THE IMPACT OF PRESSURES AND SUPPORTS ON TEACHER LEARNING AND TEACHER SENSE OF EFFICACY IN AN INTENTIONALLY DESIGNED LEARNING COMMUNITY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts
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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the impact of various forms of pressure and support experienced by teachers in an intentionally designed learning community on teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy. Eleven Grade 6 teachers in a middle school in Southern Ontario were interviewed and a complex systems approach was adopted to analyze their experiences. The results suggested three key implications: (1) teachers’ experiences of pressures and supports are variable and influenced by teacher sense of efficacy and administrative decisions about the implementation of those pressure and support mechanisms; (2) a coherent, cohesive and balanced system of formal and informal structures of pressure and support is important to support teacher learning; and (3) structures, mechanisms and culture must facilitate transfer of learning in meaningful ways between the subsystems operating in a school in order to support teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy.
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Thank you to my dear family, Greg, Nikhil, Roshni, Bindi and my mom who have been patient and encouraging and to Peter, my late father-in-law, who never let me forget my goal. I am ever grateful to my friends, both personal and professional, who have been so supportive, and often even interested in what I was studying and how my research was progressing.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the wonderful teachers that participated in this study and shared, so generously and openly, their thoughts, feelings and experiences.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father.

Dad, I felt you standing behind me with your hands on my shoulders as I completed this thesis, just as you have stood behind me my whole life. Thank you.
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

“When teachers stop growing, so do their students” (Barth, 1990, p.50). This seemingly simple statement published 20 years ago is fraught with complexities and nuances that have influenced much educational research in the last two decades. Indeed, since Judith Little’s work in 1981 on collegiality, a great deal of time and energy has been spent on how teachers learn and time and again we have been reminded that student learning depends on teachers learning (Fullan, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between three interrelated constructs that have been studied in the literature individually and in various paired combinations: teacher sense of efficacy, teacher learning and a climate of accountability and standardization.

1.1 Background of the Study

Although teacher learning has often been conceptualized in terms of professional development (PD) opportunities, we have been challenged by the literature to reconceptualize traditional notions of PD to come to a broader understanding of teacher learning. Traditional concepts of PD – the one shot workshops that are delivered in a manner divorced from teaching contexts, often referred to as “in-servicing” - have been roundly criticized in the literature. Barth (1990) argued “by and large, the district staff development activities we employ insult the capable and leave the incompetent untouched” (p. 50). Fullan (2008) has gone so far as to say that the term PD is, itself, a barrier to teacher learning. He has exhorted us to attend to Elmore’s (2004) definition of improvement: that improvement comes from
“learning to do the right things in the setting where you work” (p. 73) rather than merely being on the receiving end of a professional development workshop.

In this vein, research has focused on how the individual learning of teachers might be enhanced and supported by the collaborative efforts of teachers learning together within their own professional contexts. The concept of collaborative learning has been further extended to consider how schools, networks of schools and districts learn – always with an eye to improving teachers’ professional practice and, ultimately, students’ learning experience and achievement. Little doubt remains in the literature about the benefits of developing professional learning communities, as opposed to delivering traditional conceptions of PD, at all levels of professional practice. Descriptions of the characteristics of effective learning communities abound.

The movement towards increased standardization and accountability in many developed nations has complicated the efforts to understand teacher learning. For example, in the province of Ontario, accountability and efforts to measure achievement of standards have taken many different forms including but not limited to provincial assessments, a standardized teacher evaluation system and the use of a Ministry created framework for school improvement planning. This is an important contextual factor in that the efforts by administrators to design or structure professional learning communities are increasingly directly related to a desire to raise student scores on large-scale assessments.

Provincial testing in Ontario is carried out by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) The EQAO is an independent agency funded by the Government of Ontario to conduct large-scale assessments at key points in every
student’s primary, junior and secondary education to determine achievement levels and report the results to educators, parents and the public (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2010). The province-wide assessments in Grade 3, Grade 6, Grade 9 and Grade 10 have been drivers of school and district improvement efforts and the focus of much professional development and teacher learning in the province.

Although few of the above-mentioned developments are high-stakes accountability measures, those developments underscore how the attention to articulating standards of teacher, student and school performance have increased pressure, either directly or indirectly, on individual teachers to learn and to improve. Uncovering and examining the impact of this climate of accountability and standardization on the work of learning communities is important. Have these measures effectively spurred the creation of learning communities in schools? Does a climate of accountability and standardization enhance or impede the potential impact of learning communities? As Webster-Wright (2009) has asked: Do professional standards primarily foster continuing learning, maintain competency or regulate and deliver outcomes?

Webster-Wright (2009) outlines the need for further research that explores the interplay between teacher learning communities and the effects of accountability measures. She warns us that as a result of increasing pressures to regulate, standardize and measure, learning activities that are in line with these goals are most likely to be funded and supported and she states that there is a need to find this balance in research between advocating the development and maintenance of learning communities and attending to the demands of accountability. Another purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between these two constructs.
An additional factor that research suggests has a substantial impact on any study of the relationship between teacher learning and a climate of accountability is teacher sense of efficacy. Although the research literature on workplace learning is still divided between informal everyday learning, as illuminated by Wenger’s (1998) discussion of communities of practice, and formal PD opportunities, it acknowledges the link between the two. According to Webster-Wright (2009), however, this separation is artificial and problematic. Rather, she contends that continuous professional learning can refer to any experience where professionals believe they have learned. Therefore, she argues that professional learning must be studied holistically, focusing simultaneously on the interaction between learner, context and what is learned. The centrality of the teachers as learners, their characteristics, goals, beliefs about whether they able to influence student achievement and concerns about their own limitations must not be lost in the study of teacher learning. Unfortunately, Hochberg and Desimone (2010) suggest “the high-stakes accountability environment has exacted negative consequences on some teachers’ sense of professional worth (Stecher, 2002) and beliefs of self-efficacy to boost student achievement (Valli &Buese, 2007)” (p. 91).

The importance of teacher sense of efficacy to student achievement and to school improvement (the primary goals of learning communities) has also been documented in the literature (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Several researchers, following up on the work of Bandura, have investigated the concepts of individual and collective sense of efficacy – some arguing that sense of efficacy directly relates to student achievement (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010) some linking sense of efficacy to teacher learning (Bruce et al., 2010; Hochberg & Desimone,
Additional questions now arise: Do high levels of individual and/or collective teacher efficacy enhance or impede the potential impact of professional development and the collaborative work of learning communities? Do learning communities increase teacher efficacy and what effect might this have on student achievement? In what way and to what extent are the constructs of professional learning communities and teacher efficacy influenced by an overarching context of standardization and accountability in educational reform efforts?

Clearly we must closely examine and try to understand the relationship between these factors: individual and collective teacher efficacy, teacher learning within intentionally designed learning communities, and the greater context of accountability and reform.

1.2 Context of the Study: “But this is not the US - Do Ontario Teachers really feel the Pressure of Standardization and Accountability?”

In the United States, a high-stakes environment has been created as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation implemented by the Bush administration. The high pressure of standardization demands short term measurable gains where schools are required to meet Adequate Yearly Progress targets and, as a result, schools and districts have adopted standardized literacy programs, and literacy coaches and mentors have been put in place to support teachers (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). That said, standards are thought to be insufficient motivators to change educators and a system of sanctions and rewards has been put into place to facilitate desired changes in teacher practice (Fullan, 2006; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). This system has had multiple intended and
unintended consequences including turning literacy coaches and mentors, whose positions were created to support teachers, into ‘curriculum compliance officers’ (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). Much of the research literature regarding accountability and standardization measures is situated in the US context, which begs the question: Is it relevant in Ontario?

Although Ontario teachers are often astounded to learn of the rewards and sanctions that accompany standard measures in the US; like most developed countries, Canada is using large-scale assessments to measure system effectiveness. Every province and territory uses some form of large-scale student assessment, with the exception of Prince Edward Island (Volante, 2007). In Ontario, the history of reform has drifted between rigid standards and progressive ideas with the standards movement peaking in the reforms undertaken by the Progressive Conservative government led by Mike Harris from 1995-2002 (Giles, 2007). Those changes to the education system in Ontario were wide-reaching and brought reactions and consequences that remain fresh in the minds of many mid and late-career teachers today.

In accordance with one of the numerous recommendations of the Royal Commission on Learning (1995), one such reform was the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office in 1995 (EQAO) to oversee large-scale assessments in Ontario. Going beyond the recommended large-scale assessment in Grade 3 and Grade 11 (Royal Commission on Learning, 1995), the provincial government introduced standardized testing in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 with Grades 3 and 6 students tested in reading, writing and mathematics, Grade 9 students tested in mathematics and Grade 10 students writing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) where a passing
mark is a high school graduation requirement. The EQAO mandate also requires districts and schools to set and report on goals and targets, prepare their own reports regarding achievement and create school improvement plans based on assessment results and other data. Those measures are meant to lead to system-wide improvement (Volante, 2007).

The introduction of large-scale assessment in the primary (Grade 3), junior (Grade 6) and intermediate (Grades 9 and 10) divisions of school was accompanied by the introduction of a new set of curriculum documents outlining new overall and specific expectations that students would demonstrate by the end of each course. A new measurement tool meant to frame classroom assessments – the Achievement Chart – was also introduced and, in secondary documents at least, was clearly intended to be the lens through which teachers measured student assessment. In the words of the accompanying policy document, “the achievement chart provides a standard province-wide method for teachers to use in assessing and evaluating their students’ achievement” (Ministry of Education, Government of Ontario, 2000, p. 15). Thus, although the Ontario experience may not be comparable to that in the US, the movement towards greater accountability and standardization has certainly had an effect in Ontario as it has manifested itself in standardized curriculum outcomes and, most prominently, in large-scale standardized assessments of students throughout their school life. The era of standardization in Ontario has been characterized by many teachers as “too many changes, too fast”, “too much, too quickly”, and “just so much, so soon” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008, pp.137).

The tenor of reform in Ontario changed somewhat in 2003, however, when the Liberals replaced the Progressive Conservatives in government. The province’s new focus “wedded a continuing commitment to test-based educational accountability with
initiatives that built capacity for improvement and provided professional support.”
(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008, p.3). For example, recent years have seen the creation of
the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) whose responsibility is to oversee efforts at
improving practices that support literacy and numeracy development among students
from kindergarten to Grade 6. Although the LNS has avoided a highly rigid model for
improvement as is seen in the US and UK, as a result of setting provincial targets
requiring schools and districts to outline and commit to their own goals for achievement
(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008) LNS suggestions have been adopted as directives in some
districts.

Even though the current provincial government has stayed the course in terms of
large-scale assessments and standardized curriculum outcomes, Hargreaves and Shirley
(2008) argue that, as a result of a more tempered approach to achieving targets, Ontario is
now one of the few regions in the world, that is moving towards an era of post-
standardization. Post-standardization, they claim, is characterized by new principles for
improvement including:

- a vision that is inclusive, compelling and inspirational;
- priorities regarding learning and achievement that are driven by that vision;
- teacher development based on trust, collegiality and professional learning;
- a use of data that informs but does not drive instruction;
- an environment in which teachers and schools learn from being networked with peers;
  and
- parallel investment in parent and community development.
Skerrett (2010) also discusses the post-standardization movement in different countries and is encouraged by its greater flexibility to respond innovatively to challenges and its attention to context-specific teaching. Interestingly, however, she does not list Canada or Ontario as one of the regions entering this era.

Even if Ontario has moved towards post-standardization, many questions remain about the ongoing effects of standardization and accountability measures which, although tempered by increased support, have not disappeared. Ontario is still measurement driven with a focus on literacy and math (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). Suspicious of its results as well as the effectiveness of tests as an improvement measure, Ontario’s teachers’ unions and many Ontario teachers remain opposed to standardized testing. Volante (2007) argues that the consequential validity of tests (i.e. the impact of large-scale assessments on students and teachers) has not been researched in a systematic way in Ontario, although research shows more generally that they can strongly influence decisions teachers make regarding what to focus on in curriculum and impact non-assessed subjects.

Within such a climate, and often as a result of this climate, educational researchers, district curriculum departments, school administrators and teacher leaders seek to frame meaningful learning experiences that will translate into improved classroom practice which will have a positive impact on desired outcomes. Volante (2007) raises several questions that still need to be answered by research.

- How have provincial assessments affected instruction in tested and non-tested subject areas?
• How many administrators and teachers presently possess the statistical and assessment literacy to make prudent use of provincial test results?
• How has testing affected administrator and teacher retention/burnout?
• What are intended and unintended consequences of testing within Ontario and the broader Canadian context?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

In response to Webster-Wright’s (2009) challenge to avoid artificially separating and categorizing different learning experiences, I attempt to use a complex systems thinking lens to examine, in a holistic way, the various elements that had an impact on teacher learning in a middle school in southern Ontario.

1.3.1 Research questions.

The particular research questions that guided this study emerged from the literature on learning communities, teacher efficacy and the effects of standardization on teacher learning, as well as my own interest in understanding how to best support teacher learning.

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what constitutes pressure and support within an intentionally designed learning community?
2. How is teacher sense of efficacy affected by the simultaneous pressures and supports that arise from an intentionally designed learning community within a climate of standardization and accountability?
3. How do these pressures and supports affect teacher learning?
The constructs within each of the research questions will be defined and explored in the review of literature.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework suggested by Opfer and Pedder (2011) who implore researchers to use the lens of complex systems thinking to gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of teacher learning. They argue that much of the research surrounding professional development and teacher learning has suffered from a process-product approach and from a focus on “absence versus presence measurement variables” (p. 378), culminating in reductionist cause-and-effect theories that limit the generalizability of findings.

An example of this type of limiting approach is the conceptual framework proposed by Hochburg and Desimone (2010). They suggest that in an accountability context, effective PD aimed at teacher learning must be characterized by the following six elements: (a) a focus on content and standards; (b) active learning; (c) coherence with other activities; (d) sustained duration; (e) collective participation; and (f) responsiveness to contextual factors. This, they suggest, will lead to the key motivator that will spark improvement - change in teachers’ knowledge, abilities and beliefs. As a result, change in instructional practice will follow and, ultimately, student achievement (See Figure 1). In their explanation of the conceptual framework, they identify sense of efficacy in two parts of the framework, although not directly referenced in the diagram. Their description of the change in beliefs that occurs as a result of effective PD partially refers to beliefs regarding efficacy. Also, they posit that following the change that will be seen in student
achievement, teacher sense of efficacy will increase once again. They further suggest that the efficiency and success of the process of change is affected by contextual factors and enhanced by contextual facilitators, some of which in turn affect or are affected by teacher sense of efficacy.


Opfer and Pedder (2011), however, argue against conceptualizations that are based on linear heuristics and what they claim are assumptions that teacher learning naturally follows a particular progression prompted by a series of learning activities that
embody a defined set of criteria for effectiveness. Rather, they suggest a shift to complex systems thinking that recognizes that there are various systems at play in teacher learning and that these systems are interdependent and reciprocally influential. In particular, Opfer and Pedder (2011) identify three systems in which teacher learning is simultaneously constituted: “autonomous entities (teachers), collectives (such as grade level and subject groups), and subsystems within grander unities (schools within school systems within sociopolitical educational contexts)” (p. 379). This simple diagram, which I have created, might serve to illustrate this framework:

Figure 2. Three subsystems in which teacher learning is simultaneously constituted according to Opfer and Pedder (2011).

Some may argue that the district is the most important subsystem to study for the purposes of examining sustainability. Although Opfer and Pedder (2011) have identified “subsystems within grander unities (schools within school systems within sociopolitical
educational contexts)” (p. 379) as their third subsystem, for the purposes of this study, I have narrowed that field to the subsystem of the school.

Opfer and Pedder (2011) argue that learning in any system can prompt learning in any other system and that teacher learning is a “complex system representing recursive interactions between systems and elements that coalesce in ways that are unpredictable but also highly patterned” (p. 379). In this study, I use this conceptual framework to examine the simultaneous influences of pressure and support within an intentionally designed learning community on teacher learning and teachers’ sense of efficacy.

1.5 Rationale: Academic and Personal

Through this study, I am working to contribute to the understanding of how teachers learn within the context of an environment of accountability and standardization and the impact of and on their sense of efficacy by closely examining the experiences of teachers in one school. Importantly, this school, which was opened as an intentionally designed learning community, is thriving rather than suffering under the pressures of accountability and standardization measures. I hope to uncover the key factors and conditions that have allowed a designed learning community and the sense of efficacy of its members to grow and flourish despite, or perhaps as a result of, accountability pressures.

Although research exists on what adds to the resiliency of schools in the face of reform pressures (Giles, 2007; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006), Borko (2004) indicates that case studies on single programs at individual sites, which she refers to as “Phase 1 Research”, contribute to our understanding of what works. Additionally, little research
exists on how professional learning communities are developed, established and maintained (Clausen, Aquino & Wideman, 2009). Studying attempts to make professional learning communities work sharpens the research base and helps us learn more deeply about them (Fullan, 2006). Webster-Wright (2009) has also called for more research on the experiences of teachers in authentic professional learning contexts and emphasizes the need to study changes in learning communities as well as where and how learning occurs in a holistic manner that does not artificially separate the learning from the learner or from the context. This study will do that by focusing simultaneously on teacher learning, teachers’ sense of efficacy and the overall context of educational reform.

