every month. Members
of the community often consulted with their peers, sometimes on very short notice, about
decisions they needed to make, about new policies, and so forth. For example, in the
category of CTL, consider Patricia’s growth. As discussed in her case study (Chapter 5),
when she began she felt very nervous about decisions in the area of assessment and
evaluation of student work, she used the group to determine current research and used the
group almost as a “book study” guide. Her need to extract important philosophical and
tangible constructs from understanding curriculum implementation through group input,
has enabled her to use this information for her own professional purposes as well to
accent her authority in this area to her staff. When she asked, “What are the math
qualifiers?” (e-mail, 2005), “What is an anchor chart?” (e-mail, 2008) “Does anyone have
ideas on how I can help my staff member with a unit on bridges?” (e-mail, 2007.). This
became interspaced with her desire to build cohesiveness through book studies and
sharing her experiences on the School Effectiveness District Teams. The group was used
as a forum for providing answers, stimulating discussion and as a place to air some ideas
on her own confidential questions and doubts in this area.

In the case of management, Marcia’s support from working with the group
assisted her in supplying ideas to efficiently run her school. As a new administrator, she
was overwhelmed with all the procedures and policies in place. Her questions such as
“When can a teacher come back from maternity leave?” (e-mail, 2005) to “What are the
safe school regulations?” (e-mail, 2008). Marcia’s apprehensions with technology were
also eased with group responses to assist along her journey. Throughout her time with the
group, she asked such questions as, “How do I access suspension data?” (e-mail, 2007),
“What are some ways to use the SMART board?” (e-mail, 2007), “How do I change term
two report marks?” (e-mail, 2008) and also, “Thanks to the group, I know how to use the
blackberry!” (Marcia, off-remark, but authenticated by Caren, who mentioned, “Some in
our group are afraid of technology”. (Caren, Interview, item 7)

Technology is the forum for this group. Understanding how to use it, developing
an ease and confidence with it can sometimes be a challenge to those unsure of the
process. However, it has certainly altered this community’s learning venue by enabling
an environment of providing “universal access to business and strategic information”
(Gephart et al., 1996, p. 41). Through technology, in-service of this group was a reality. It
was readily accessible, part of our working culture, and in most cases, created an
environment of confidence.

6.3 The Development of an In-service Peer Community

The final research questions were those concerned with the dynamics and
evolution of the community as a whole. Was participation equitable? Was the activity
level consistent across months and years? Did the experience or perceived impact of the
community feel like a burden or a joy or a life raft for members? How did the
community change over time, and where will it go in the long run, as members develop
increased levels of confidence and expertise, and eventually even retire from service?
This section discusses the nature of the community itself, in terms of two research
questions that were posed in Chapter 1:

4. What are the challenges to setting up a successful online community? What
are the essential components that assure vibrant, sustained exchanges? What are those
dynamics? What are the purpose or function of the e-mails?
5. How does the community itself come to develop and evolve as its participants mature? Does its role change as members mature? Is the importance of the community for its members expected to fade, so that the community eventually dies out?

6.3.1 Dynamics of the community

The community dynamics have evolved over the past three years during this data collection. The core principles of the group have developed from the essence of developing friendships and camaraderie, to a place of learning and support. Peter Senge, in his study of group dynamics commented that a group learning organization negotiates what they want to learn and then they develop the strategies together as a team to achieve the goals (Senge, 1996). In this specific example, the fervent desire to achieve excellence in our roles became the central focus of our collective mission; to absorb and quickly develop those traits which embody an effective administrative leader. At the beginning of the group, the social network and base of the group was in full swing. In fact, the data indicated that 62.3% of year one e-mails were based in the social context. Establishing a culture of trust and a climate of confidentiality took time and great care to form. Embodied in this community of trust, humour became an essential ingredient in diffusing some of the anxiety associated with the position. Banter through humour and developing relationships through social situations worked together to establish the basis of the group. As Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996, determined in their work, “trusting relationships with shared understanding and knowledge of one another may be necessary for working and reflecting together, especially when the participants have different orientations and views and are facing challenging issues (cited by Katz & Earl, 2010, p.44).
After the establishment of the group, by year three, both humour and e-mails regarding the social context had diminished. Although humour was still a major component of the e-mails in 19% of the e-mail conversations, it did show a 5.6% decline over the 3 year period. E-mails around the topic of social context also displayed a decrease of 29.5% at the end of year three.