Although the impact of teacher learning on student achievement is not within the scope of this study, research evidence related to the extent to which effective professional development and teacher learning improves student achievement is sparse (Borko, 2004; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). This may be because research has not yet focused directly on the connection between teacher learning and the corresponding effects of and on teacher sense of efficacy. Perhaps more direct measures are needed to build teacher sense of efficacy using designed learning experiences to jumpstart the cycle of high teacher sense of efficacy and positive impacts on student learning. Perhaps designed learning opportunities need to address the problem of inflated sense of efficacy by helping teachers see their existing practice is problematic (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Cowley and Meehan (2001) also call for further research on the construct of sense of collective efficacy and its relationship to teacher learning.
My personal interest in the concepts of teacher learning, teacher sense of efficacy and educational reform has evolved over a number of years of working with teachers in different capacities – as a teacher in a highly collaborative department, as a literacy coach within a school, and as a consultant and facilitator of professional learning in districts across Southern Ontario. With humility, I admit that early in my career, I had very different beliefs about improving professional practice. Observing what seemed like unreasonable resistance from my colleagues as we were faced with the challenges of reform, I felt early in my career that sound pedagogy should just be mandated and that, ultimately, resisters would see the folly of their ways and adopt the proposed change. Those beliefs were reversed upon reading Fullan’s (2001) *The New Meaning Of Educational Change*. In it, he quotes Marris (1975) who noted the following:

> However reasonable the proposed changes, the process of implementing them must still allow the impulse of rejection to play itself out. When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes, and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions. (as cited in Fullan, 2001, p. 31)

Over the years, I have come to see the wisdom of those words while working with schools whose administrators have attempted to bring teachers along by building collaborative learning environments within their schools and managing the delicate balance of pressure and support required to improve teacher practice. I began working as a teacher-leader after the reforms associated with the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris were already well underway and I continue to find many
teachers still struggling today to make sense of and implement reforms that were introduced over 10 years ago. Questions such as the following continue to challenge teachers: How do I differentiate between students in Academic and Applied courses? How do I effectively support and prepare students for the Grade 10 literacy test? How do I balance the demands of teaching math with the other areas of the curriculum in a large-scale assessment year such as Grade 3 when the school has identified an improvement in numeracy scores as a priority? Even though these reforms and accountability measures were introduced many years ago, they remain the subjects of heated discussions at staff meetings and professional development workshops offered at the district level in 2013.

As my experience with facilitating teacher learning deepened, I began to feel that the biggest barrier to improvement efforts was that many teachers did not believe their instructional practice makes a difference. They certainly seemed to believe that by building relationships with students, showing care, taking an interest in students’ lives outside of school, and showing support, they could have a significant impact on students’ perseverance and potentially, achievement. Nonetheless, they did not necessarily believe that their instructional practice could make a difference to student achievement. Repeatedly, I heard comments that made me feel that teachers underestimated their own power to influence change. Little did I know then that my concern had been identified in the literature as teachers’ sense of efficacy.

In recent years I have had the privilege of being involved in projects at both the individual school and district level in which administrators have attempted to build learning communities, largely hopeful that it will prove an effective method of improving professional practice, and thus, student achievement. Those learning communities have
been varied, sometimes consisting of just three or four teachers teaching the same grade in the same school and, at other times, including all the teachers in the same division in a school, the entire school working within and across divisions, grade level teams from different schools within the same family of schools, or literacy coaches and/or administrators from one region within a district. As illustrated in the examples that follow, learning communities are being framed in a multitude of ways, with varying degrees of intentional design, in order to meet the challenges posed by increased attention to standards and accountability.

Example one is a secondary school in the Greater Toronto Area. The principal asks for volunteers from across all levels of expertise that are interested in learning together and shaping the schools’ attempts to implement the Ontario Ministry of Education School Effectiveness Framework (SEF)\(^1\). The 21-member team works collaboratively to examine data and determine which of the multiple indicators of school effectiveness will be its focus. The school administration enlists an external consultant to help the team come to a greater understanding of how to improve effectiveness on those indicators but is largely focused on how the team will support teacher learning internally over the course of the year.

Example two is a school board in Southern Ontario. After three sustained years with a particular PD initiative, the district funds a pilot project to train teachers who have significant experience with the initiative to become teacher-leaders within their school. As well as formal PD for teacher-leaders, the funding includes 20 release days for teacher-leaders to work with a small team in their school to implement what they have

\(^1\) School Effectiveness Framework (2010)  
learned from the formal PD. Although some requirements are in place about how this time might be used, it is largely a self-structured program that allows teacher-leaders to build the community and program in their schools that best suits their unique needs.

Example three involves several school boards engaged in the Coaching for Math GAINS project coordinated by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The project involves repeated and ongoing cycles of co-planning and co-teaching by teams of grade 7, 8 and 9 teachers attempting to bridge the gap across elementary and secondary panels. It also involves a network designed for sharing with and learning from other school boards engaged in the project.

Example four includes kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers from a school board in southern Ontario. The teachers attend a full year professional development program that inspires them to apply for a grant from the Ministry of Education’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support them as they learn from and about their attempts to implement what they have learned from the PD. At the end of the project, one of the teachers shared the following sentiments:

Speaking personally, I feel my teaching has grown significantly over the course of the year, due to this inquiry and the privilege of having the training.... Lesson planning is far more in-depth and goes beyond just teaching skills or content. As a group we thought that the kids had shown growth in their ability to think more critically, evidenced by their appropriate use of criteria and the oral discussions we had. We also agreed that we probably won't start seeing the real effects until the children have had a few years of this kind of instruction. All in all the inquiry was a great experience…a lot of work, but worth it. (Personal communication, May 25, 2010)

In each of these cases, teachers or administrators intentionally designed a learning environment or adopted an externally-designed model of a learning community to support teacher learning to increase student achievement in response to challenges.
imposed by provincial standards. In the final example, the teacher’s overall assessment of the experience clearly points to a rise in teacher sense of efficacy as a result.

What roles do the three factors outlined by Webster-Wright (2009) - the learner, what is learned and the context - play in achieving this type positive result? In the following chapter, I review the literature on teacher learning, teacher sense of efficacy, professional learning communities and the broader effects and implications of an environment of accountability to provide the context for analysing the experiences of teachers in this case study.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

In an effort to avoid artificially separating and categorizing different learning experiences, this study attempts to examine, in a holistic way, various elements that had an impact on teacher learning in a middle school in southern Ontario including an intentionally designed and highly structured professional learning community and formal professional development (PD) provided to staff. The review of relevant literature related to this study includes four key areas.

- Teacher learning: A focus on effective professional development.
- Teacher learning: A focus on intentionally designed collaborative learning environments.
- Relationships between individual and collective teacher efficacy, teacher learning and student achievement.
- The impact of standardization, accountability and perceived pressure on teacher learning and teacher efficacy.

2.1 Effective Professional Development

In this section, I survey the literature on effective formal professional development. Considerable criticism has been levelled against the traditional model of professional development, a model that is still highly pervasive (Webster-Wright, 2009). When discussed in the literature, this traditional form refers to one-shot workshops, generally with no follow-up and which are removed from the context of teachers’ daily work (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Frequently, high-quality professional development is specified as part of an improvement strategy, such as the No Child Left Behind
legislation in the United States. Unfortunately, this PD has been deemed “woefully inadequate” (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010 p. 94). More specifically, the traditional model of PD has been criticized by several authors because of the inherent assumption that professionals’ knowledge can be topped up by attending workshops (Bruce et al., 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009) and that topping up teacher knowledge is not only possible but also desirable. The underlying assumption that teachers are deficient and require development - most often provided by an external source - is roundly denounced in much of the literature and works to reinforce the status quo in terms of PD delivery (Barth, 1990; Borko, 2004; Bruce et al., 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). Webster-Wright (2009) directly challenges change leaders to question the assumption that well-designed PD with a good facilitator will result in professional learning.

Moreover, Webster-Wright (2009) maintains that most PD remains didactic and divorced from teaching contexts despite the broad criticism in the literature. Showers and Joyce (1995) reported that evaluations of staff development in the 1970s “revealed that as few as 10 percent of the participants implemented what they had learned” (p. 12). Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) observe that, in US schools, teacher learning is largely found outside the workplace. According to them, the problems of decontextualized professional learning are multifold. PD that is offered on designated days or in the summer, often outside of the school and at the district level, sends the message that learning is a summer or PD-day activity and not an integral part of professional life. It is also considerably less effective when teachers do not attend in teams and when it is not accompanied by follow up support. These single stand-alone professional development opportunities suggest that learning opportunities are optional
and tend to attract teachers who are already passionate about their learning, often having little or no impact on teachers who may be in most need of exposure to new ideas as they may be least likely to volunteer. This becomes a cycle in which teachers, who already wary of PD, are subjected to it during the school year in a decontextualized setting and then view PD in general as useless, irrelevant and not impactful (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Conversely, Bruce et al. (2010) found that teachers who had positive views of prior professional learning tended to get more out of subsequent PD opportunities that focused on similar content. In fact, prior professional learning experience was the key enabling condition for professional learning in their study as it influenced teachers’ conceptual foundation regarding the value of professional learning. This finding surprised them as, rather than experience a “ceiling effect” where teachers had their fill of a particular concept, those teachers with positive prior learning experience regarding that concept continued to benefit from the PD whereas those who had had fewer or less productive prior professional learning experiences that tended to focus on surface features of the concept.

The separation of PD from authentic contexts of the classroom and schools in which teachers work also influences and limits the way PD is conceptualized in current research (Webster-Wright, 2009). Because the professional context and learning context are often practically separated for teachers, they are also often studied separately. This may lead researchers to draw conclusions about teacher learning from one of the two contexts without considering the impact of and on the other (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009)
So, what does effective professional development look like? Joyce and Showers’ (2002) meta-analysis of research studies on effective professional development found that although theoretical understanding was important to teacher development, its effect on classroom practice was limited unless supported by demonstration, practice and timely feedback on teacher efforts. Significant gains, however, were made when a job embedded peer coaching component was added to professional learning opportunities. It appears that to be effective – that is, to improve teacher quality and student achievement - PD must be sustained, collaborative, active, content-based and situated in classroom practice (Borko, 2004; Bruce et al., 2010; Doppelt at al, 2009; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). Grossman et al. (2001) suggest that it must also align instruction with standards, be coherent with other school initiatives and meet the needs of diverse learners (see also Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Several researchers point to the importance of collective participation, which is defined as a number of teachers from the same school or learning context participating in the same activity (Doppelt et al., 2009; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Doppelt et al. (2009) also refer to the findings of other researchers that outline additional features of effective PD including a focus on student thinking, instruction, improved teacher practice and leadership skills.

Despite Webster-Wright’s (2009) lament that few professional development programs have changed in response to this research, there has been an increased focus on teachers’ communities of practice when considering PD (Printy, 2008). The emerging foundation for studying teacher learning is based on the understanding that teacher learning happens in a variety of places – in classrooms, school communities, formal PD programs, in hallways, workshops and various combinations of the above (Borko, 2004;
Webster-Wright, 2009). Borko (2004) suggested that regardless of where learning happens, there are four basic elements of any PD system that researchers need to attend to and, Webster-Wright (2009) argued, should be studied holistically: (a) the professional development program, (b) the teachers, (c) the facilitators, and (d) the context. As she “mapped the terrain” of professional development research, Borko suggested that there are three different phases to the research in this area. Phase 1 research largely focuses on individual PD programs at a single site. Phase 2 research focuses on studying the implementation of a PD program at multiple sites and, Phase 3 research studies multiple PD programs at multiple sites.

According to Borko (2004), phase 1 research has shown three potential impacts of effective professional development. First, when PD programs include an explicit focus on subject matter, they can help teachers develop the rich and flexible knowledge of subjects they need to foster deep understanding among students. Second, effective PD programs can help teachers understand and, therefore, guide students’ thinking. Third, effective PD programs that incorporate a more extensive focus on instructional practice can improve classroom teaching.

Hochberg and Desimone (2010) summed up the findings regarding effective PD. Clearly, the role of professional development in the accountability system is more complex than simply serving as an input that results in the desired outcome. Instead of simply changing classroom practice and impacting achievement through professional development activities directly, we need to consider the intermediate steps of changing teacher content and pedagogical content knowledge, developing the ability to identify and address student learning needs, and fostering appropriate epistemological and efficacy beliefs relevant to the new practice to be implemented. All of this must occur in a manner that is responsive to different teacher and student characteristics. Further, we need to acknowledge that efforts to impact teacher practice may yield different results depending on contextual factors of the school environment, which may influence teachers’ motivation to change as well as individual and
collective interpretations of reforms. (p.94)

Opfer and Pedder (2011) further warn that focusing on discrete variables, for example the location of the training or the characteristics of the workshop, may actually serve to limit our understanding of teacher learning as a result of professional development activities. A shift in focus must emerge from absence versus presence of such variables to an examination of the effects of varying intensity of each variable and to its impact on the learning that occurs simultaneously in various interdependent systems in education (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

2.2 Intentionally Designed Collaborative Learning Environments

Productive communities of practice, learning communities, professional learning communities, learning organizations, authentic professional learning opportunities – these various terms are used to describe variations and nuances of a common concept: a collaborative learning environment in schools designed for the purposes of improving teacher practice and, thus, student achievement. A review of the literature reveals an abundance of research that defines the nature, elements, and benefits of a successful collaborative learning environment, however it may be titled. Warnings and cautions about potential pitfalls and barriers, findings regarding key conditions necessary for overcoming barriers, and criticisms of the concept or its implementation are also outlined.

2.2.1 Why build collaborative learning environments?

Although a proliferation of single session workshops and decontextualized professional learning experiences continue in Ontario, little doubt exists regarding the
benefits of professional learning that is situated within schools and includes groups of teachers working collaboratively to examine student achievement and the impact of their practice upon it. Broadly based on the growing consensus regarding the centrality of workplace learning for continuing professional learning and the widely acknowledged finding that learning is context dependent (Webster-Wright, 2009), the primacy of building teacher communities within collaborative learning environments as a route to educational change may appear to be a foregone conclusion. That said, understanding and unpacking the rationale for creating these communities and the promise they seem to hold would be wise.

According to the literature, teachers individually benefit from working within a learning community in a number of ways. Working in a collaborative learning environment has been shown to reduce feelings of isolation and increase teacher satisfaction and morale (Hord, 1997). Schools that nurture professional learning communities also create time and space for continuing teacher learning (Grossman et al., 2001), which may be viewed as luxuries by teachers but are proven to be necessary conditions for instructional improvement nonetheless (Fullan 2008; Printy, 2008). Teachers also experience more powerful learning in these context specific learning communities and develop new knowledge about teaching and learning. The content takes on greater meaning and their understanding of the content deepens when professional learning happens over the long term and is “situated within a community that supports learning” (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 703).

Another benefit of establishing and maintaining learning communities emerges from the proposition that teachers cannot be expected to foster a community of learners
among students if they do not participate in community of learners themselves. Teachers ask their students to listen to others, state their beliefs in public, commit to their thinking while remaining flexible and consider the needs of group. Teachers also need opportunities to engage in those activities (Grossman et al., 2001). They need time and opportunity to try out new ways of thinking and acting with peers. They must have the ability to try on different perspectives themselves before they can appreciate different perspectives from students. The collective serves as a training ground for these practices (Grossman et al., 2001).

Classroom and school contexts in the 21st century present a multitude of challenges unlike anything teachers may have experienced during the many years spent in the classroom as students during the period Lortie (1975) has called their apprenticeship of observation. If teachers are to be successful at meeting new and emerging challenges, they need to share instructional expertise, increase their combined capacity to make and implement decisions, and explore and experiment with learning environments in classrooms (Lee, 1991). Learning communities have been shown to result in improving teachers’ abilities to adapt more quickly for students (Hord, 1997).

Schools benefit from functioning as learning communities as well. Collaborative learning environments tend to foster an increased commitment among teachers to school goals, a shared responsibility for student success and decreased teacher absenteeism (Hord, 1997). Professional learning communities also support development of teacher leaders within schools (Lieberman and Miller, 2008). An understanding has emerged that when staffs within schools create learning organizations, they develop innovative structures and processes that allow them to respond to changes more easily and systems
thinking allows them to see the big picture when responding to educational change and, therefore, respond more effectively (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Giles (2007) argues that staffs within schools that function as learning organizations and where teachers participate in professional learning communities are better able to develop and sustain the capacity for self-renewal.

Examining new and emerging demands on a broader level, Borko (2004) states that changes in classroom practice required to significantly improve educational practices on a district or national level rely on teachers and, therefore, their learning. For this, she states, teachers will require support and guidance. Teachers working in professional learning communities are more likely to undertake and to commit to significant and lasting fundamental, systemic change (Hord, 1997).

2.2.2 Defining learning communities.

The benefits and results described above are predicated on the prerequisite that the learning communities in question are genuine and productive. Fullan (2006) warns against the superficial implementation of professional learning communities or their treatment as the latest innovations as opposed to a new way of doing business in schools that is founded on a pervasive collaborative culture. So, how are these genuine learning communities defined?

The use of the term community has proven problematic due to the variable use of the word in the literature (Grossman et al., 2001). Fullan (2006) notes that the concept of professional learning communities emerged from Judith Little’s work in the early 1980s and Rosenholtz’s study in 1989. For the purposes of this study, however, the seminal
work of Wenger (1998), which posited a framework for examining workplace learning, offers a starting point for examining definitions. Wenger defined communities of practice as groups of people that are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise and share a common repertoire – sets of routines, tools, symbols, stories, and other resources – for engaging in their work. Printy (2008) further articulated that “in schools, as in other organizations, communities of practice consist of members who share values and interests, who engage in shared activity, and who produce shared resources in the process” (p. 190). Bellah defined community as a “group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (as cited in Grossman et al., 2001, p. 946). In general, a community of practice is more than a way to learn technical skills and knowledge. It is based on shared experiences where learning happens through relationships and conversations with others also engaged in the work (Lieberman and Miller, 2008).

Printy (2008) pointed out an important distinction that has emerged in the research. She outlined two types of studies: those that describe informal and emergent communities that develop naturally in workplace environments and those that describe communities that were intentionally designed for professional development purposes (Printy, 2008). This second type of community, involving intentionally designed and formally implemented structures and approaches, is captured by definitions framed by researchers seeking to study the phenomenon over time. Various researchers have identified the defining characteristic of professional learning communities in educational settings as a motivated and incessant search to understand, refine and improve practice.
For example, Astuto and Hord focused on the importance of teachers and administrators continuously seeking and sharing learning in their definition of a professional community of learners and emphasized the importance of acting on that learning (as cited in Cowley & Meehan, 2001). Similarly, Skerrett (2010) noted that learning communities continuously inquire into their practice and, therefore, find new meanings that improve their practice. Warning that not all communities of practice are productive, Printy (2008) introduced the term Productive Communities of Practice to distinguish a community where members refine their practice with colleagues and open their ideas and practice to scrutiny.

Other authors have focused on attributes of the group. Graves defined a learning community as “an inherently cooperative, cohesive and self reflective group entity whose members work… toward common goals while respecting a variety of perspectives, values and life styles” (as cited in Clausen et al., 2009, p. 445). Grossman et al. (2001) focused on the genuine, authentic responsibility that community members must have for the learning of other teachers in the community and the centrality of the focus on the clientele for a group to be defined as a professional community. Although Grossman et al. (2001) argued that no criteria have been developed to distinguish a community of teachers from a group of teachers sitting together in a meeting, they claim a focus on students is what separates the two.

A final element in the definition of learning communities is the primacy of learning situated in the context in which teachers work – the classroom. Many authors have argued that learning communities emerge when “the whole social context of the classroom becomes the primary and legitimate site of teacher professional learning on an
ongoing basis” (Bruce et al., 2010, p. 1599). Echoing the research on situated cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), Lieberman and Miller (2008) summed up the importance of learning situated in teachers’ working contexts when they pointed to the erroneous assumption of many professional development activities that “there are best practices out there” (p. 22) whereas she contends that professional learning communities are characterized by their focus on uncovering internal knowledge. This is not to suggest that there is no value in external guidance or the power of an external catalyst to motivate further learning but rather highlights the importance of examining professional learning in a holistic context and avoid the pitfalls of ignoring the nexus between professional development sessions and professional learning at work (Webster-Wright, 2009).

2.2.3 Components and attributes of learning communities.

Several lists of attributes of professional learning communities have been suggested in the literature. Table 1 offers a sampling of the studies outlining some of these characteristics.

Table 1

Summary of the Critical Attributes of Effective Learning Communities as found in the Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Critical attributes of effective learning communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louis and Kruse</td>
<td>• Reflective dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1995)</td>
<td>• De-privatization of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collective focus on student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared norms and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dufour (2004)</td>
<td>• Focus on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative culture with a focus on learning for all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Collective inquiry into best practice
• Action orientation (learning by doing)
• Commitment to continuous improvement
• Focus on results

Giles and Hargreaves (2006)
• Collaboration
• Focus on teaching and learning
• Collection and use of data

Hord (1997)
• Strong (collegial and facilitative) and shared leadership of principal
• Shared vision – consistently articulated and referenced
• Collective learning among staff and application of learning
• Visitation and review of teacher’s classroom behaviour by peers – for feedback and assistance
• Physical conditions and human capacities that support first four elements

After an extensive review of the literature on attributes of effective learning communities, Clausen et al. (2009) compiled a list of ten elements recurring in multiple studies that would signal to an outside observer that a learning community existed in an organization.

• There exists within the community a constructed understanding of reality and learning.

• The community is driven by a shared goal or purpose.

• Informal power is shared amongst community stakeholders.

• Flexibility is created within the organizational structure.

• Through a balance of support and pressure, formal leaders show long-term commitment.

• There is an open communication channel.

• There is group memory.
• In-servicing becomes ongoing and internal.
• Teachers begin to think in collegial terms.
• A culture of trust and respect exists among stakeholders.

(p. 445)

Throughout the literature, the emphasis is on the genuine nature of the interactions within these communities. Different phrases have been coined in attempts to capture this concept of authenticity. Lieberman and Miller (2008) pointed to the importance of honest talk within communities to avoid what Hargreaves (1991) called “contrived collegiality” or Grossman et al. (2001) dubbed “pseudocommunity” or “playing community” which is characterized by the suppression of conflict for the sake of harmony.

2.2.4 Threats and challenges to establishing and maintaining effective teacher learning communities.

The findings reviewed thus far may cause one to see learning communities through the proverbial rose-coloured glasses. Balanced with the promise of collaborative learning environments to reinvigorate and improve teaching and learning are the challenges and potential pitfalls to this approach to professional development as well as criticisms of the approach and the research on it.

First and foremost is the danger of superficial implementation of learning communities as just another initiative (Fullan, 2006; Lieberman and Miller, 2008). This may manifest itself in a number of ways. Skerrett (2010) listed a number of factors that
proved to be barriers preventing a community of practice from developing into a learning community such as the lack of a jointly developed mission and limited engagement in practice that addressed issues of curriculum, teaching, and learning. Expectations to work as a learning community without the provision of quality time to engage in collaboration or sustained learning was also found to be a barrier. In these cases, schools or facilitators of professional development who purported to build learning communities did not “walk the talk”, realizing fears of superficial implementation.

Another challenge to the development of genuine learning communities comes from a more elusive and ambiguous source. Grossman et al. (2001) posit that teachers rarely enter profession because they want to work with other adults and therefore need to develop new ways to interact with colleagues. The possibility always exists that teachers may retreat to the classroom in the face of a learning environment that challenges their practices and assumptions about teaching and learning. Most of teachers’ working lives occur in classrooms where they are the authority and their knowledge exceeds that of all others in the room. Grossman and her colleagues found that teachers struggled to consider that some colleagues knew things that they did not know and that the collective knowledge exceeded the individual’s knowledge. This is a key understanding necessary for collaborative learning environments to flourish. At the crux of learning communities is teacher collaboration. Meaningful collaboration “driven by deep, personal and enduring interest and motivation” (Wallace, as cited in Bruce et al., 2010, p. 1599) is difficult to achieve. Given that collaboration by itself does not necessarily improve teaching and might actually disempower teachers (Wallace & Louden, 1994), then challenges of developing well functioning learning communities become clear.
Printy (2008) states that the character of a learning community will be a reflection of social relations within the community. That held true during the attempt by Grossman and her colleagues to build community amongst a group of teachers who already knew each other. Long standing power dynamics and habits of interaction dominated the interaction for months before more productive ways of interacting began to emerge (Grossman et al., 2001). Non-formal learning happens naturally in a community of practice as members learn the norms of behaviour and expectations in a particular environment through observation and increasing participation in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). That non-formal learning, however, often undermines more deliberate learning efforts (Printy, 2008). Yet, crucial to survival of professional learning communities is that new members learn about community’s norms, values and practices (Lieberman and Miller, 2008). The challenge then is to ensure that new members learn norms, values and practices that are productive. Grossman et al. (2001) suggest that leaders or facilitators will inevitably encounter obstacles when seeking to create community – otherwise, they claim, they have chosen motivated, self-selected volunteers or only met for a limited time.

Researchers are divided over whether threats to community come more from the imposition of structures and controls or the lack of them. Some have claimed that a significant challenge comes from not losing control of the agenda and deciding who controls conversation (Lieberman and Miller, 2008) whereas Printy (2008) pointed to studies that indicate a pattern of initial success in designed communities followed by disintegration, suggesting that communities of practice “resist prescription” (p.193). Prescription may come in many forms, however, for example, over reliance on externally
developed, standardized tools of practice (Skerrett, 2010). Although administrators or facilitators may be tempted to prescribe structures, methods, or tools as a way to avoid inefficiency or to control the direction, Wallace (1999) suggested that the collaborative nature of teacher communities only seems chaotic and uncontrolled because they take a variety of forms as a result of increased teacher autonomy.

Another threat to developing and maintaining learning communities comes from the various competing forces that cause tension and conflict, challenging the development of strong communities. According to Lieberman & Miller (2008), these fault lines include four tensions: (a) the tension between voluntary and non-voluntary membership in the community; (b) the tension of developing collegiality versus congeniality; (c) the tension between focusing on the content that teachers learn versus the process by which community develops; and, (d) the tensions that inevitably emerge across and between different subject areas.

Finally, workplaces, themselves, can undermine or thwart the development of strong learning communities either by placing greater value on learning some practices over others or on the learning of some members over others, or by reinforcing non-productive learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). As Printy (2008) reminds us, learning in a community of practice can be productive – possibly innovative – or it may not. For example, it might perpetuate stereotypes or non-productive practices. One criticism of the research on learning organizations is that it does not pay adequate attention to the impact of power structures inherent in the workplace when using the communities of practices concept as a framework (Fenwick, 1997; Webster-Wright, 2009). That criticism suggests
that, as in any power relationship, this may lead to a distorted understanding of how a productive community of practice develops.

In addition to the numerous challenges faced by those seeking to nurture effective learning communities are the criticisms of this approach to professional learning. Learning organizations have been criticized for having low flexibility and low individual agency, and for emphasizing formal cognitive processes over social networking and informal relationships. They may lead members to be victims of “group think” rather than valuing individual voice and dissension (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Finally, some researchers have found that the scope of learning communities is narrow and may have very limited impact outside the particular school in which they function (Fullan, 2008; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

2.2.5 Conditions required for the sustainability of productive learning communities.

Given those difficulties and criticisms of the ideal learning community, the challenge of developing and nurturing such a community seems daunting. Through the study of many attempts to develop productive and effective learning communities, however, research has identified a variety of necessary conditions and mitigating factors to help those embarking on this journey.

Giles (2007) has argued that schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities are better able to develop and sustain the capacity for self-renewal but need supportive internal and external conditions. Research has identified many of these conditions that I have organized into the following categories:
• structural elements;
• nature of interaction among members;
• qualities, characteristics and tendencies of individual teachers;
• how teachers spend their time;
• the role of principals; and
• design that matches context.

2.2.5.1 Structural elements.

Of all the structural elements necessary for the success of productive learning communities and the one that seems mentioned most frequently is the need for time. Time to collaborate, discuss and engage in intellectual work is seen as a crucial element (Borko, 2004; Grossman et al., 2001; Louis & Kruse 1995; Skerrett, 2010). Authors also conclude that the process of building community is a lengthy process (Borko, 2004; Grossman et al., 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2008). A group needs time to develop a common history - a key element found in the survey of the literature by Clausen et al., (2009). This common history ultimately defines them as community (Grossman et al., 2001). The attention to the issue of time reinforces the caution that learning communities must not be seen as simply the next initiative that may be replaced by a different priority in the following year (Fullan, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Another structural element surrounds the idea of breadth of interaction. Cowley and Meehan (2001) posit that for a professional learning community to have impact, the whole staff must be included in its membership. This is certainly not universally agreed upon in the literature and various studies have focused on the building of learning
communities within a single department or small group of teachers (see Grossman et al., 2001, for example). That said, research does support the notion that greater breadth of interaction has been directly linked to a greater impact of change (Printy, 2008). Printy (2008) also noted that learning communities should be built across levels of expertise and also across areas of expertise. This suggestion is based on the finding that in communities of practice, individuals are most likely to change their practice according to learning that happens in the community of practice with which they primarily identify. The most radical change is likely to occur as a result of boundary encounters during interaction with members of other communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Other structural elements noted in the literature include staffing elasticity and flexible organizational structures (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Giles, 2007), proximity with other members of the community, interdependent teaching roles and communication structures that foster and open communication channels (Clausen et al.; Louis & Kruse, 1995) and a design that includes systematic learning opportunities (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010).

2.2.5.2 Nature of interaction among members.

Perhaps one of the most difficult conditions to facilitate is the nature of interaction among members of the learning community. Widespread agreement exists on the importance of supportive, emotionally safe environments where experimentation is acceptable as a prerequisite for productive change to result from designed learning communities (Clausen et al., 2009; Giles, 2007; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Printy, 2008; Wallace, 1999). A variety of important qualities of relationships are cited in the literature
and are largely summed up by the conclusions of Wallace and Louden (1994). They conclude that teachers find the following qualities valuable in professional relationships: similarities between collaborators that allow them relate to each other; sufficient differences between collaborators that mean that they have something to learn from each other; symmetry (a balance or equality of power); risk-sharing (both are exposed to critique from the other); trust (there are no hidden agendas); emergence (the relationship grows at its own pace and is not forced); humility (a balance between pride and modesty); and fair exchange (the rewards of relationship are balanced by efforts made to maintain it). Building relationships must be part of the agenda for learning to occur and attending to process is critical while designing the content of learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Additionally, the difficulty associated with deliberately attempting to build supportive and caring relationships when trying to nurture a collaborative culture, particularly among teachers who already know each other, cannot be overstated (Grossman et al., 2001) and will continue to challenge leaders and facilitators who seek to design learning communities within and across schools.

2.2.5.3 Qualities, characteristics and tendencies of individual teachers.

Although authors disagree about the extent to which community should displace individual interests, all agree that collegiality and a collaborative culture evolve (Clausen et al., 2009) while the role of the individual teacher in the success of the learning community is also acknowledged.

If learning communities are to be productive, teachers need to see the learning as relevant to their individual contexts and circumstances (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010;
Wallace, 1999) and feel included in work they believe is important (Printy, 2008). More broadly, they “must believe that serious engagement in their own learning is part and parcel of what it means to be professional” (Stein & Nelson, 2003, p. 425).

Hochberg and Desimone’s (2010) findings offer some assurance to change leaders concerned about how these beliefs may develop. They suggest that although the impact of professional development depends on teachers’ will and skill to change, this will and skill builds in a spiral manner. The spiral of sense of efficacy and improvement occurs when teachers implement changes and see a positive impact on students. In turn, their sense of efficacy increases which increases their commitment to change.

2.2.5.4 How teachers spend their time.

Less agreement exists on what it is that teachers do within a learning community that is necessary for a collaborative working environment to be effective. For example, although co-constructing goals and a vision may be ideal (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006), in Clausen et al.’s (2009) case study, it was clearly the principal’s vision that was implemented. Teachers in that case were aware the vision came from the principal but appeared open to it anyway. Similarly, Printy (2008) points to several studies that highlight contribution of outside experts to challenge current ideas and introduce new ones, whereas others highlight that the strength of learning communities is the message that expertise can be found internally while acknowledging that insider knowledge may not be enough (e.g. Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Those are two examples of areas of uncertainty in the literature about the types of activities that should take place within learning communities.
Nonetheless, learning communities do engage in many different productive activities that underpin their effectiveness. Several authors highlight the importance of engaging in challenging conversations where members believe they can express themselves honestly without fear of reprisal or humiliation (Borko, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Grossman, et al., 2001). This is called by different names – “honest talk” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008) or moving beyond “playing community” (Grossman et al., 2001). Dialogue underlies much of the writing about what should happen during the time that teachers spend together.

The literature in this area tends to draw heavily on Lave and Wenger’s (1990) concept of legitimate peripheral participation and Bandura’s claim that vicarious experience in the form of observation is a powerful learning tool (Bruce et al, 2010). Both concepts support claims that learning communities are most productive when teachers have opportunities to observe their peers (Fullan, 2006; Skerrett, 2010). In addition, being observed by others is also an important part of the equation (Fullan, 2006; Wallace & Louden, 1994). Fullan (2008) argues that teacher learning is dependent on deprivatizing teaching, with all teachers opening their doors, not just some.

Overall, teachers must engage in both intellectual and social work in learning communities (Grossman et al., 2001) for teacher learning to flourish and for designed collaborative learning environments to result in productive change.

**2.2.5.5 The role of the principal.**

Not surprisingly, researchers have found that school leaders have a crucial role to play in the development and nurturing of effective learning communities (Wallace,
In addition to the work they do to frame the rationale for learning and prioritize messages (Printy, 2008), effective principals create the structures necessary to facilitate learning. They do this by structuring meetings around appropriate tasks and authentic learning opportunities, bringing in appropriate expertise, ensuring adequate resources and providing time for teachers to engage in conversation and collaborative work (Lee, 1991; Printy, 2008; Stein & Nelson, 2003). As a result of knowing their staff, they are able to appropriately scaffold their development (Printy, 2008) and understand their learning needs (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Effective principals engage in sense-making (Lee, 1991; Printy, 2008), perhaps by initially modeling ‘not-knowing’ (Printy, 2008), grappling with tough questions and working alongside staff to understand data and uncover trends. By personally engaging in a project and committing to it over the long haul, a principal causes teachers to see him or her as a believer and participant in the learning community (Clausen et al., 2009). The actions of effective principals to support learning communities foster a greater breadth of interaction. For example, secondary teachers have been found to be more likely to interact across departments and in school-wide activities when a supportive principal is involved in work of the learning community (Printy, 2008).

Effective leaders, as described in the literature, need to balance design and emergent qualities of a community of practice to “capitalize on the learning and innovation that is the promise of teachers’ communities of practice” (Printy, 2008, p. 218). Similarly, they must provide leadership but also share leadership in such a way that teachers buy in to the power sharing (Clausen et al., 2009). The balance of pressure and support (Fullan, 1992) by effective principals is one of the crucial conditions in the success of learning communities in schools.
2.2.5.6 Design that matches context.

Lieberman and Miller (2008) summarize the importance of context when designing and nurturing collaborative learning environments. One of their overall findings is that context, which refers to the location of the learning community, the culture, its history, and the conditions of membership, is crucial to consider when making decisions about establishing and maintaining a learning community. Different contexts make different demands on leaders and present different challenges. Leaders and change agents who ignore the powerful influence of specific contexts when considering how to establish and maintain sustainable learning communities do so at their own peril.

Despite the exhortations of researchers regarding the necessity of the conditions for positive outcomes, we are reassured by Clausen et al. (2009) that the characteristics of effective professional learning communities do not all have to be present at the beginning of implementation but may emerge through the process. This is reinforced by research that documents the various stages that learning communities go through as they mature and develop. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) categorize those stages as moving from the novice stage, where teachers begin collaborative inquiry together, often starting by collecting data, to an intermediate stage where they may realize that their data is insufficient and begin to collaboratively build leadership, a shared vocabulary, and clear goals. At its most advanced stage, teachers in learning communities probe deeper into how they might improve student outcomes; they change classroom instruction, reform practice and develop sense of collective responsibility.
That the process involved in establishing an effective learning community is gradual and often time-consuming is echoed by Grosman et al. (2001) who categorize learning communities as beginning, then evolving and then maturing. In the first stages, they claim individualism overrides collective responsibility, conflict is suppressed for the sake of congeniality and there is lack of agreement over common goals and purposes for collaboration and collective learning. Given time, support and guidance, however, the conditions for effective learning above may emerge.

2.3 Relationships Between Individual and Collective Sense of Efficacy, Teacher Learning and Student Achievement

The literature on teacher learning, whether through formal professional development programs or collaborative learning environments such as teacher learning communities, only intersects occasionally with the research on teacher sense of efficacy. Interestingly, when connections do surface, the findings that these two concepts – teacher learning and teacher efficacy – are inextricably linked are compelling. This section of the literature review explores and summarizes those findings in order to provide a rationale for considering teacher sense of efficacy in this study.