The group was still close, as exemplified in the explosion of e-mails by year three, but the need for writing socially based e-mails had substantially decreased. This evolution of adaptation seems appropriate, as the community responds to its members needs at that point in time. The need developed from a base of exclusive friendship to a learning organization contextualized in solving collective situations and problem based learning, as remarked by the case studies of those presented in Chapter 5.

6.3.2 Evolution and development of the community

In Chapter 5, the case studies of three specific participants were examined. The role of the community was cited as a predominate factor for their growth and success (April, 2008). From year one to three, there was an 11% increase in the e-mails pertaining to questions and comments about CTL and an 18.1% increase in the questions regarding management. These questions evolved as the understanding in these areas increased.

Management never seems to stay the same, due to current legislation, Board memos and the evolution of procedures and practices. Questions regarding union and board issues increased by 13.1% over the three years, perhaps since issues in these particular areas always seems to be in the forefront of activating change (for student achievement) and to develop the soft people skills while skillfully take all the rules and regulations of unions into account.
E-mails that reflected a focus on problem solving grew over the three years as participants discussed better ways as a group to tackle issues such as “How” to do certain things. For example, Nov. 2007, the question, “Does anyone have their safety/character education plan?” or e-mail, April, 2008 “How do you handle this one?” (pertaining to a discipline issue and ramifications to the staff). Conversations around collective problem solving increased by 18% from year one to year three. Community members were more forthcoming to share and voice their thoughts to the collective. Personal experiences were analyzed and when a group member asked for advice, participants were willing to share.

The sharing of these experiences showed a definite increase, as confidence increased. There was almost a 10% increase from year one to three, as participants ventured to share their way of handling situations or their thoughts. This was a valuable development helping each other develop and contribute to the knowledge building process by becoming an active participant. Professional identity questions increased 5% over the three years but asking questions about “norming” (am I doing this correctly?) decreased by 5.5%. This increased confidence generated the willingness to participate with conviction, as the increase in e-mails demonstrated. Checking with each other wasn’t as important, since confidence was established, but conversing about ideas and values to determine what to do was. This indicates a bold sense of assertiveness and courage tempered by a careful and thoughtful decision making process.

Overall, this confidence was reflected in e-mail participation increasing from approximately 50 e-mails a month in 2005 to an average of 400 e-mails a month in 2008. This was attributed to a desire to participate and most of all, a desire to belong to this
community. This mandate to “keep our group together” eventually generated conversations about replacements and careful succession capacity building.

As the group’s confidence grew through experience and collectively solving problems through a sociocultural perspective, the value of the group also grew. The development of self confidence and individual pride in one’s profession were noted, making the community more cohesive and an integral part of each member’s professional journey. At times when Caren was absent, the remaining members of the group initiated thread discussions and continued to learn in this networked environment. The cohesiveness and importance of the community developed into a strong mandate and directive for all the members involved.

After three years the community was currently undergoing changes and metamorphosis due to natural causes such as retirements and re-location of members. Hence, one of the paramount considerations for the group members was to actively recruit others who would be worthy candidates in this sharing of the group’s mission of developing knowledge and confidence, within an environment of friendship and caring. This was expressed by all group members and stated here in this quotation from Patricia’s interview:

As I said before we really need to expand our group now that so many of us are retiring or moving on. We need to have a certain number of people in order to make it work. I just hope we don’t fall apart from each other. This is a great group, and it has been instrumental in my overall understanding and development. *(Patricia: Interview, item 9)*

Creating another group like this would also require a similar purpose of being. As it was pointed out,

“It’s all the stages of learning. The very beginnings of the group which was 5 years ago, there was a kernel. No leadership mentorship was
available. We were all we had, and we did it together. (*Caren: Interview, item 8*)

6.3.3 The role of technology

This community survived and thrived in its ideal of creating effective leadership among its members. In fact, due to the application of personal hand devices, such as the blackberry, instant communication is even more of a reality now from anywhere at anytime. The essence of upholding the values and ethics of friendship were the key factors to responding to this circle of friends in this community. This strong social connection cultivated this loyalty. As Caren pointed out during her interview:

Now with the blackberry, if my blackberry buzzed and Nina said, “Help” I would stop and answer the e-mail. We are constantly logged on. Like best friends, we don’t have to connect everyday, every minute. We are connected in different ways outside the group. Linda and I are connected, she lives in my district, my school community, Candice and I have social time together…we spend time together outside .... I don’t think there is a magic number of connection times.... If you walked away, for a week...you feel behind.... But you go to the last e-mail and go up, and you get the gist of the conversation. It’s not unlike facebook. It’s part of our culture to have those types of conversation.... It’s not unlike a Wiki or first class technologies...groups where we can talk..."reply to all" will solve the problem....(*Caren: Interview, item 8*)

The community continued to use an asynchronous e-mail format. There were some in the group who continued to be fearful of technology, and since all board system messages are also sent through this format, it isn’t a major issue to move from one situation to another, which can save a lot of time and confusion.

It’s easier by e-mail...we all know it, “Reply to all”...some in our group are fearful of the technology.... Besides, we can’t log into facebook from school. E-mail is part of our job culture. It’s the ease of use and it’s readily accessible. We are logged on all the time anyway, just to get
information from the Board about all the stuff we have to be aware of.  
(Caren: Interview, item 9)

The e-mail format comes with serious limitations or liabilities as well. Quite often, members have cited that they can get distracted and consumed by group conversation which can sometimes play a negative role in staying by the computer and not addressing the merits of being a visual presence in the school. “Sometimes you can get caught up in conversations and not do what you are supposed to be doing.” (Julie: Interview, item 8)

“Reply to all” can also be a very real negative factor when an e-mail not sent by the group may have an answer by a group member, who invertently believes that the message is only being forwarded to this community. Another harsh reality is that some of the e-mails might be read and misconstrued by someone outside of the group forum reading the dialogue. “This threat of even an accidental breach of trust is significant.” (Caren: Interview, item 8)

6.4 Limitations of the Research and Opportunities for Future Research

This section discusses the shortcomings of the present study, some fundamental limitations, and potential topics for future research.

6.4.1 Limitations of the research

First, it is important to acknowledge that while the present research investigated the content of the e-mail exchanges, this was done at a relatively coarse grain size, and did not, for example, capture the actual categories or specific topics of discussion. For example, within the broad category of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning there were many interesting subtopics (e.g., relating to special education, assessment, teachers and
parents, etc). The analyses reported in Chapter 5 did not provide details about these topics.

Second, the face-to-face conversations that occurred during the period of the community were not analyzed or tracked with sufficient reliability to discuss in any way. There were relatively few such meetings, with various subgroups of members, but those occasional face to face exchanges could certainly have been an important factor in the stability of the community, and their content is not easy to reconstruct.

Third, it must be acknowledged that this research sought to document a rich, problem-based approach to the development of expertise -- essentially, creating “case-based” learning for each of us, based on the rich cases of all other participants. While this thesis made the argument that expertise can be interpreted as the development of sophisticated knowledge, it should be pointed out that there are other views of knowledge development that may advocate different approaches to in-service professional development, or that might offer differing accounts about why this online community was successful. "For example, Robert Sternberg (1985) defines three aspects of human intelligence: analytical, creative and practical abilities. Analytical helps one to deconstruct the task through metacognition and the creative component generates invention or creative output. The practical aspect of intelligence ties the learning together in relevant application. This perspective could advocate an increased emphasis on metacognitive or analytic aspects of leadership, as if to help the participants develop higher level perspectives and interpretations of what was happening in the rich cases. Of course, we were likely doing just that, each in our own ways, but the research as
presented here does not address such processes, and hence cannot include them within its account of the development of leadership expertise.