2.3.1 Defining teacher sense of efficacy.

The concept of teacher efficacy is based on Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy – the belief that one is able to organize and take action to produce a desired result (as cited in Goddard et al., 2000). In this study, I have used the term “sense of efficacy” to refer to a concept that has been called self-efficacy, teacher efficacy and sense of self-efficacy in
the literature. When translated in the lives of teachers, it has been defined as “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). Perhaps more specifically, a teacher’s sense of efficacy refers to the belief or conviction that she can influence how well students learn, that she can support student learning and positively impact student achievement despite perceived challenging circumstances such as those presented by students considered difficult or unmotivated (Bruce et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Although she did not directly use the term teacher sense of efficacy, Printy (2008) described the concept when she suggested that a close relationship exists between teachers’ instructional abilities and competence, their belief in the ability of students and their belief in their ability to change their practice. Teachers with low sense of efficacy believe that they cannot do much to increase student achievement; that it is outside of their control (Bruce et al., 2010).

An expanded concept is the sense of collective teacher efficacy. Again, based on Bandura’s definition of collective efficacy as a groups’ shared belief in its ability to organize and take action to produce a desired result (as cited in Goddard et al., 2000), the sense of collective teacher efficacy describes the perceptions of teachers that their collective efforts can have a positive impact on students (Goddard et al., 2000). For instance, the statements below illuminate the meaning of sense of collective teacher efficacy. They are from a measurement instrument called the “Revised Collective Teacher Efficacy Instrument” (Goddard et al., 2000, p. 492). On this survey, researchers ask teachers to agree or disagree to varying extents with the four statements below.

1. Teachers in this school have what it takes to get the children to learn.
2. Teachers in this school are able to get through to difficult students.

3. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.

4. Teachers here are well prepared to teach the subjects they are assigned to teach.

Those statements, designed to measure a sense of collective teacher efficacy, paint a picture of how this construct is conceptualized by researchers. Intuitively, for teachers and administrators, a sense of individual and collective teacher efficacy may seem like an obvious factor in student learning and school improvement efforts, however, it has proven a difficult and elusive concept to measure and influence (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Nonetheless, there have been attempts to measure and study it and the results show an important relationship between sense of efficacy, teacher learning and student achievement.

2.3.2 Teachers’ sense of efficacy and teacher learning.

Research has shown a reciprocal relationship between teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy, revealing that each has an impact on the other. In particular, contexts and environments created by professional learning communities and the conditions required for an effective learning community have been shown to increase teachers’ sense of efficacy. For instance, Lieberman and Miller (2008) found that the professional learning communities seemed to affect how teachers in their study experienced teaching in the sense that they experienced a sense of personal growth and intrinsic rewards – a feeling some would equate with the feeling of sense of efficacy. Similarly, Barth (1990) found that teachers find courage when they have legitimate authority to make decisions; they can make demands of colleagues and comply with
colleagues’ demands. Again this feeling of confidence in the ability to meet challenges is equated with the concept of sense of efficacy and is confirmed by research that shows that teachers with more legitimate control over their jobs – both a condition and an outcome of effective learning communities - have higher levels of efficacy (Hemrick, Eury & Shellman, 2010). Although Cowley and Meehan (2001) found that internal and external measures of teacher sense of efficacy are not significantly related to perceptions of school as a learning community, it seems that the research reported above shows that the reality of the school as a learning community impacts feelings that can be equated with teacher sense of efficacy.

Research has also shown that teacher sense of efficacy also has an impact on teacher learning. Bruce et al. (2010), who set out to find the effects of professional learning activity on teacher sense of efficacy and student achievement, found a strong connection between teacher sense of efficacy and professional learning opportunities. They noticed that professional learning leads to mastery experiences (experiences in which teachers have success in the classroom when implementing change), which leads to an increase in feelings of personal competence, echoing the research that links effective professional learning communities to increased levels of teacher sense of efficacy.

If a teacher’s sense of efficacy is high, he or she will more likely implement the changes suggested or modeled within a professional development context (Bruce et al., 2010). Furthermore, sense of collective teacher efficacy influences efforts and perseverance of individual teachers on a daily basis (Goddard et al., 2000), suggesting that sense of efficacy is a strong determinant of whether teachers implement practices
aimed at improvement. Gregoire (2003) echoed this finding and suggested that teachers with greater sense of efficacy and opportunities to process ideas are more likely to experience the conceptual change required to implement reform (as cited in Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Thus, the success of reform is not just dependent on PD improving teacher knowledge but on increasing teacher sense of efficacy (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010).

Those findings are made problematic however by the observation of Bruce et al. (2010) that “inflated teacher efficacy based on invalid self-appraisal can be disabling. It impedes teachers’ abilities to benefit from professional learning opportunities” (p.1598). They found problems associated with the self-assessment of efficacy in that less competent teachers, who, in this particular study were identified as those with the least knowledge of effective math teaching, rated themselves higher in terms of their abilities (Bruce et al., 2010). This inflated sense of efficacy proved to limit teacher learning and changes to practice.

2.3.4 Teachers’ sense of efficacy and student achievement.

In terms of individual teacher sense of efficacy and its effect on student achievement, Bruce et al. (2010) found that teacher sense of efficacy is a mediator, not a cause; that is, it does not create higher achievement but has an indirect effect by influencing teachers’ goal setting and persistence. Research has shown that teacher sense of efficacy is a reliable precursor to, and predictor of, student achievement (Goddard et al., 2000) and that in high-efficacy classrooms, students develop persistence, deep
conceptual understanding and self-regulation. These characteristics have been shown to lead to increased student achievement (Bruce et al., 2010).

The research on sense of collective teacher efficacy has also shown a significant relationship with student achievement. For instance, Goddard et al. (2000), indicate that Bandura came to two important conclusions regarding sense of collective teacher efficacy and student achievement; he found that, first, student achievement is significantly and positively related to sense of collective efficacy and, second, that sense of collective efficacy has a greater effect on student achievement than student socio-economic status. Goddard, et al. (2000) also found that a high sense of collective teacher efficacy in a school leads to a greater likelihood that teachers will act purposefully to increase student achievement. They suggest that a sense of collective teacher efficacy might explain differences in student achievement across schools.

Overall, those researchers seem to be in agreement that an indirect but powerful relationship exists between increasing teacher sense of efficacy and increasing student achievement (Bruce et al., 2010) and that administrators can increase student achievement by focusing efforts on improving sense of collective teacher efficacy (Goddard et al., 2000).

### 2.3.5 Improving teachers’ sense of efficacy.

What can administrators or designers of professional learning do to increase teacher sense of efficacy? Bandura posits four main sources of teacher sense of efficacy which have been refined and extended by others (as cited in Bruce et al., 2010; Goddard et al., 2000). They are:
• mastery experiences (direct teaching experiences that are challenging but highly successful);

• vicarious experiences (watching peers of similar ability levels teach challenging ideas with high success);

• physiological and emotional states (feelings of success and confidence); and

• social and verbal persuasion (receiving positive feedback from students, peers and superiors).

Mastery experiences are acknowledged as the most powerful tool for increasing sense of efficacy (Bruce et al., 2010) but might be the most difficult to bring to staff with low sense of collective efficacy. If success through mastery experiences comes too quickly, subsequent setbacks lead to discouragement. Sense of collective efficacy is most resilient when it is built as a result of overcoming challenges with persistence over time. A wiser approach may be to focus on vicarious experiences such as videos or visits to other schools (Goddard et al., 2000).

As has been stated earlier in this review, one way to increase student achievement is to initiate the cyclical process by which teachers implement change in the classroom, see positive results and, in turn experience increased sense of efficacy (Goddard et al., 2000). In this vein, Bruce et al. (2010) also found that the activity that happened between formal PD sessions when teachers worked at implementing what they had learned in classrooms increased teacher sense of efficacy and related student achievement.

Finally, although it seems that years of experience do not seem to have an effect on a teachers’ sense of efficacy (Cowley & Meehan, 2001), the experience of joining a staff with high sense of collective efficacy does have an effect on teachers with average
sense of efficacy who, as a result of being exposed to group norms tend to make a greater
effort in terms of their professional practice (Goddard et al., 2000).

2.4 The Impact of Standardization, Accountability and Perceived Pressure on
Teacher Learning and Teacher Sense of Efficacy

The final section of this literature review examines the overarching context of
educational reform, accountability and standardized measures and the impact of this
broader policy environment on the more localized context in which teacher learning
occurs and teacher sense of efficacy is shaped. In this study, standardization refers
broadly to the various efforts made at the national, state, provincial or district level to
systematize assessment tools and instructional priorities. It goes beyond the development
of common standards and standards-based assessments to include the implementation of
large-scale standardized assessments and minimum achievement requirements on those
assessments. In some cases, advocates of standardization claim that it is a tool to promote
and ensure fairness whereas critics of standardization argue that it perpetuates
inequalities (Giles, 2007).

The term accountability refers to the requirement that teachers, schools and
districts conform to the expectations of standardization and are answerable when student
achievement does meet expected levels. Much of the current research on standardization
and accountability is centred on the US context and, in particular, the intended and
unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind legislation that has been driving
educational change in the United States.
2.4.1 The impact of accountability and standardization on teacher learning.

Webster-Wright (2009) argues that to understand authentic professional learning we must also understand the pressures of increased standardization and accountability on teacher learning. Those pressures have been shown to have an impact on the conditions that have been identified as necessary for learning communities to result in positive change outlined earlier in this literature review.

First, increasing pressure of standardization and accountability has an effect on the structural conditions necessary for learning. Teachers’ working environments become increasingly complex and uncertain and there is an associated intensification of work (Webster-Wright, 2009). Printy (2008) found that when secondary department heads have agendas that attend to achievement on standardized tests, it slows down the work of the community of practice. Giles & Hargreaves (2006), in their study of the sustainability of innovative schools that were opened as designed learning communities, found that work overload from reform led to a scarcity of time that, in turn, undermined collaborative efforts at planning. The lack of time also weakened the culture of caring that had been developed as teachers stopped volunteering, focused on minimal requirements, and found no time to induct new faculty. These pressures also lead to less time to discuss and reflect on work (Webster-Wright, 2009), seen earlier as a widely acknowledged structural element necessary for teacher learning.

Second, accountability measures have been found to narrow the goals of teacher learning communities and limit teachers’ abilities to experiment and innovate. For example, Volante (2007) argues that in Ontario, the widely publicized ranking of schools according to their performance on EQAO assessments places a negative and unhealthy
pressure on schools and teachers to compete. This leads to the narrowing of curricular focus onto the subjects that will be assessed on the test and the adoption of inappropriate test preparation strategies that might lead to increase in test scores but not real improvement in learning (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Volante, 2007). Similarly, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) found that teachers in their study felt that standardized reform undermined cross-curricular, interdisciplinary efforts at innovation.

Fecho, Graham and Hudson-Ross (2005) noted “standardization strips teachers of agency and creativity in developing context-specific teaching practices” (as cited in Skerrett, 2010, p. 651), claiming that an over reliance on externally developed, standardized tools of practice (e.g. the use of an externally developed definition of literacy) caused the learning community in her study to deny itself an important learning opportunity for members to share and negotiate perspectives on teaching and learning.

The narrowing of goals and objectives because of increasing pressures to regulate, standardize and measure, may partially be the result of the fact that learning activities that are in line with these goals are most likely to be funded and supported (Webster-Wright, 2009) within schools and district as well as at the provincial level.

Third, the emotionally safe and supportive environment required to sustain teacher learning may be undermined or negatively affected by accountability and standardization pressures. Work overload has a negative effect on social interaction and has been shown to threaten caring learning communities (Fullan, 1998; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Larson’s (2009) study on the effects of the standardized Teacher Performance Appraisal system in Ontario found that it had multiple adverse impacts on teachers’ lived experiences. For most respondents, it negatively impacted their
relationship with the principal and/or vice-principal or reinforced an existing negative relationship. Similarly, it had harmful impacts on collegial relationships with other teachers, leading to feelings of resentment, and a generally heightened sense of skepticism and mistrust – all of which are antithetical to the conditions required to support productive learning communities. Volante (2007) also argued that standardized large-scale assessments have undesirable impacts on teachers’ learning environment. He found that the focus on test scores had a negative impact on professional collegiality illustrated by the sharing of resources and best practices.

Likewise, Giles and Hargreaves’ (2006) research showed that innovative schools, which they identify as those that were initially opened with a vision and structure of a designed learning community, turn into regular schools over time as inflexible forms of standardization derail innovation. Of the three factors they identify as contributing to the weak sustainability of innovative schools, two are related to reform pressures: first, changes and pressures make schools become more conventional and, second, schools are derailed by large-scale reform if it pushes standardization and accountability. The latter is identified as the biggest threat to the sustainability of innovation (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

Some research, however, has shown the positive results of large-scale assessment on teachers. In particular, schools have been able to use data to improve student learning through the development of action research projects. Research has shown that many teachers take advantage of district PD related to grade 3 assessment (Volante, 2007). In the US, some turnaround schools have improved and reversed chronic poor performance as a result of the system of rewards and sanctions associated with No Child Left Behind
(Hochberg & Desimone, 2010) and large-scale assessments have resulted in the creation of learning communities in some schools (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010).

2.4.2 The impact of accountability and standardization on teacher sense of efficacy.

Tension exists around accountability, sense of efficacy and collaboration (Wallace, 1999), however, limited research exists on the direct connection. Studies have found that increasing pressure challenges teachers’ self-perceptions (Webster-Wright, 2009) and that pressure to reform may seem to be an implicit rejection of teachers’ current repertoire, thus having the effect of lowering a teacher’s sense of efficacy (Hargreaves, as cited in Webster-Wright, 2009; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Individual teachers’ levels of stress (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Larson, 2009), frustration and self-doubt (Larson, 2009) have all been shown to increase in a climate of accountability. Because of the climate of increased pressure, continued learning may demand changes not only to teacher practice but also to their professional identity (Webster-Wright, 2009). The impact of this challenge on teacher professional identity begs further study.

2.4.3 Factors that increase resiliency

Despite the discouragement that might result from an understanding of the negative impacts of the persistent global trend towards standardization and accountability, research has also provided insight into factors that increase resiliency of innovation and teacher learning communities.
Resilient self-renewing organizations (Giles, 2007) require “an enduring internal architecture of personal, group and organizational characteristics as well as external contextual conditions that provide long-term nurturing and support” (Giles, 2007 p. 159). Many authors insist that an understanding of these conditions is crucial if educational reform is to move forward in a productive way. Wenger (1998) argued that the era of standardization compels learning communities to manage and effectively appropriate externally imposed tools in ways that still honour the community’s identity. Skerrett (2010) echoed this concern. She insisted that schools need to build learning designs and infrastructures to combat the harmful effects of standardization and high stakes testing as well as those that enable them to learn in and about their local practice in the context of increasing regulation. Similarly, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) stated that the future success of a school as a learning community is “dependent on its capacity to secure ‘learning space’ from reform pressure to find the time and latitude to learn, flex, adapt, and regroup, when even the availability of time has been standardized by policy mandate” (p. 152). Finding a way forward to establish and nurture sustainable and productive learning communities while protecting and increasing teachers’ sense of efficacy in the context of pressures of accountability and standardization is evidently a pressing concern.

Important questions remain. For example, what is the role of PD in the maintenance of competence and development of expertise? Webster-Wright (2009) questions whether professional standards foster continuing learning, maintain competency (the definition of which remains up for debate) or regulate and deliver outcomes. What is the best way forward on a systemic level to shift notions of
accountability further away from number crunching and closer to a comprehensive understanding focused on authentic system improvement (Volante, 2007)?

Giles (2007) has posited that one of the factors that increase resiliency is a greater recognition of the cumulative and potentially detrimental impact of long-term systemic influences but questions whether schools are becoming more adept at finding ways to harness time and money from standardized reform initiatives to use in productive and creative ways and still achieve those standards. This study is designed to examine a school that seems to have done just that.

In summary, in this section I have presented the literature I used to contextualize my research questions. The literature provides a great deal of insight into the characteristics of learning communities, the nature of teacher sense of efficacy and the context of accountability and standardization, particularly in the United States. The research also examines the relationships between various paired combinations of these three concepts but suggests many areas that warrant further study with regard to the interrelationships of all three concepts within a Canadian context. My hope is that this study will contribute to this understanding and provide some insights into ways to navigate a complex environment to achieve the system-wide improvement that will help teachers, and their students, learn.
Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents the decisions made concerning the methodology, research design, participant selection, and data collection and analysis. This study has a qualitative research design and utilizes a case study approach to inquire into the perceptions, experiences and learning of a group of Grade 6 teachers in a middle school in a school board in Ontario.

Qualitative research design reflects the researcher’s interest in drawing out and focusing on “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4). Considering my research questions, a qualitative methodology was most appropriate as my interest was in ‘how’ rather than ‘how many’ (Silverman, 2010) and I wished to work within a constructivist paradigm, recognizing the multiple realities and variety of constructed understandings of teachers within the same context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

I selected an instrumental case study approach, where “a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (Stake, 1994, p. 237). Stake (1994) points out that each case embodies both a uniqueness that must be explained and understood and a connection to or commonality with other cases that suggests that findings may enhance our overall understanding of a phenomenon or issue and may be generalizable to other cases. Below I describe the particular case in this study and then discuss both its unique features and its connections to the broader field.

3.1 Case Selection
In order to answer the three research questions of the study, the site selected was a middle school serving a highly diverse student body in a school district in Southern Ontario. The school opened in 2007 and is situated in a growing and ethnically diverse area just outside of Toronto, Ontario. It is both an English and French Immersion school with approximately 40 teaching staff.

When opening the school, the inaugural principal had a vision of a culminating task that every student in a particular grade would complete to demonstrate his or her development of critical and creative thinking abilities. This task would serve as a focal point for cross-curricular teacher collaborative planning of both the project and the explicit teaching of the particular skills and competencies that would be needed for students to be successful. The project and the accompanying long-term planning require teachers of different subjects to discuss skills and competencies that are transferrable across subject areas in order to plan how they will work together to support student understanding and skill development collectively in their different classes and subject areas. It also requires them to share specific curricular content students will learn in their subject areas and grapple with selecting relevant content and curriculum expectations in concert with other teachers. Teachers meet regularly, collaboratively engage in both long-term planning and lesson planning targeted at particular transferrable concepts and competencies, and revisit earlier planning to revise and reconsider at various points during the term. Although this was a somewhat unique aspect of this case, it has parallels with the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP)\(^2\) approach as it has been conceived.

\(^2\) For a brief overview, see http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/teaching_learning.pdf
in many schools and school districts in Southern Ontario. This parallel was drawn by some participants in the study who compared their experiences of the TLCP process in other schools with the collaborative planning in this school. It also has similarities to the ways some schools are approaching cross-curricular, whole-grade long-term planning to support student development of areas such as literacy or numeracy competencies, character education, and citizenship education, for instance.

The implementation of the principal’s vision has required the building of a highly collaborative learning community. All teachers formally work as part of two different teams: a grade level team which consists of teachers teaching different subjects to students in the same grade (e.g. all grade 6 teachers), and a subject-specific team which consists of all teachers teaching the same subject across all three grades (e.g. all language arts teachers). They work in their grade level teams to develop the cross-curricular portion of term assessment tasks for a particular grade, bringing their diverse disciplines to the table and considering how each discipline might contribute to the broader learning targets associated with the task. They also co-construct key boundary objects (Wenger, 1998) that they agree to use in their respective disciplines to help students transfer their skills and developing critical thinking abilities to new contexts. In their subject-specific team, they focus on planning which aspects of the cross-curricular assessment task will be supported in their subject-specific classes and work on developing a better understanding of their specific content and what critical and creative thinking look like within their subject areas.

This particular case presents both unique features and elements that are widely recognized in Ontario as important structures of teacher learning. In my experience in
various school boards and schools across southern Ontario, this school generally reflects a movement that has been gathering momentum in the last decade towards schools as professional learning communities, collaboration around assessment and instruction, and cross-curricular integration. The school stands out as an example of a highly structured professional learning community with very specific intentionally designed elements that require teachers to work collaboratively to achieve common goals.

This learning community has been established and maintained within the context of measurable goals as outlined by the district. The board identifies eight goals that it has committed to working towards and achieving. These include:

• set high expectations;
• use resources effectively;
• positive relationships;
• safe and appropriate places to learn and work;
• school success planning;
• achieve equity;
• use technology effectively; and
• attract, develop and retain staff.

For the purposes of this study, the district’s description of the first goal provides an interesting window into the possible climate of accountability and standardization. The board outlines the goal as follows:

**Goal:** Set high expectations for achievement of students and staff, and measure the outcomes.
**Description:** Our highly effective staff ensures that all students achieve to the best of their ability. High expectations are set through the analysis of data to guide success planning, instructional practice and resource allocation.

**Indicator:** EQAO results (percentage of group performing to standard)

**Target:** 100 per cent of our schools will improve their EQAO scores

It is interesting that EQAO scores are the only indicator of high expectations identified. This singular focus on large-scale assessment as a measure of high expectations for students and staff suggests the climate of accountability that might drive district priorities.

In the spring of 2008, at the end of the second year of the school’s existence, I was invited to provide a professional development workshop on critical thinking to support the staff in these endeavours. What started as a single workshop has turned into an ongoing professional development program in which I provide external input through workshops presented at staff meetings and support during some team meetings, framed according to the needs of the staff at the time. I have also provided in-between session support for many individual staff members in the form of consultation by email or phone when staff members request it.

Near the end of the 2009-2010 school year, the area superintendent of schools visited this middle school as part of her regular schedule of visits to principals. At the insistence of the principal, she took an unplanned tour of classrooms and spoke to students about the way they were learning that year and how it differed from how they had learned in the past. She was so impressed with the way that students could articulate what they had learned, how they had learned, and the extent to which the way they
learned made a difference to their understanding, she attended the end of the year staff meeting to congratulate the staff on their achievements. She also arranged one of the two days of the following year’s principals’ retreat to showcase the work at this school and introduce other principals to the particular model of critical thinking that has supported their learning communities’ efforts through formal PD. This initial work with principals has expanded to include an ongoing series of two-hour sessions with administrators within this area of the district and professional learning programs involving several other individual schools in the area. The interest in this work is also expanding to other areas in the district.

These factors suggest that this particular case, although perhaps unique in its approach, is focused on the broad priorities and general approaches valued by the district and that the findings are potentially applicable across different contexts.

3.2 Sampling and Participant Demographics

Given that I was interested in examining pressures that teachers experience as a result of accountability measures, I decided to purposively sample participants who taught Grade 6 students as Grade 6 teachers across Ontario face the challenge of preparing their students for the EQAO assessment that occurs in that year of elementary schooling.

Limitations of previous studies on teacher learning have arisen from their focus on participants who are already inquiry or learning oriented and who have voluntarily joined a micro-learning community within a school (Borko, 2004; Skerrett, 2010). In the
intentional design of the learning community of this school, the principal has attempted to ensure every teacher has equal membership in the learning community. Teachers are required by the principal to work within both their grade level and subject-specific teams, which may avoid the limitation outlined by Skerrett (2010). However, undoubtedly some teachers are more engaged in the work of the learning community than others. All Grade 6 teachers in the school were invited to participate in the interview process to ensure a broad spectrum of teacher engagement. Eleven teachers, almost all of those invited, were willing and able to participate. As Table 2 illustrates, their varying positions within the school, years of experience and degrees of participation in the learning community indicate a breadth of experiences that help address the issue of generalizability within and beyond the case study.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (all names have been changed)</th>
<th>Number of years teaching</th>
<th>Number of years at this school (at the time of interviews)</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Core French, Language Arts, Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Math, Science, Multimedia Learning support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Language Arts, Social Studies, Dance, Drama, Visual Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6, 7, 8 Visual Arts, Gr. 6 Vocal music, Gr. 6 dance, drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>5.5 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Math, Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>LTO - Grade 6 French Immersion - Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Arts; also teaches English to all of the grade six French Immersion students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 French Immersion – Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Arts, Drama, Dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamina</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>LTO – Grade 6 Math/Science/Technology (MST) - Teaches MST to 3 clusters of students: a) ESL cluster b) ESL/high needs c) Instrumental music cluster (high achieving)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>9-10 years</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Gr. 6 In-school support (supports all 10 of the Grade 6 classroom teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Gr. 6 Language Arts, Social Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Methodology and Data Collection

Case study data was collected and analyzed in the form of semi-structured interviews. Punch (2009) suggests that interviewing is “a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (p. 144).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were scheduled and carried out with interested participants over two days. Participants were invited to identify a time within the day that would be convenient to them and a private space within the school was secured for each interview. Scheduling and location decisions were made based on a concern for participants’ convenience, comfort level and time constraints. Participants signed a consent form, providing consent to participate and for audio recording immediately before the interview and each interviewee was informed of the protocol in...
place regarding transcription and storage of records, and confidentiality of responses.
Each interview was approximately thirty minutes in duration.

Interview questions were formulated prior to the interviews but shifted in response to participants’ answers and the directions their answers took (see Appendix B). Participants were first asked to provide background information on how long they had been teaching, what they were currently teaching and how they had come to work at this school. They were then invited to respond to a series of open-ended questions regarding what it was like to be a teacher at the school, the nature of collaboration at the school, their experiences of collaboration, the pressures or challenges they faced at this school on a variety of levels and the extent to which they felt they could and were making a difference for their students. The questions were designed to draw out their feelings, experiences and opinions in relation to the key constructs of the study: teacher learning, sense of efficacy and the impact of accountability and standardization. Follow-up questions were used intentionally to encourage teachers to share detailed descriptions, to pursue particular thoughts that seemed to point toward tensions within their thinking or descriptions and to invite them to clarify.

3.4 Data analysis and interpretation

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify three processes related to their definition of data analysis: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification.

Transcripts were examined multiple times in an iterative process to identify emergent themes through a process of identifying and applying descriptive codes. An initial process focused on identifying places in the data that related directly or indirectly
to the key constructs embedded in the research questions of this study. Data were further coded by way of connections to relevant research findings from the literature review. Cognizant of Opfer and Peddar’s (2011) suggestion to consider the research with a complex systems thinking approach, a further level of coding occurred to make connections between the individual, the collective and the school culture that houses these two entities.

Coded selections were grouped and regrouped as I began to make inferences about the meaning of and patterns embedded within participants’ responses. A key turning point in the process involved recognition of an underlying but unstated hypothesis that was informing my reading of the data. Based on my review of the literature and my personal experience, I discovered that I had expected to find that the masterful combination of elements inherent in this intentionally designed learning community would prove to support deep and rich teacher learning. However, through the process of iterative analysis, I was finding underlying tensions in participant responses, often not clearly articulated, that challenged my assumptions. It was at this point that I began to re-examine the data in an attempt to test and verify this emerging understanding and interpretation. This “steady and explicit ‘dialogue’ (Ragin, 1987) between ideas and evidence” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 433) necessitated a return to the literature review and a re-examination of the interview data in light of more nuanced and specific research findings. In this way, a process of open coding, focusing on questions such as what is this piece of data an example of? what does this piece of data stand for, or represent?, and what category or property of a category does this piece of data indicate?, gave way to more selective coding at a higher level of abstraction in an attempt to explain
the data (Punch, 2009). As the messy process of analysis, interpretation and re-
interpretation proceeded, additional open coding was revisited and new themes suggested
themselves and were incorporated into the findings.

3.5 Ethical considerations and potential limitations

Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify trustworthiness criteria proposed within a
constructivist paradigm for evaluating the quality of inquiry: credibility, transferability,
dependability, and confirmability. Decisions regarding research design directly reflect a
concern for these criteria.

3.5.1 Credibility.

Borko (2004) identifies that most studies she classifies as Phase 1 research
(studies of a single professional development programmes in one particular setting) are
carried out by researchers who were also facilitators of the PD. This is true of this study
and an important validity concern arises from potential researcher effect. Framed in
quantitative research as reactivity, this criterion is concerned with the question: Has the
research process itself, and specifically the collection of data, somehow influenced the
data, or even created the data? (Punch, 2009). Since I have been working intensively with
teachers around professional learning about critical thinking, have developed
relationships with participants and enjoy a privileged status within the learning
community, I was highly conscious of the potential impact my involvement in the
research process may have on their responses.
Fontana and Frey (1994) outline some basic elements of unstructured interviewing. I used particular elements intentionally to counter possible researcher effect. For example, Fontana and Frey (1994) focus on important decisions that need to be made regarding how the interviewer presents herself and warn against the potential effects that occur when participants view the interviewer as a spy for management or attempt to impress the interviewer as someone who might pass judgement on their practice. Similarly, they point to decisions regarding the gaining of trust and establishing of rapport that might enrich or inadvertently undermine the quality of the data. Several routines and approaches were deployed to address these concerns.

Prior to beginning the interview, I reviewed the consent form and asked participants to sign and date the form. At the start of the interview I verbally assured participants of their anonymity in any publications, their ability to withdraw from the study at any point, and the right to refuse to answer any questions they choose. Participants were also reminded that the information collected in the interview sessions would be held in a locked drawer at my home office and destroyed 5 years after collection and that all documents on my computer would be encrypted and password protected and deleted 5 years after collection. The interviews were audio recorded only with their consent.

Some participants, when considering how to respond to specific questions, asked again whether their responses would be confidential and I assured them that their responses would only be used in my research, that their names and other identifying markers would be removed, and that I would not share what they had shared with me with the school administrators. In addition, having established trust and rapport with
participants over the course of my long working relationship within the school, I sensed what might have been a reverse effect. Some participants seemed to be very open with their concerns, perhaps trusting that I would fairly and sensitively relay their concerns and that their voices would be heard by administrators within the school as a result of my research without them having to directly declare their concerns.

3.5.2 Transferability.

A second potential limitation concerns transferability, sometimes framed as generalizability. Fullan warns that “even if you knew how particular schools became collaborative, you could never tell precisely how you should go about it in your own school” (as cited in Clausen et al., 2009, p. 451). This belief is echoed by many authors who remind us that context matters, both when developing learning communities and when studying them (Borko, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). As outlined above, selection of the particular case was made with careful consideration of this concern. Efforts to describe the unique features of the case and to situate the case within a larger context have been made within the description of the research design and are reiterated and explored in the findings and conclusions. This attempt at thick description increases the likelihood of transferability (Denzin, 1994; Schofield, 2002).

3.5.3 Dependability and confirmability.

The concern for dependability and confirmability are related to questions regarding whether the reader can be confident in reported conclusions, whether the study could be replicated and whether the methodology is transparent, particularly in relation to
how conclusions have been drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These concerns will be revisited in Chapter 5 and addressed in terms of the conclusions that have been generated from the data.

The findings from the analysis described above are presented in the following chapter.
Chapter Four: Results of the Study – Characteristics of Individual Subsystems

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the impact of various forms of pressure and support experienced by teachers in an intentionally designed learning community on teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy. Below are the particular research questions that guided this study.

1. From a teacher’s perspective, what constitutes pressure and support within an intentionally designed learning community?
2. How is teacher sense of efficacy affected by the simultaneous pressures and supports that arise from an intentionally designed learning community within a climate of standardization and accountability?
3. How do these pressures and supports affect teacher learning?

Opfer and Pedder (2011) point out that teacher learning is dependent on the activity of three subsystems: teachers, collectives (in this case grade level teams and subject teams), and the school (within the school system and the greater socio-political context of education). In order to increase the likelihood of transferability of conclusions from this case study, in this chapter, a conscious and deliberate attempt has been made to provide a thick description of the three subsystems of the case so that the unique features of the case might be easily identified by those in different contexts and accounted for as the reader draws his or her own conclusions.

That said, examining each subsystems in isolation is counterproductive. When it comes to complex systems thinking, Opfer and Pedder (2011) suggest we must understand the complexity of teacher learning. In fact, they argue, “any attempt to
understand teachers’ professional learning at only a subsystem level must be understood as partial, incomplete, and biased” (p. 379).

Figure 2. Three subsystems in which teacher learning is simultaneously constituted according to Opfer and Pedder (2011). The arrows illustrate their contention that all systems are interdependent and reciprocally influential. Analysis of interview data from this study suggests implications of the nature and quality of interdependence between subsystems in an intentionally designed learning community.

Webster-Wright (2009) also emphasized that professional learning must be studied holistically, focusing simultaneously on the interaction between learner, context and what is learned. This is done in Chapter Five where the findings have been organized by evidence that occurs in the intersection of various combinations of the three subsystems. Special attention has been paid to data related to the interaction of the subsystems and the impact of that interaction on teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy.
In particular, the findings in this chapter are structured around the following themes: characteristics of individual teachers and their orientation to learning; characteristics of collectives (grade teams and subject teams); characteristics of the school and the school’s orientation to learning. In Chapter Five, findings are reported around the following themes: reciprocal influences and impact between the teacher and the collective; reciprocal influences and impact between the collective and the school; and reciprocal influences and impact between the school and the teacher.

4.1 Characteristics of individual teachers and their orientation to learning

This section presents data that describe characteristics of individual teachers within this case and their unique and shared orientations to learning. Teachers’ characteristics, as inferred from their responses, were grouped according to characteristics related to teacher attributes as a learner and their orientation to learning as well as characteristics related to individual teachers’ sense of efficacy.

4.1.1 Attributes as a learner and orientation to learning.

Several participants commented that the best thing about working in the school was the personal and professional growth they had been offered. Many discussed how their thinking had really been pushed since joining the school. These comments have been included in this section to highlight the individual teachers’ orientation to learning within this case. One participant’s comments summed up what many others had said in different ways:
The best thing about being here for me personally has been my professional growth. When I came here last year, I felt it was the hardest year I’ve worked since my first year, you know, because there was so much that was new to me, like, around the critical thinking stuff and trying to get my head around that and not really understanding it or not feeling very comfortable in it…that is the best thing and then coincidentally sometimes it’s the overwhelming piece too. [Jason]

### 4.1.1.1 Personal and professional growth changes their practice.

When teachers explained what that professional growth meant to them, they articulated a number of ways that it had changed their practice. These four participants talked in particular about how their learning and growth at the school had caused them to reflect on particular elements of their program. Jason, who has been teaching for 7 years, talked about the way he approached the math curriculum and how that contributed to his personal growth:

I feel that I’m learning so much and I feel more confident in what I’m doing because it makes more sense to me… whereas before I was focused on teaching the expectations and hitting every expectation, you know? And ticking off that box and that’s done. But whereas now it’s the critical and creative thinking piece. What’s the big stuff that’s really important?

A teacher with 16 years of experience talked with a sense of wonder about how she was actually throwing things out that she had used for years and was quite amazed about how she had changed as a result of what she had learned at the school:

[It’s] really changed my way of thinking, you know?...you always get initiatives coming along from the board and and you listen and you do it. That’s it. But last year I really started thinking about my program and how I do things and so it was a learning experience for me last year and this year. And last year one of my teaching partners and I started talking, using the vocabulary that you had given us rethinking a lot of things. I remember even calling you once and saying, “How do we change this? How do we do this?” And so I’ve just thrown away things I’ve had for years that I thought were really good and I go, “No, this is how we need to think about it critically.” And assessment totally changed, you know? I’m not testing for regurgitation anymore. Can they memorize these facts about First Nations? …So now that I’m comfortable with it, this year has been a year that
I’ve impacted my students to think critically. I feel like I’m empowering them as opposed to just raising them or parenting them. [Ashley]

Sheila, a teacher with 7 years of experience also marvels at how her sense of self-assuredness is continuously challenged as she encounters and learns from new staff in the learning community:

It makes me reflect back on my practices. …in the beginning you feel very versed in what you’re doing and sharing everything with everyone. And then every time you get more staff who are also experts in their field, I also get ideas from them. So although I’ve been teaching for seven years, my husband’s saying to me, “Why are you planning so much?”

Throughout the interviews, various teachers referred to how their learning within the school caused them to constantly reflect and re-vision how they might approach the curriculum differently in the following year:

I feel it changing every year. Even if I am teaching grade six again next year I can already picture a bunch of ways that I’d want to do things a little bit differently and go from a different angle here and a different angle there and see what happens. [Zamina]

All of the participants interviewed displayed similar attributes. Not only were they open to learning but directly spoke about reflecting on their practice and changing their practice as a result of their professional learning at the school.