6.4.2 Opportunities for Future Research

This research has demonstrated that participation within a viable, healthy online professional community is a source of knowledge and philosophical growth. Can a group like this be nurtured outside the setting of friends, so that it becomes an active part of a leadership mentorship program with only professional outcomes in mind? Can it persist, in a solely online state, with no face to face meetings? Can an online group sustain personal conflicts and still be functional? Several studies could be performed to investigate such questions, including a comparison of a face to face support groups with no online communities, as well as a content analysis of the topics and specific support mechanisms relied upon by the community. An online community that was not successful would be an interesting case study, if the opportunity should arise to investigate such a case.

Several other areas of interest could be explored, as an extension of the present study. One topic of interest is that of phronesis, or practical wisdom, as part of problem solving expertise in school leadership (Halverston, 2004). The content of community interactions could offer a source of evidence about the development of such practical wisdom in relation to professional identity and metacognitive aspects of leadership. Another interesting area is that of professional development programs and policies. It would be interesting to further consider the implications of this approach for a viable or sustainable program of in-service professional development for school leaders – particularly those who are in their early years of service.
6.5 Implications for Leadership Preparation

The opportunity to develop another group, similar to this one must be based in purpose and mission. The purpose of this group was to develop effective leadership principles in a very challenging and demanding environment. Creating this type of professional group culture for others is not something which can be forced or directed. As a group member explained,

....it's like in your schools, you try to encourage team teaching, sometimes it clicks, and most times it doesn't work. Each and every group is like this, both professional and social groups which are completely based on the people and the dynamics in the group. You can't force a group like this to happen. *(Caren: Interview, item 9)*

One of the most effective aspects of technology is the ‘in-basket’ activities of cases framed in real time. Having a pre-service program which develops problem solving experience and simulated consequences prior to assuming the leadership role may foster a better reference of problem solving skills and thereby an improved sense of confidence, resulting in a healthier sense of professional identity. Developing preparation programs which incorporate skills and knowledge training would be ideal. Including opportunities for experiential growth within the framework of problem based learning would be beneficial. Current practicum requirements are valid only if there is an opportunity for self and guided reflection with expert mentorship. Explicitly developing some of the “soft skills” to build “knowledge of people and how to work with them is indispensible.” *(Lazaridou, 2009, p. 11)*

For an effective program to serve as a strong base for leadership development, there must be a deliberate and reflective strong cognitive analysis in conjunction with the development of specific skills. Applying knowledge to specified situations prior to facing
significant negative consequences (on the job) would be an ideal way to develop this base of expertise, and resulting confidence in ability. “The requisite knowledge is better learned in systematic professional development that includes instruction, modeling, practice and feedback.” (Lazaridou, 2009, p.11) The subject of developing the principles of effective leadership lies not in the focus of action or behaviour but rather a promotion of focused thinking and cognitive problem solving. (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992)

Michael Fullan (2001) remarks, “The more complex society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become. Complexity means change, but specifically it means rapidly occurring, unpredictable, non-linear change” (p. ix). Leading in a climate of constant change requires flexibility, confidence and the ability to grow through current knowledge of evidence-informed practice. Providing the preparation of school leaders has been one of the goals found in the Ontario Leadership Framework.

The current model of coaching and mentorship leadership is effective to an extent, but having the opportunity for problem based learning and deconstruction of facts towards creative problem solving provides the base for the development of professional identity and ultimately, public confidence.

The key to any thriving community would be based in first developing the foundation and development of trust and confidence (Lave & Wenger, 1999; Myllari, Ahlberg & Dillon, 2010). Without this foundation, it is difficult to explore any capacity of building a nurturing environment. There have been instances in ‘generic’ blogs or posting areas for all leaders to incite and encourage this type of collaborative and constructive outcomes; however, the ones studied for this work have not demonstrated any success. Instead, the responsibility of mutual learning for the betterment of the
community as a whole is critical to create a knowledge building platform (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1998). This base of shared values and identity towards this development are essential to build this cooperative knowledge.

To begin such a community, finding those with shared mutual interest is needed. Woodruff (2002) identified function of shared goals, shared values, identity and discourse as key factors for community cohesiveness. Function is defined by sharing of mutual interest in developing the reason for the community to exist. In sharing stories and cases brought upon a common set of factors experienced through organizational mandates, the community comes together to solve and seek understanding for next steps. As the previous case studies related, this mutual understanding of deciphering difficult tasks and contextualizing theory and practice, has led to the participants feeling ‘part of a whole;’ not isolated or alone in their task. This confidence brought about by mutual community support enables stronger and more confident decisions to occur, leading to greater job satisfaction.

Further to the confidence one feels in their own decisions, group support also lends itself to becoming more enlightened professionals through posing challenging and probing questions and discussions without fear of reprisals or without fear of losing face. This feeling of securely taking risks and challenging one’s own thinking begets a better sense of identity which leads to acceptance of self and each other. Maintaining a professional and ethical discourse throughout all conversations is a crucial factor in the development of an effective community.

The language of the community continued to grow both in the social and professional content. The importance of comic relief due to the humourous interventions
helped to alleviate some of the stress and insecurities which occur in this role. The initial “peripheral participation” of community members (Lave & Wenger, 1991), led to a more active and collective role as the community foundation established itself. Challenging one another created an environment of deep constructivist thinking and conversation related to some of the real time problem based learning approached by the members.

As a social group, we shared the responsibility of promoting our own understanding. Secure in the knowledge that together we would be one another’s advocate, confidante, and friend, we attained a level of professionalism and satisfaction which would have been difficult to achieve through any other means.

When considering how a phenomenon like our community could possibly be replicated, we discussed starting “pods” or satellite communities with other novice administrators. If other new leaders could be involved in a similar construct, perhaps some of the successful ideas of this venture could be developed with others, with similar results. Framing the community members within other diverse constructs could also be a possible option to explore. Could we use this type of community setting to assist various other groups (men, women, people of various backgrounds, multi-cultural groups, or even heterogeneous group)? A community foundation like this one might serve to retain some of the many capable administrators who enter into this line of work, but do not remain, due to isolation or discouragement. Creating a network and foundation of capable and solid leadership would play a vital role in developing a more progressive system of education and increased focus on student achievement.
6.6 Contributions of this thesis within the larger body of academic work

Perhaps the main contribution of the work is to provide a rich case study of such a community, illustrating it in terms of the specific discussions, demonstrating that those discussions focused on the relevant dimensions of leadership knowledge, and documenting an improvement in terms of content, coherence and knowledge building process. The thesis of this work is that a small circle of school leaders can provide a constructivist learning environment for one another, with the rich array of problems or issues that emerge in their respective lives serving as continuous source of rich cases for which they can negotiate a shared understanding of the relevant professional knowledge.

The analyses thus demonstrated that the online conversations consistently supported the growth of leadership for all individual members of the community. The conversations supported our growth as leaders and were focused on professionally relevant topics, as opposed to idle or inconsequential chatter. The thesis began by identifying a set of five important dimensions of leadership knowledge, then articulated a perspective of expertise as knowledge development. It was argued that if school leaders are to develop some expertise, then they should do so in those five knowledge dimensions. The thesis then analyzed three years of discussions, to reveal the nature of their function within the community, as well as their central topic. It was found that the discussions focused on relevant knowledge, and that this focus intensified in the later two years of the community. The e-mail threads were analyzed for their coherence and knowledge building processes, both of which were seen to mature over the three year span.
Finally, the individual case studies also reveal that this type of asynchronous community environment was cited by the members as a predominate reason for their job satisfaction, professional growth and awareness of leadership expertise. An analysis of the dynamics of the community revealed that participation, while varied amongst the members and at different time periods, was universal – there were no lurkers. Also, some of the more silent voices became active over time. Essentially, as the community developed, individual members gained confidence and trust, and were able to engage with their peers on more firm footing. The community itself was seen to evolve and mature.