4.1.1.2 Teachers value being pushed or challenged by the environment or the administration.

Several participants went further than simply valuing professional learning. They also valued being “pushed” and identified the pressure to step outside their comfort zones
as positive. Both the following participants identified this as what they liked best about the school:

This school has gotten me out of my comfort zone in certain areas….it was a push off the ledge kind of thing for me and it really made me realize I can do it. And if I can do it, I need to provide the same environment for my kids to do as well, so that’s been the most challenging thing that I’ve had done here. And to be quite honest, this year it was a breeze because I had had that experience. [Ashley]

Similarly, Amanda enjoys the pressure, even though it is sometimes challenging:

What I like is that it’s not stagnant and you’re always pushed to be ahead of the curve, on top of your game. You’re always pushed and if people don’t like growing and learning, then I think they’re the ones that have a hard time working here because it’s very busy and I think it’s very progressive. The constant thinking - you can’t just come and sit and take notes and fly under the radar, you can’t…. it forces me to be outside of my comfort zone, which makes me a better person ‘cause I know my limitations and then I’m pushed outside of them and it makes me grow.

4.1.1.3 Teachers have high expectations of themselves.

Teachers at this school seem to have very high expectations of themselves. Four teachers in the study commented on the internal pressure they feel to be effective. Amanda explained her feelings:

I feel like I’m expected to know everything. Everything about everything. Be an expert at reading, be an expert at writing, being an expert teaching oral skills like listening and speaking. Be an expert in French, be an expert on First Nations and Europeans, and mapping and trade…I feel like I’m expected to be an expert, but I’m not. So I do a lot of independent learning over the summer and then I always try to take an AQ.

Some teachers directly related these personal high expectations to the environment of the school where they are surrounded by teacher learners who are also challenging themselves. This is illustrated by Sarah’s comment:
Everyone has so much to offer and everyone is so capable in so many areas, it really helps to challenge you as a teacher and you want to be better as an individual because there’s always people around you who are setting new goals for themselves, taking courses, or even offering courses to each other.

This deeply embedded and broadly present positive orientation to learning amongst teachers might be seen as unique to this case or may be seen in a variety of other learning communities or micro-communities within schools. This particular characteristic, however, is crucial when considering the interaction of teachers with other subsystems in the case.

### 4.1.2 Sense of efficacy

Before investigating the impact of the pressures and supports within the intentionally designed learning community and the influences of the interaction of various subsystems on teacher sense of efficacy, I provide a general sense of the level and nature of teachers’ sense of efficacy within this school site. Almost all participants, when asked directly about the impact they believed they had on their students, reported feeling like they were making a difference in terms supporting their thinking, pushing their thinking, developing their abilities to collaborate and supporting their learning. Typical of these comments were those made by first-year teacher, Sarah.

I do feel as though everything I do as a teacher impacts the students. And I’m always planning and finding ways to make sure that everything I’m doing is meaningful and that it’s helping the students to think beyond what we’re doing in the classroom to apply to everyday life and also to apply it to situations they might face in the future.
Nuances existed within these responses that reflected some particular characteristics of the teachers interviewed. I sensed that teachers did not have an inflated sense of efficacy, but rather were quite humble as they questioned their abilities and their impact and were thoughtful in their reflections about whether they were meeting the needs of all students.

4.1.2.1 Displayed qualities of self-questioning, humility and thoughtful reflection.

Teachers evidenced humility and self-awareness. The following excerpts from teachers in early and mid-stages of their careers highlight the feeling of general self-questioning that emerged from the interview data.

I would say that a challenge is just making sure that I’m always not only challenging the students to their best potential because I could be giving them good work, but is it good enough to make them really take it to that next level and to feel as though they’re really enjoying class every day. And once they go to grade seven they feel, “Wow, I learned so much in grade six.” So, not only challenging them to do that, but also challenging myself. How can I take this and make it better? And how can I take this and make it more interesting? How can I take this and make it so that the students can make it really meaningful and relate to it? [Sarah]

I think that me personally I try my best right? I feel like I’ve set up my classroom in a way that sort of maybe fosters that kind of thinking. And a lot of problem solving or critically analyzing….so I feel like personally I think that I’ve been okay with that, but at the same time it was my first year doing four new curricula….I could have done a better job. If I was to do the same thing next year, I already know how I would make it better. So I don’t feel as effective or that my impact was as effective as it could have been because I was also struggling with learning new content. [Melanie]

4.1.2.2 Worried about challenging students enough.

In particular several teachers talked about their concern that they had not challenged their strong students enough.
I think that a lot of my programming was geared towards more of the lower students. The level fours never needed me but I felt bad because I know I wasn’t challenging them as I could have. [Melanie]

4.1.2.3 Worried about whether they were doing enough to support struggling students.

Teachers communicated a concern regarding whether or not they were meeting the needs of students who were struggling or who were identified with special needs. For example, in addition to worrying that she had perhaps not challenged her strongest students enough, one teacher felt that “I hope that I helped both but sometimes – and this is maybe my insecurity - I hope that I didn’t miss them” [Melanie]. Similarly, a mid-career teacher worried, “I’m scared all my special needs kids are really falling behind” [Julia]. Those concerns were connected directly and indirectly to a variety of factors that will be discussed later in the analysis including administrative decisions regarding in-school support teachers and timetabling, in particular.

4.2 Characteristics of Collectives (subject and grade level teams)

In the section that follows, data relating to the characteristics of the various collectives within this case is explored. Teachers talked about several different groups that Opfer and Pedder (2011) would characterize as collectives within the broader school community. They discussed institutionally created groups that were intentionally formed to advance the administrative vision including grade level teams and cross-grade subject-focused teams and they also described groups that emerged more organically such as the informal collaborative teams that formed as a result of the proximity of teachers’ classrooms.
During interviews, teachers were asked the following question to draw out their insights and experiences related to the collectives within the professional learning community of the school: *How do you feel about the way teachers work together in this school? Tell me a little bit about the level of collaboration and how it affects you.*

Discussions of collaboration and the nature of interaction of teachers within various collectives also emerged from other questions including a general question close to the beginning of the interview in which they were asked: *If you had to describe what it was like to be a teacher at this school to an outsider, what would you say?* Three distinct themes emerged from their answers and are explored in this section.

- Characteristics of colleagues.
- General characterization of level of collaboration within school.
- Description of collaboration: What does it consist of?

### 4.2.1 Teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of their colleagues.

All participants spoke very highly of their colleagues. The general tenor of their comments is reflected in Melanie’s statement, “I am very proud to be working here. I think it’s a great teaching community. I feel like my colleagues are incredible”. Their responses clustered around two broad categories of comments: accolades for their colleagues’ support and nurturing, and how the high quality of their colleagues’ approaches to teaching and learning furthered their own practice.

Participants particularly noted that their colleagues were “very supportive and …nurturing” [Jason] and praised “the camaraderie…with the teachers” [Kendra]. Several participants went on to explain what that meant for them.
The staff really are very supportive. They really are a talented group of people… so for me that’s been great, very knowledgeable and welcoming and open and, you know you can sit down and have those dialogues and discussions. [Mariah]

Ninety-nine percent of the teachers that I ask for anything would bend over backwards to make it happen. Or if I just needed to go out and get away from here they would do that. They make this place what it is. [Julia]

Several participants commented on the high quality of their colleagues as teachers noting that “everybody is very unique and everyone is an expert in their field” [Sheila] and stating “this is a very predominantly young staff, so there’s a lot of energy amongst the staff members here. They have a lot of ideas that are new and have a very modern approach to things” [Rebecca]. Mariah expanded on the same theme:

The teachers are very talented, very motivated group of individuals. I find that probably the most current staff that I’ve worked with as far as professional development and, you know, wanting to know what’s current and what the research is saying and they definitely get what’s being talked about. Whereas in some other schools, you can be a classroom teacher, whereas I find here everybody’s very current - very up on what does the data say? What is critical thinking? How can you teach that? So that’s a huge, a huge focus and a big shift when you come. I find the teachers look much more at the whole child and just a bit bigger picture.

Sarah made the direct link between relationships with colleagues to teacher learning and improvement, “So I think that the relationships here are very encouraging and very successful and that everyone is really there to encourage each other along the way to just be the best you can be as a teacher.”

4.2.2 General characterization of the level of collaboration within the school

Teachers described the level of collaboration within the school generally as “very high” [Jason, Amanda, Sheila, Zamina]; for many it was their first response when asked
what it was like to be a teacher at this school. Ashley cited the collaborative school environment as an expectation that may have been considered during the hiring process, suggesting perhaps how integral collaboration may be to the administrative vision.

You need to be more of a team player than any other school I’ve worked at. There are schools where you are forced to work by yourself and there are schools where you can choose to work by yourself or can choose to work in a team. Here you have to work as part of a team, so if you don’t have interpersonal skills this is not the place for you, and I think that’s probably what happened at the interview. That was kind of identified that I am a team player, [that I] work better as a team player than in isolation.

Participants spoke enthusiastically about the level and nature of collaboration. Sheila referenced the importance of the school’s collaborative environment for new teachers, “it’s beneficial if you’re a brand new teacher and learning the curriculum, and having a lot of support in terms of planning. And you’re not in the classroom by yourself; you’re not isolated. It’s communal”.

Rebecca’s comments confirmed the breadth of collaboration from her perspective and its value with regard to modelling the behaviours that they wanted to be teaching students.

There’s a lot of conversation that goes on about everything here….there’s a lot of teamwork going on and planning. There’s a lot of support in terms of that group work. Nobody appears to go it on their own. So there’s very much a group effort which is great because it’s what we’re trying to show the kids as well. The team dynamic - so you sort of get that model for the most part in the staff as well.

Finally, two participants, Jason and Zamina, describe the level of collaboration in comparison to what they experienced at previous schools where they had taught. Zamina explained,
I would say it’s very collaborative in that at my last school we were doing TLCPs and we seemed to collaborate around language, which is what the TLCP was mostly based in. We had tried to give it a science focus, but because we were so many split grade teachers working together we actually gave it a character ed focus so that we could kind of all go in the same direction. Um, which was great ‘cause that kind of built on our character ed stuff that we wanted to cover, but it left us with all of our other things kind of floating around a little bit. So I would say it’s more collaborative [here] in the sense that everybody’s working together. Like I don’t just go meet with the MST\(^3\) team and then I go meet with these people. It’s sort of a larger group focus. I would say that’s sort of a hallmark characteristic of what happens here that’s a little bit different.

Jason noted his own understanding of collaboration has changed as a result of his move to this school, which he describes as “the cutting edge”.

It was kind of a big deal for me. At my previous school a colleague and I decided that we would teach virtually the same class, teach the same lessons at the same time. That was pretty revolutionary - that we would actually teach the same, cover the same strands, teach the same expectations, and teach more or less the same lessons, you know what I mean? He would do his thing but I would do my spin, but still covering the same thing, assigning the same homework, assigning the same assignments or activities, right? And that was a big deal….and then to come here it’s the other end of the spectrum where that’s already happening but now we’re looking at coordinating expectations across subject areas….which is challenging, you know?

### 4.2.3 Description of collaboration: What does it consist of?.

Although participants were not asked to define collaboration, it became clear that understanding their perceptions of collaboration was crucial to drawing relevant conclusions about the central research questions driving this research. Some participants referred to the more formal structures put in place by the administration including the grade-level and subject-specific teams, and staff meetings. People described staff meetings at the school as collaborative in the sense that they were focused on professional learning and that everyone was involved in them.

\(^3\) Math, Science, Technology
I like the fact that we come together as a team and we can plan as a team...I like the fact that during staff meetings it’s not wasted time. It’s being used productively to better myself and maybe possibly better other people. So it’s more like a professional development kind of a feel. [Sheila]

At staff meetings we all collaborate, no one sits at the back and, you know, doesn’t say anything. Everybody’s accountable at our meetings and our P.D.s. Like I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone just sit at the back and turn off....everyone’s held accountable in some way. [Ashley]

In addition, several people described other team meetings as places where collaboration takes place.

So every Wednesday’s meeting day, so we don’t organize anything for Wednesday after school. The next Wednesday is a coordinator’s meeting and that’s where the one representative from every grade level team meets with [principal’s name] and [head secretary’s name]. They do budget stuff, they discuss what’s going on in the school... And then there’s a [subject-specific team] meeting the next Wednesday and then the [grade-level team] meeting...that’s how it’s supposed to be but in the last two years we haven’t had those regularly, as we should have. And they are supposed to be on an as-needed basis, so maybe that’s the reason. [Ashley]

Sheila described her approach to chairing team meetings:

So every team meeting – in the beginning we share something new. What would you like to share? Like, some teaching strategy or something. A book that you picked up at a P.D. session, so I try to do that.

In addition to the formal institutional mechanisms for collaboration, many participants referred to opportunities for collaboration that were informal, organic, self-organized by teachers and teacher directed. For example, Jason described collaboration as “networking with teachers and being able to go to teachers... and people volunteering their time”. Sarah defined collaboration as “getting involved and planning with others, and getting other people’s perspectives and understanding the way other people teach, or
the way they plan”. Amanda extends this definition by describing how she collaborates with others.

I know my teaching partners on both sides of me really, really well because I’m constantly having dialogue with them about what we’re doing in class and, you know, do you have a resource for this? Oh I have a resource for that. So there’s a huge level of collaboration. I feel like I’ve made some really good collaborative relationships. [Teacher’s name] teaches next to me…we have an open dialogue about everything that we do. And then [teacher’s name] is on the other side of me and she’s an invaluable resource for everything, so I’m always talking to her. And then [teacher’s name] supports my class and we have ongoing communication about what the students are doing too, so I feel like I’m getting it every day. Staff meetings, and then every day I show up for work, I’m not just in my classroom chained to my desk.

Similarly, Melanie describes her collaborative relationships, “I must say my colleagues are the people I work closest with. I think our working relationship is incredible. We feed ideas off each other, we learn from each other. We develop programming together which is great”.

4.3 Characteristics of school and the school’s orientation to learning

In the conceptual framework outlined by Opfer and Pedder (2011) that frames this analysis, the final subsystem they describe is that of the school within a larger system. Participants were asked to describe what it was like to work at the school, what they liked best about working there and the greatest challenges they faced. The comments about the school that emerged were grouped under three categories. They described the characteristics of the school as:

• innovative, cutting edge, highly regarded;

• busy; and
• learning-focused.

In a later question, in an effort to have them articulate the pressures they faced, teachers were asked about expectations that were placed upon them by the school. The responses to this question clustered around the following themes:

• high expectations of excellence;
• high expectations of time/commitment; and
• expectation and pressures related to Grade 6 EQAO testing.

Together, those responses paint a picture of the school-level system, including “the contexts of the school that support teaching and learning, the collective orientations and beliefs about learning, the collective practices or norms of practice that exist in the school, and the collective capacity to realize shared learning goals” (Opfer and Pedder, 2011).

4.3.1 Characteristics of school as described by participants.

4.3.1.1 Innovative, cutting edge, highly regarded.

Several participants used the term “cutting edge” and described how different the school was from other places where they had worked, as noted in the section in the previous section. For example, Sheila commented that,

Coming here, it’s a world of a difference compared to what I left. Anything else, I’ve been to… [The biggest differences are with regards to] the organization of the curriculum. How the curriculum’s delivered. Looking back, [this school] has evolved quicker than the school that I had left in terms of their particular objective with whole school curriculum planning, and also whole school teaching.

Several other participants commented on how they had heard about the school from others before applying to a position.
It was recommended that I come here. The VP and someone at the field office that I had been working with through the TLCP process both said that what’s happening here is the cutting edge of everything, and if there’s anywhere you want to be it’s here… And it’s funny ‘cause I know some people are seeking out working here and trying to work here and I kind of stumbled into it, and I’m very happy that I did. [Zamina]

4.3.1.2 Busy.

Interestingly, many participants described the school as very busy, saying

“It’s very, very busy. I’ve been at other schools that are very busy as well. This one matches up” [Rebecca]. Often these comments were made in the context of articulating the greatest challenge they faced at the school. For example, Jason mentioned that “it’s very fast-paced, it’s very, very busy and sometimes in all the busyness there’s conflicts that arise”. This characterization of the busyness of the school as a challenge is important when examining the interaction between subsystems and the impact of school-level pressures and supports on teacher sense of efficacy and teacher learning as outline in the next chapter.

4.3.1.3 Learning focused.

Although collaboration can sometimes be narrowly defined as simply sharing resources or cooperating to complete a task, in this case, participants seem to have defined collaboration more broadly. This is reinforced by their characterizations of their school as an organization that is learning-focused. Kendra describes the school in the following way:

You know what? I think that the school motto “energy” actually describes everything that goes on here. It’s a school full of energy and the teachers have lots of energy…lots of learning opportunities…lots of new ideas. It’s a really good font of knowledge, you know, for you to experiment with things.
Sarah also describes the environment that nourishes and nurtures teacher learning:

We always say, “Just be the best you can be,” and it’s on all of our handouts or what have you. But I think that it’s a healthy kind of expectation where you know, we’re offered workshops and we’re offered articles to read, and we’re offered opportunities for getting involved in the school community or even outside of the school community, or team planning, and there’s so many opportunities for just pushing yourself.

Finally, many participants mentioned that being a teacher in the school would undoubtedly lead to improving one’s practice. Many respondents said, “you would not walk away from here without being a better teacher one way or the other” [Kendra]. One teacher who was not convinced that the school was the right fit for her when she first joined the staff said, 

Now I would say come to this school because you will be a better teacher in the first two months than you would anywhere else, working there for years. I feel like I’m a better person, a better teacher, a better mom, and a better spouse because of being here. [Amned]

These sentiments seem to point to a sense of collective efficacy in addition to an appreciation of the personal and professional growth that some participants saw as a result of the school’s qualities and characteristics.

4.3.2 Expectations the school has of its teachers from the teachers’ perspectives

As part of their general characterization of the school, teachers commented on the expectations and pressures they felt were being placed upon them by the administration or the general school environment. Two recurring themes emerged from these comments.

• High expectations of excellence.
4.3.2.1 High expectations of excellence.

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned the pressure that they placed on themselves to continue to grow and learn and improve as was seen in section 4.1. They also articulated external pressure coming from the school environment or the administration to achieve personal and professional excellence. For example, Sheila spoke about how the school philosophy affects her,

I think just because of the philosophy of being the best that you can be, just knowing that gives you a personal pressure. Okay, I’ve got to be the best; I want to be the best. Okay. Got to make sure my classroom looks good.

Sarah also mentioned the school philosophy when she noted that, “I feel as though there’s an expectation to be the best you can be. That is the motto here and that is sort of the saying that everyone follows, even the students”.

4.3.2.2 High expectations of time/commitment.

Many participants expanded on their characterization of the school as a busy place with comments related to the expectations and pressures they feel. For example, they stated that “it’s very fast-paced, demands are high, our expectations are high” [Jason]. Time and commitment expectations are related to both “extended academics as well as the extracurricular programs”, according to Rebecca who also notes, “there’s a lot going on but there’s no angst, or there doesn’t appear to be any angst about it and everybody is
pretty cool and knew what they signed on for and…is involved and happy to keep going”.

Other participants, however, did convey some “angst” with the level of commitment. In terms of the time commitment that resulted from the expectations around curriculum planning and collaboration, Mariah commented,

It’s a shift to be a teacher here. Coming from an elementary school was a shift but I think the whole practice of the [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] is a different way of thinking. You really have to be prepared to embrace it and be involved in sometimes a very heavy amount of meetings, be able to keep on track and keep up with everything. It is a bit commitment. I know I came from a school where they had TLCPs to here. I mean it’s a similar type of focus, it’s just on a much, much bigger scale. So that was an adjustment when I first came.

Others focused on the expectations related to involvement in co-curricular activities. For example, Kendra noted,

I guess it’s really just time. You know? Time to be an all-around teacher, time to be in sports if that’s where your talent lies. Time to be in concerts, or in the arts program, or whatever. You know? You really have to give a lot of yourself as a teacher here…Because there’s so much happening here you actually kind of put pressure on yourself…it’s an unspoken kind of pressure I would say… But you know what? I think I would say most of it just revolves around all the activities and all the things that take place, and to do a good job of it.

Mariah echoed the references others had made to the school motto here also.

I feel that every year there’s an additional expectation placed upon us in the school….so I think the expectation is that you’re always doing your best and you’re involved in as much as you can be involved in. And you’re sharing all of you, not just as a teacher but for your extracurricular or kind of all different parts of you that you’re kind of sharing that with the kids. Time is a big one. The expectation of time and I think that sometimes becomes a challenge.

As in so many other characterizations of the school, some teachers identified this expectation to give of oneself outside of delivering the curriculum as both a challenge
and an opportunity or a reason that they enjoyed being at the school. Ashley told a story about her interview process that reflected this feeling.

At this school it has to be beyond the classroom. [The principal] doesn’t hire classroom teachers, he hires school teachers. And he says that all the time, so you have to put something forth outside of the classroom. He asks that in interviews. He says, “What else do you bring to the table?” basically. His very last question in interviews, and I’ll never forget this ‘cause I’ve never had a principal ask me this before. “Besides teaching, what passions do you have?” …I asked him about that once. “Why do you ask that?” And he said, “It’s because if you can’t answer that and teaching is your life I don’t want you around. I want to know that you have interests and hobbies and you will share your passions with your students outside of the classroom.” So, that was kind of interesting. That kind of intrigued me and it made me think, “Oh yeah, [I] want to work here” because that year I did actually have another job offer and I chose this school because of that kind of feeling I got, I guess, from the interview that this was more than just a classroom job. It was a whole school job.

4.3.2.3 Expectations and pressures related to Grade 6 EQAO testing.

One of the most surprising findings for me was related to participants’ responses regarding Grade 6 EQAO testing and the corresponding pressures they might feel. As part of my research design, I deliberately chose to interview Grade 6 teachers, thinking that as I investigated pressures and supports of an intentionally designed professional learning community, EQAO would inevitably be the source of some pressure. What I did not expect was the extent to which teachers did not feel pressured by EQAO at all, highlighted by the excerpts below.

As a classroom teacher in the past dealing with that, you just, pardon the phrase you have to suck it up. There’s really nothing you can do about it. You just have to work through it. [Rebecca]

It’s interesting ‘cause this is my first experience with it. It has affected the classroom because it’s taken up – I mean everything is incorporated…so everything to do with EQAO you’re already doing. But it’s just enforcing it even more and reviewing it even more…I think I’ve been comfortable with it to be honest. [Sarah]
Honestly EQAO doesn’t stress me out at all. [Amanda]

I don’t feel a lot of pressure working towards it. I feel like the test more or less reflects the curriculum. [Zamina]

I don’t look at the school results. I know we do well. I know reading has gone up. I know writing went up. I think math has been a focus this year, but again next year it’ll be reading again. It’ll just keep flopping back and forth so I don’t really take a lot of, um, interest in it. [Ashley]

Some teachers explained the lack of feeling pressured to the presence of a variety of support mechanisms including a culture of collaboration, professional learning opportunities for teachers and consistent messaging about the relationship between EQAO and the curriculum. For example, Rebecca said,

So, you know, that support mechanism that’s in place amongst the grade-level team just has to be so strong so that the new teachers coming in, who is their first time don’t go into panic mode, going oh my god. And that you realize some things are going to drop. They just have to. They just have to.

Mariah talked about the deliberate decisions about messaging around EQAO and how that may have worked to alleviate pressure.

One of the things that we really talked about with the grade six team this year was we need to – and I think it will be a focus, continue to be a focus for next year - is we need to make sure that this is not an add-on. That kids understand this is what we’re teaching, this is how we teach, this is creative and critical thinking; they’ve just called it EQAO. And that, you know, these are the types of questions you get, but we do them all year anyway.

Teachers who did articulate difficulties with EQAO referred to structural decisions related to scheduling and timelines resulting from the collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project as reasons that their students might not have been as prepared and, therefore, might not do as well on the standardized test. Kendra noted that:
With everything [going on], it is going to be difficult for the kids really to do well in EQAO. Right? Because once again it means that we haven’t done a good base program and, you know it’s all over the place, so sometimes that can be a real big challenge.

Julia pointed to the fact that disruptions to her class time signalled to her that preparation for EQAO was not an administrative priority and, therefore, she did not feel pressure related to preparing her students for the test.

I’m not fussed about it. It’s one of those where the school says they’re concerned about it and at the beginning of the year we had one meeting and we looked at last year’s results, but then they planned things that make it absolutely impossible … I think in two weeks I lost one class for five periods for a variety of different things that had nothing to do with curriculum. They had nothing to do with the curriculum that I teach them. So if you’re gonna keep doing that I will do my best to teach them, but I certainly didn’t review any concepts with them before EQAO. There was no time. So if it’s not a focus for you then I’ll just keep doing my best to teach them.

In this chapter, I have described the characteristics of teachers within this school, various collectives operating within the learning community and characteristics of the school itself. These findings paint a picture of a staff and an administration committed to continuous learning and personal and professional improvement. The next chapter outlines the impact of pressures and supports on the interactions between subsystems and how those interactions either support or undermine that commitment.
Chapter Five: Results of the Study – Reciprocal influences and impact between subsystems

Thus far, I have attempted to provide a thick description of each of the three subsystems within this case from the perspective of the teacher participants: (1) the individual teachers and their characteristics; (2) the characteristics of various collectives and learning communities within the school; and, (3) the characteristics of the school community. Studying these systems independently, however, gives rise to difficulties regarding generalizing conclusions about teachers’ learning. Opfer and Pedder (2011) remind us “elements of the system (both individual learners and other system elements) cannot be understood independently. Rather, the interactions of the elements give rise to emergent behaviours that would not arise through independence” (p. 381). The thick description of the case allows the reader to understand the highly contextualized environment in which teaching and learning are taking place but “although teaching and learning are contextualized, complexity theorists also believe it to be decontextualized—patterns can be generalized across highly contextualized instances” (Opfer and Peddar, 2011, p. 381). In order to draw out patterns, interactions related to reciprocal influence and impact between and across subsystems were analyzed and are reported in the following sections.

5.1 Reciprocal influences and impact between the teacher and the collective

The findings regarding the interrelationship between the subsystems of the individual teacher and the collective yielded interesting results related to two of the research questions.
• How is teacher sense of efficacy affected by the simultaneous pressures and supports that arise from an intentionally designed learning community within a climate of standardization and accountability?

• How do these pressures and supports affect teacher learning?

Several themes emerged from participant interviews. Within these themes, participants described interactions and drew connections between an individual teacher’s learning and sense of efficacy and the pressures and supports related to the collectives operating formally and informally within the school environment. These themes and their subthemes are detailed below.

5.1.1 Impact and value of the collective for individual teachers: collaboration as a source of support

This section focuses on collaboration and collaboratively made decisions as a source of support that enhances teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy. When discussing both formal and informal opportunities for collaboration that were present in the school, participants were very positive about the impact of collaboration. One mentioned, “for me it’s, it’s key in the sense that it allows me to see what’s going on” [Rebecca]. She expanded,

I like the work that’s been done here, that I’ve been lucky enough just to step into around the cross-curricular links and really all of the teachers working towards that common goal. It has really helped in building that team attitude because you’re all relying on each other and nobody can sort of sequester themselves off in a corner and just sort of run it alone. I love that.
In particular, teachers commented on the positive impact collaboration had on their teaching practice and their learning.

Because people are so open here and they’re so willing to give advice, you know? How about trying this? So I think it certainly informs how I teach and it improves my teaching strategies, improves what I do in the classroom, the impact I have on them. [Kendra]

Jason spoke about a sort of positive peer pressure that occurs in the school.

It’s one of those things where it’s like a snowball effect too where someone else is doing this and you think I should be doing that too and so it’s [a] very positive thing to be happening in the environment because then you think this person’s going that extra mile. How can I go that extra mile for somebody else or for that person? It can be a little bit contagious that way, which is really a nice environment to work in.

Teacher sense of efficacy was also positively impacted by collaboration. At a certain level, collaboration simply made meeting the high expectations of the school “doable”.

I think that in a school that is so busy it takes the edge off in the sense that someone else can help you prepare, and that’s a good thing, not a bad thing. It’s not like you’re not doing your job. You’re really just making use of everybody’s resources and everybody as a resource because we do all come with so many different things. I think that’s such a big part of it and it’s such a big part of making it doable for everybody. … I think the collaboration here really, really does make the difference and makes it doable. I think without that, the whole – the concept is great, but I think it would just fall flat because you’d have too many people running around with their heads cut off. [Rebecca]

Beyond facilitating the implementation of an ambitious school vision by ensuring a sense of teacher confidence with regards to implementing that vision, the level of collaboration also increased teachers’ sense that they were having a significant impact on student achievement.

It’s helped me ‘cause it helped me to refine some more of what I’ve been doing…. And it is meaningful because I’m helping not just my kids, I’m also assisting with the whole team of grade six. … I feel good knowing that I’m
impacting not just the kids in my class, but all the other kids in the school. [Sheila]

Amanda and Jason both noted that the environment empowered teachers to create their own opportunities to collaborate.

I think it’s easier to find collaborative groups of people to work with who have the same teaching philosophy and style that you do so you can feel like you have open dialogue. And it’s good to work with other people who don’t share the same ideas too, but you can choose to do that or you can choose to talk to somebody that you feel really comfortable with. [Amanda]

A teacher suggested this year that the grade six, seven, and eight math should meet and figure out what [the priorities are in each grade] – ’cause they know that everybody doesn’t teach everything….hearing that suggestion, it gets back to the collaborative…I mean she feels comfortable enough to suggest that and, you know, the team may look at that and will it be hard?…you bet. Trying to coordinate between three grades, right?...hard but worth it….That’s great about working here. [Jason]

Similarly, Sarah, a first year LTO, indicated that she had requested and received release time to collaborate with the French Immersion (F.I.) team which indicates her level of comfort with collaboration and her confidence about the importance of collaboration to administration.

But actually I have requested from admin that we have a release day. Or at least, you know, some kind of time for the F.I.s to get together to plan because all of that extra planning that we really do need to get done we don’t have any time to do, so we actually have been granted that this year. I’m really looking forward to it to help to plan for next year.

Sheila also pointed to a sense of freedom to choose not only with whom one would collaborate but also the extent to which that person’s ideas might be adopted by another teacher:

Not everybody’s going to teach the same way. There are times where we may collaborate and some people might go off and do something additional, or
something less, and that just depends on the kids that they have or just their teaching style. Maybe they just don’t, you know, want to teach that way.

That sentiment was echoed by Mariah who said,

I love it. I came from a school where I was kind of in a room on my own and now to come into a room that I’m sharing with five people it was an adjustment at the start - getting used to, you know, “Oh I have to work with all this noise?”…but no, for me it’s vital. Like I just – I love that sharing of information and figuring out what’s the best way to do something and just kind of getting all the ideas out there and, you know, we work as a very collaborative team, so we’re very lucky. We share a lot of information and we’ve really tried to streamline the processes this year to make sure that we all are starting at kind of same understanding and moving forward, in our own, but the same way.

Melanie also discussed the relationship between collaboration and autonomy to adapt ideas.

I think the collaboration that happens is incredible. I actually love working with my colleagues planning, throwing ideas out there, making things work….I think it’s important and I think that I learn better ideas or how to do something better for myself or within my classroom, especially this year ‘cause grade six was new to me, so collaborating with other people was very important for me. But I liked having the flexibility of taking someone’s idea…and making it fit my class, right? Or making it fit my style.

For many participants, the general appreciation for the collaborative environment extended beyond a recognition of its value with regards to their teaching practice to a sense of gratitude that the environment of collaboration contributed to their sense of belonging and reaffirmed their teacher identity. Amanda’s comments provided a wonderful analogy that was emblematic of the responses of a variety of participants.

I feel like a piece of the puzzle here. I don’t feel like a piece of a different puzzle. Like being jammed into a puzzle. I feel like a piece of the puzzle ‘cause I’m giving stuff and people are giving stuff to me. So I don’t feel….like I’m excluded or isolated, or I’m not involved in collaboration because I am. …And part of it is like provided for us in terms of staff meetings. Like here’s the environment, here are the steps to collaborate and then you’re given the freedom to do it. And then
outside of situations like that my teaching partners just take opportunities to collaborate so I feel like I’m getting it on all levels.

5.1.2 Fitting in to collaborative teams.

5.1.2.1 New community members.

The particular nature of formal collaborative structures at the school with regards to common planning across the grade level and across disciplines was experienced as a significant pressure or challenge as well as a source of support in the context of being new to the profession or new to the school community. Rebecca notes how this approach can support new teachers and ease their anxiety.

You just need to sort of worry about this and take this on, and these other pieces will come into place and will fold into the big picture – especially for new teachers….now they’re real lucky ‘cause there’s a lot of people on the grade six team that have the experience and can sort of go in with the very calm…we’ll make it out the other end. Don’t worry. The kids will be fine. We’ll be fine.

Zamina discusses her own experience as a teacher new to the school and the impact of finding out how much had been pre-planned by the team.

I came here [at] the beginning of second term, but the [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] and everything was laid out. There was really not a lot of room for addition in that sense. And that was fine because I was so new, I had really no idea what we were doing or where we were going anyway, so that was great. It was all kind of laid out and I appreciated that, and I know there’d been a lot of collaboration to make that happen.

Rebecca uses a wonderful analogy that captures both the support provided by the collaborative planning process but also the pressure to find one’s place within what seems, to an outsider, like a well-oiled machine.
As a new teacher to [this school]… the term is defined. It’s hard to figure out where you can sort of then pull into – it’s like pulling onto the 401, right? You’ve got to time it just right in rush hour or else…you’re going to get schmucked. [Laughs] by a Mack truck and not know what hit you. You have to sort of plan where that’s going to go and that can be tricky just because things are so involved and so engaged…to sort of make that manoeuvre as seamless as possible…has really been a challenge.

The same teacher discusses how the collaborative environment was also a source of support.

I was kind of lucky...lucky in the sense that because I was teaching all three grade levels, I had an ear into what was going on at all three grade levels so there were multiple levels at which I could sort of veer into traffic, you know? At the same time sort of being a little bit under the radar so that if I choose to take the collectors instead it wasn’t really noticeable…so multiple grade levels allowed me that ability to sit back a little bit...at the same time you’re also expected to have your foot in in every grade level and to know what’s going on. So that did present a challenge just in terms of keeping on top of things and being able to figure out where things belonged. I found I really had to make decisions about where I was going to step in and where I was just going to sort of let it pass by and be on the sidelines and not try to get too deep into the organizational end of things...and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. There were a few balls that dropped, [Laughs] I’ll be quite honest….but it happens…but again, you’ve got enough people around that sort of pick up the slack and figure out where the holes and fix them, but it was a challenge that’s for sure. With so many links going on you really have to sort of take that bird’s eye view and go okay, I need to be over there. How am I gonna get there from here? And sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. Timelines are tight and there’s just no way around that. You just have to jump in with two feet and hope for the best [Laughs]. [Rebecca]

5.1.2.2 Taking leadership within the collective(s).

In addition to feeling empowered to take initiative within the collective as was noted in an earlier section of the findings, many participants discussed formal opportunities to take on a leadership role within various collectives within the school and the impact that leadership had on them or the impact they felt they had through that
leadership role on the collective. Sheila described one of those formal leadership roles and what it entailed.

Well I’m a team leader and since I’ve been here, I’ve been the Language Arts Social Studies coordinator, so I help coordinate the kinds of textbooks that we have, the kind of programming…I assist in determining what we’ll be studying for term one, or term two, or term three. I coordinate the writing of the report cards with the team…a lot of times I had a lot more experience teaching grade six, so I had that background knowledge to share and to kind of help to guide the team, so that’s been my role…so for me, collaboration is what I try to encourage [Laughs].

The adoption of the school-wide value of collaboration by teachers who take on leadership roles within the school was also evident in Mariah’s comments.

I was the lead teacher for the [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] for grade six and that was one of the things that we really wanted to focus on was that collaboration and communication. Like making sure there’s a consistent message to share to everybody, that if differentiation was happening or if modifications were being made that it was being shared so that everybody was sharing it and completing it in the same way. So, I think I’ve been fortunate that there has been a lot of collaboration.

5.1.3 Impact and value of the collective for individual teachers: collaboration as a source of pressure.

While teachers certainly identified collaboration within the collectives as a source of support, they also discussed it as a source of pressure.