6.7 Closing Reflections

Over the past few years, the journey to expertise has been especially validating for this author, who was able to witness her own growth as well as that of her peers through the coding of the knowledge within their discussions. This journey from both an individual and group point of view has been outlined through the coding and content analysis of knowledge building. The social environment provided by this forum has been key in “providing continuous learning, providing strategic leadership, promoting inquiry an dialogue, encouraging collaboration and team learning, creating embedded structures for capturing and sharing learning and empowering (the group) towards shared vision (of effective leadership)” (Gephart et al., 1996, 43).

While I have been able to participate and watch my colleagues grow professionally, I have also been excited to observe my own personal journey. This journey has been made through trial and error, community discussion and observation. The role this group plays in the area of collaborative problem solving has been cited by a
few of the members as an instrumental factor in their professional success. The wide range of knowledge and abilities of all are integral in the sharing and growing process, as Lori describes in her following statement:

I think we are all learning to be more efficient and helping us through things like technology and paper work forms. I tried this...why don't you try that. And people share their personal experiences. It's sharing the wealth of knowledge... So you can keep yourself out of dicey situations for next steps. (Lori: Interview, item 8).

The confidence and trust that have been established, have afforded the luxury to articulate personal and private thoughts. Careless or miscalculated mistakes are reflected upon without judgment and with utmost confidence so that “what is said in the group; stays in the group.” (Lori: Interview, item 8)

Once one becomes an administrator, one releases the opportunity to openly dialogue with others on staff about timely issues that have just occurred or with issues that are framed by the complicated events and circumstances around them. Sometimes relaying the intensity and complexity surrounding the challenges poses a difficult one to articulate, especially when dialoguing with people outside of the centre. The extreme issue of confidentiality prevents any type of honest and open dialogue. This becomes a precluding step when one has to make thoughtful decisions alone that may impact a number of people from the onset.

Daily discussions, bantering and reflections have established, to an extent, the types of circumstances that play around each one of us. Case based problem learning; embedded in confidentiality has been the focal point of the group dialogue and study. The opportunity to experience complex personalities and complex situations can be analyzed, even though we have not experienced them personally. Understanding the reflections of
each other based on a particular circumstance, through each particular personalities, is one of the luxuries that can be afforded through a healthy and dynamic community of learners. This journey towards expertise can be celebrated through each individual case and in the process the group develops as a whole.

The constant comment, “There is no manual” for this job, can be re-directed as “WE are the manual” for this job. It is important to keep in mind that the foundation for the group is achieved through friendship, nurturing and a sense of belonging. Through these key elements ego and insecurities are minimized, as the advice is generated in a caring and nurturing manner.

Well we always rally behind the person in need. “I've got your back.” Even when someone gets into trouble...it's not “I told you so,” but “what can I do to help?” It's like “what can we do to make the situation better?” (Caren, Interview, item 9)

The discussion of personal stories of trial and error have provided a canvas of vicarious experiences and ideas to the group as a whole on which actions to follow and which to dismiss. This case based study led to knowledge expertise among its members and provided a foundation of friendship and social support during difficult times and personal challenges.

Although mentorship programs have been developed to assist our educational leaders in their role today, the creation of a community piece nurtured by the common goals of its members provides the opportunity for case based discussion in real time and within the understanding context of those also in similar positions. As Patricia remarked in her interview, “I was part of the old mentor program, but I needed more. I needed to know that when I needed someone they would be there.” (Patricia, Interview, item 3)
The implications of having a group such as this are to provide a valuable base of support and a forum to develop intelligence and practical advice on the implementation of concepts and vision. However, one of the essential components of such a group lies in the maintenance of trust and confidentiality between members and also of the conversation. To ask without judgment and to support without accusation were the basis of this group’s success. The goal was not to be “better” or “stronger” than others in the group, but rather to maintain the group concept mentality and to keep everyone moving forward in one direction. Caren’s comments on this point in the following statement:

“Well we always rally behind the person in need. “I’ve got your back.” Even when someone gets into trouble…it’s not “I told you so,” but “what can I do to help?” It’s like “what can we do to make the situation better?” (Caren: Interview, item 9)
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Appendix A: Survey of Ontario Administrators  
(November 2006)

1. Administration Role

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<tr>
<th>2. When did you take your PQP course?</th>
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<td>Vice Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 10 Years ago</td>
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<td>Between 5-9 years ago</td>
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<td>Between 1-4 Years ago</td>
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3. Did you find that our PQP coursework provided adequate training to become an administrator in our system?

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<tr>
<th>3. Did you find that our PQP coursework provided adequate training to become an administrator in our system?</th>
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<td>1 (Insufficient)</td>
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4. How effective did you find the Action Plan/Practicum to the training piece?

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<th>4. How effective did you find the Action Plan/Practicum to the training piece?</th>
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<td>1 (Ineffective)</td>
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5. How valuable were each of the following in preparing you for your role?

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<th>Title</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (Valuable)</th>
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<td>PQP Courses</td>
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<td>Trial By Fire</td>
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<td>Peer Discussion</td>
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<td>Board Leadership Program</td>
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6. What was missing or highly limiting in your initial PQP training?
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7. In your present role do you use e-mail or on-line discussion groups as a support?

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<th>1 (Not Really)</th>
<th>2 (Rarely)</th>
<th>3 (Sometimes)</th>
<th>4 (Usually)</th>
<th>5 (Always)</th>
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8. Using this scale from 1-5, how great of an issue do you consider the following?

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<th>Title</th>
<th>1(Major Issue)</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5(No issue)</th>
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<td>Conflicts with Parents</td>
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<td>Student Discipline</td>
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<td>Legal Knowledge and Guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of support from the School Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Contact with Peers in the Profession</td>
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</table>

9. From what source do you find that you gain the greatest overall support?

- Teachers within your school~
- Peers within your school board~
- Ontario Principal Council ~
- School Board~
- School Environment (Parents, Students)~
- Other~
10. What support would help you do a better job on a daily basis?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

11. At this point in your career do you find that you are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 (Do not use)</th>
<th>2 (Discouraged)</th>
<th>3 (Indifferent)</th>
<th>4 (Contented)</th>
<th>5 (Can’t Wait to Go to Work!)</th>
</tr>
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</table>

12. How important are online resources including e-mail list web sites and online communities in your work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t Use</th>
<th>Rarely Use</th>
<th>Frequently Use</th>
<th>Definitely Use</th>
<th>Can’t Live without it!</th>
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</table>

13. Online resources, e-mail lists or communities are:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C~ Interview Questions for members of the e-mail group

Purpose: To gain more insight into the e-mail group composition. To further understand the group dynamics and clarify the function of the group construct. How has this network enabled and empowered the participants in their professional and personal growth?

1. Why did you join this group?
2. What have you gained from this experience?
3. What would you like to change?
4. What would you like to add?
5. As part of group presence, do you feel the personalities online? How would you describe them?
6. Do you feel you contribute to the group with your knowledge?
7. Although it is hard to estimate completely, without the group, what disadvantage do you think you might have?
8. Since joining, describe your growth in the group.
9. How often do you feel you have to log in, in order to feel like a viable part of the group?
10. Are there any aspects that annoy you about the group? Any personalities, topics, types of conversation mode?
11. Do you feel you read every, all, most, hardly e-mails in the group?
12. How do you see the group evolving?
13. What aspects about this construct do feel can be replicated with other professionals in our system?
14. Would you like to add anything to our conversation?