5.1.3.1 Description of pressures.

Several teachers commented on the time pressures they experienced as a result of a highly planned curriculum process that required teachers to share limited resources and, therefore, ensure that they were meeting certain timelines so that other teachers could access those shared resources. For example, Jason noted that:
I would say sometimes where things start to break down in the collaborative area is expecting some basic things and then people don’t arrive or haven’t done those basic things…it’s a high-stress situation because you’re counting on other people to be at certain points and I think that’s the big thing at this school that makes it so challenging.

Rebecca’s comments explain the mechanics of this challenge further but adds that the level of cross-program discussion and planning mitigates the challenge:

That does add another stress, you know – grade sixes have to be done theirs by day X so that the grade sevens can get to the computers for day Y….and the eights can get there by day Z and we’re all done for the presentations. There’s no way around avoiding the stress of those sorts of timelines, but that being said…with all the communication that goes on and the sort of discussion and cross-planning, it works…it works…that’s a little less hairy.

In addition to the time pressures created by the highly structured, collaboratively planned curriculum delivered at the school, some teachers felt that, although they wanted to differentiate instruction and assessment for their students, there was little room to deviate from the plans made by the collective. It is interesting to note the contrast between the comments that follow and those noted in other parts of the findings from participants who actually felt the opposite – a real sense of autonomy and freedom to tweak ideas and choose the extent to which they would follow the collaboratively devised plan.

It’s very regimented what we do in [a particular collaboratively planned class]. There’s no kind of room for freedom or manipulating things to kind of fit your style, or to go with the flow… and then when you get [a lesson planned for that class] that’s kind of made for the mainstream, my students interpret it as lame or not challenging enough. But the expectation is that we all deliver it in the same way, and that I don’t like. I like to be able to adapt it and give the kids what they need, so I think that’s been one struggle I’ve had this year. [Ashley]

Melanie’s comments also indicated that she felt that it wasn’t acceptable to change a lesson that had been collaboratively planned or decided upon. She said, “I almost felt like I wasn’t allowed to change things, but I did, and I had to so that my kids would get the
best out of it.” Jason recognized this feeling in his comments and describes it as follows, offering something of a potential explanation:

So because you have classes all trying to complete things, and one thing sets up the next thing, sets up the next thing – but not all classes are created equal, right? And I think that sometimes teachers are just cramming stuff down their throat as opposed to maybe giving that class a break, cutting stuff out because I think maybe they feel that, no, this is what has to be done, so it has to be done. It can’t modify it or change it, but meanwhile they can. You know what I mean? They can do that, but I just don’t think that we’re there to that comfort.

### 5.1.3.2 Impact of pressures of collectively made decisions on individual teachers.

Teachers described ways in which they experienced a negative impact as a result of collectively made decisions using words and phrases such as “negative stress”, “anxiety” and “burned out”. Jason described his observations on the impact of this pressure that arises from the tight timelines and target dates required as a result of the collaboratively planned curriculum in the face of limited resources.

It starts a lot of negative stress and negative anxiety that gets a snowball effect… and I notice it more here and I’ve been here for two years,…teachers are burned out by early May…I’ve only been at two schools but I’ve taught for seven years and…[at] my previous school, which in terms of curriculum planning was nowhere near what this school is, you would see that would see that kind of [burn out] come June…but [here], early May I notice it. Early May, which is like four weeks earlier.

Similarly, Melanie discusses how she felt when what seemed like a visionary and innovative approach to collaboratively planning didn’t work.

The [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] I feel is pressure - but the thing is, it’s teachers who planned it. Like we sat together and we planned it, but when we tried to implement it just fell apart. It didn’t work. But I feel like many of us felt a lot of pressure to try to
get this finished…and it turned into something – it turned from a great idea to a very stressful process to actually go through…I mean I can’t blame anybody ‘cause we planned it and we thought that it would work out fine. But it didn’t. And it became a pressure. It became stressful.

5.1.4 Uneven collaboration.

Although participants were very positive about the impact and value of the intentionally designed collaborative environment at the school, there were several comments about the uneven nature of collaboration and how that negatively impacted their sense of efficacy or their learning. Zamina mentioned that “we collaborate a lot about the [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project]. I would say we spend less time on subject-related stuff”. She expanded on what this meant for her:

I did find when I arrived here, in my three sections – no one knew where they were in math and so I said, “Well where are the long-range plans?” And I think someone said “There aren’t long-range plans. Each teacher has their own and they go in their own direction,” which was different from where I’d come from where we sat down in August, made consistent long-range plans. So I would say the collaboration around the [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] is high. But then around subject-specific I would say it’s probably a little bit lower or less than I was used to.

There were also comments about teachers’ varying willingness to collaborate with the participants. For example, Mariah, a resource teacher comments on the different ways she works with teachers. She stated,

I work with the ten teachers at the grade six level…through the course of different parts of the year I have met and worked with all of them at different points. I think it really depends on the vision that the teacher has for their classroom as well…there are certain teachers that I’ve worked with where I’m more of a resource or a support to them. You know, “Can you help me with this, do you know how I could organize this?” And it’s more on a discussion and a planning level. And then there’s other teachers where my role kind of changes and develops with the different needs of the groups of students, so sometimes it’s very
hands-on...and then other times it’s as a resource to the teacher to help her implement and differentiate the programming and that’s kind of happened on different levels through the course of the year and I think it’s also partially to do with the teachers’ comfort level with different things too.

Although variance in comfort and willingness to engage in collaboration is expected in any school, in this case, the overwhelmingly positive response to the value of collaboration signalled that the discontent with uneven collaboration merited further investigation. Further analysis revealed that this discontent was connected to administrative decisions that some teachers felt undermined the stated goal of collaboration. This tension will be explored in the following section that describes and analyses the interactions between the two subsystems of the collectives within the school and the school itself.

5.2 Reciprocal influences and impact between the collective and the school

The findings categorized under this heading and the next shed light on the research questions of this study. In their responses, participants spoke frankly and passionately about both the positive impact of pressure and support to collaborate, as has been discussed in earlier sections, and the negative impact of various pressures and supports on their sense of efficacy and their learning. In the following two sections, participants’ responses identify the various elements of formal and informal structures and systems that administration has built in to the intentional design of this learning community and how those elements affect them and the learning community as a whole. Their responses are clustered under two main themes; time for collaboration and ideas for improvement.
5.2.1 Time for collaboration.

5.2.1.1 Subject specific planning time.

It has already been reported in this chapter that teachers believe that uneven collaboration within the school is problematic and undermined both their sense of individual and collective efficacy. Some teachers attributed the uneven collaboration to uneven allotment of time to address subject-specific planning. For example, Sarah said,

On one side if you’re to look at the grade six team as a whole I think that we collaborate a great deal and I think we get a lot done, and we can plan and we can work with each other quite well. But then on the other side when you take out just the French Immersion I find it extremely challenging because when you have the language portion of it, it changes a lot. Say we talk about language in English we can cover certain aspects, but then there’s a whole other layer that can’t really be discussed. So I have found that difficult.

5.2.1.2 Job embedded time needed.

Related to the need for more even distribution of time between cross-curricular collaborative teams and subject-specific collaborative teams was an indication that meeting times outside of the school day were becoming overwhelming, even though there was a clear desire to meet.

I have found that very hard because if we do need to meet, it’s kind of on top of what we’ve already met about and it’s on top of all of the other meetings and so it’s hard because of time restrictions and even just the way I guess we plan as well – it’s not as effective as the whole team and how everyone is on the same page. [Sarah]

As evident in this quote, there seems to be a connection in teachers’ minds between where time is allotted by administration and what is valued by administration that recurred at various points in the interviews.
5.2.1.3 Small teams and the problem of turnover.

Several teachers commented on the difficulty of collaborating when the teams were small and there was a high degree of turnover. Julia complained:

I would say the grade six math and science team – we’ve never really had one in the sense that there’s been me and another teacher [who] as a general rule likes to do her own thing. There’s never really been anyone else. Like it’s always an LTO or the other grade six math position keeps – there’ll be like three people in it for the year….it’s hard to co-plan too much in that you don’t have teaching partners.

Sarah experienced a similar feeling in her position, teaching French Immersion:

So then that only leaves two people to plan for the F.I. grade sixes, and I found that very challenging if one person can’t meet, or if one person isn’t covering the same thing at the same time, or if one person’s behind.

Ashley also commented on the challenges of a changing roster of staff members in terms of collaborating within the collectives.

And I think the other thing is just the team being together for a whole year. We do have a young staff. We’ve had a lot of turnover… The year before I came the grade six staff at the beginning of the year to the end of the year was, like not one person was the same. There were maternity leaves, there was LTOs, there was nobody who was consistent the whole year long and last year they did have that.

5.2.1.4 Decisions about the use of support staff.

Teachers made many comments either directly or indirectly about the administration’s use of support staff time. When talking about support staff, they were referring to resource teachers whose job they understood to be supporting students with high needs in their classrooms. Julia commented that, although the support staff are “all very, very nice people [and] would do their best, their job really has not been to support. They’ve been pulled off for things and they have no control over that at all”. When asked to explain, she provided the following example:
One of the people that was linked to my class is in charge of the technology component of [the collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project]. So for a lot of the year he’s working with the kids on [that project] which is fantastic, he does a fantastic job with it. It just means that the kids that need math support in grade six don’t get it…they might be writing IEPs, which is cool. Sometimes he’ll be planning fundraisers or assemblies, or just doing whatever admin needs him to do.

Ashley echoed these sentiments:

To get the whole team onboard is really hard and to get the support team onboard as well is really hard….I guess time is an issue that we just don’t have that time for that support anymore….‘cause I think there are a lot of interruptions and support staff get pulled to do those kinds of extracurricular kinds of things that normally teachers would volunteer to do after school or whatever….I guess if the students were kind of put first – I mean I understand we want to do an assembly, we want to do a showcase, we want to show parents what we’re doing, but they have to come first you know? And so I struggle with that.

5.2.2 Ideas for improvement.

Embedded in teachers’ responses were many ideas for improvement. Interestingly, these ideas centred on potential administrative actions regarding either formal or informal systems or structures to encourage and facilitate collaboration within and across collectives. Teachers expressed a real desire to collaborate with others in areas where they now identify that little collaboration is happening. For example, Julia says,

I would love to be able to sit down with especially the MST team to start with. And I would love to chat with the grade sevens and find out where are their weaknesses, what are you finding? We don’t have time to teach the whole curriculum, so what should we focus on and what will you focus on so they at least get it? I wish we could do that.

Julia also voiced an idea about creative ways to find time within the school day for subject specific teams to collaborate.
I would love if staff meetings along with covering business or along with sometimes for professional development, it would be great if we could use those to actually talk about what the day to day challenges are and do some planning in them. Or frequently they’ll bring in arts or drama presentations [for students] to talk about character development. If the grade sixes went down into the gym and were seeing a presentation, or if the guidance department had programmed something or planned something then while they were down there…there’s not that many of them. We can have a few supervisors and then some grade six teachers could plan for the period….so the way I see it happening is it’s got to be within the school time when people are still here because the current method is to in your grade level meetings on whatever Wednesday of the month, but between the creativity showcase practice and softball practice, and cross-country practice and your kids, and your family it, it just doesn’t happen. So those are just a couple of suggestions for what could theoretically happen.

Ashley’s suggestion also addressed less formal mechanisms for collaboration that might be facilitated by administrative decisions about time allotment and scheduling.

Honestly I’m going to go back to time. We don’t have time to sit down on a regular basis and plan. I’ll tell you one thing that would really change things here at [this school]. Common planning times. I’ve had that at other schools and I will give up a planning time of my own to sit and meet with people because you learn so much that way. But if you don’t have a common planning time you’re doing things in isolation even though you have once a month after school meetings, you know?

She notes how this informal structure that would allow for meaningful, more frequent collaboration might mitigate tensions that currently appear within the time allotted for more formal collaboration.

So if we could have a common planning time where we do get to meet and collaborate I think it would reduce those kinds of tensions when we have the teacher moderation and people go well this is already done. I did it wrong, or I didn’t do it right, you know? How did you differentiate? Like that’s a huge discussion we have during teacher moderation, but it’s too late.

Her suggestion reinforces the emerging key conclusion that it is vitally important for administrators making decisions regarding an intentionally designed learning community
to attend to both informal and formal structures and how they work in concert to support or unintentionally undermine school goals.

Jason, one of the resource teachers who recognized and shared the concern that his time is split between supporting high needs students and supporting whole school initiatives, suggested an administrative decision to restructure the time of resource teachers to address this concern; that it might work for there to be more collaboration or job sharing among resource teachers, shifting the workload to fill gaps so students don’t fall through the cracks.

Right now we have four ISSP [in-school support provider] teachers so one dedicated to each grade and they mostly do LASS [language arts and social studies] support, and then I do the math support. So an idea would be that their schedules change and support the math when I’m not able to.

5.3 Reciprocal influences and impact between the school and the teacher

The final pair of subsystems to be analyzed is the school and the individual teacher. When participants’ responses were grouped according to what they revealed about the impact of interactions between the school level operation and teachers on individual teachers’ sense of efficacy and teacher learning, the analysis unearthed some important findings. It seems that administrative decisions about both formal and informal structures and systems within an intentionally designed learning community can have both positive and negative impact on teacher’s sense of efficacy and teacher learning. Participant reports of those impacts are explored below.
5.3.1 Administrative decisions that negatively impact teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy.

5.3.1.1 Impact of disruptions.

The issue of disruptions to time spent in class was mentioned several times by teachers. Sheila describes the problem.

Getting the time to really have the kids to teach them. Yes, we do have longer periods and longer time within the periods, but some of the times...the kids are taken out...the kids as well are also involved in a lot of activities. They’re in band, they’re in sports, they’re in an assembly, they’re in the musical – so you lose your kids because not only do we offer all these activities, but the kids are so involved that sometimes you’ll have half your class...so that’s, that’s my biggest challenge.

Kendra elaborates on the impact these interruptions have on her.

The most challenging is time. Because there’s so many ideas here, I think sometimes you have to revisit ideas constantly and see – make sure that you don’t have too many ideas and you’re not going into many directions, thinking that you’re going in one direction, you know what I mean? So that is it. So I think really it’s just time and to fit in all the ideas at once....but I think they’re just lots of impromptu things to be honest.

The problem of unplanned interruptions is echoed by Sheila.

Well, [Breathes out] I’m a very calm person, very cool. I try to be anyways...and I try to be organized enough to say, okay, I know what we need to know by when. This is what we need to get done. When we have some unexpected time where the kids aren’t in the classroom, that’s when it becomes strenuous.

Administrative decisions to interrupt classroom time was seen as a barrier to teachers doing their best and also as a reflection of the administration’s belief about the value of teacher work. Melanie notes that,

I feel like the amount of disruptions in my classroom is a huge issue for me and that’s where I feel disrespected the most as a teacher. Because I feel like my job
isn’t almost taken seriously and that it’s okay to pull kids away from me when I’m trying to prepare them.

5.3.1.2 Impact of administrative decisions regarding scheduling.

Several teachers were unhappy with the relative time allotted to different subject areas within the schedule, saying, for example, “I feel the timing is an issue, right? So the amount of time that is given or allotted for – I’m going to speak to MST - is not enough” [Melanie]. However, in addition to this general complaint, teachers made direct connections between time allotted for certain subjects in terms of scheduling and what they believed that said about how much the administration valued those subjects. Ashley explained the issue from her perspective.

There’s a lot of focus put here on drama and arts and that’s because [the principal] is, you know, drama and arts. And I know principals carry their personality and they bring it into the school. I’ve seen that before. But I kind of feel like other things take a backseat to that. You know. I’ll give you an example. We have an amazing phys ed program, amazing music program, but the maths aren’t valued here…as much as they should be. You know?

Interestingly, Rebecca who is an arts teacher had a similar concern about scheduling.

So you talk about pressures, right? I only see [the students] once a cycle and yet I have to get marks for them and I have to be able to evaluate them. So even in those subjects where you don’t want there to be pressure, all of a sudden there’s built-in pressure for the kids, and…it’s a real struggle to maintain that connection and that sense of worth when you’re fighting timelines….just in terms of the scheduling.

Furthermore, some participants expressed feelings that indicated that the administrative decisions regarding scheduling directly impacted their sense of efficacy. Zamina spoke of what she seemed to think were unfair choices.

Definitely the most challenging is the time. I like the idea of spending more time with the students on something, but when I only get one MST a day, I basically
feel like I have to make the choice between our doing math or science, and I feel like in the beginning of the second [collaboratively planned cross-curricular unit] the math got put aside a lot ‘cause it was a lot of upfront science that needed to happen so all of the other things could start to happen.

Julia felt that the scheduling directly affected her ability to support her students.

Honestly we have very little time for math. In a six day cycle, we have seven periods for math and science, which is not a ton….I know that I’ve made a couple of them not feel as bad about science, bad about math, and I feel like I’ve let them know that they can be successful and so they don’t necessarily come in hating math. So in that I feel like I’ve been a success….how much they’ve learned? How much they’ve grown? I don’t feel like much of a success. I feel like I know what I could have done had I been able to work with them. Or if I had been a support teacher….I find that they really need it differentiated and they need support. Differentiation without support for them is – I don’t know how to frame it so it does any good for them….I just think they could be doing way better in a different system somehow.

5.3.1.3 Feelings of having limited voice in decision making and limited respect for contribution.

I feel like the collaboration when it comes to bigger decisions isn’t there. Like my voice isn’t heard. So when it’s with my own team we all have a voice, but I feel like when it’s the whole school I feel like I don’t have a voice…because I feel like maybe I’m a bit scared to say something because I don’t know the reaction I’m going to cause. [Melanie]

Several teachers mentioned the contrast between the level of input and collaboration with colleagues versus the level of input or voice in school-wide decision-making, illustrated in the quote above. Melanie expands on the frustration she voices above with the following example:

I feel that the amount of disruptions that happen here are a problem. And if I was to voice that or even try to voice that I almost feel scared to say something. Just because I don’t know how it’ll be perceived. But I know that it’s an issue for me and my students.
Julia identifies particular types of administrative responses that she believes contribute to the feeling of disempowerment amongst staff members. She feels that the culture created by these responses undermines the stated goals of collaboration and the vision of a collaborative environment.

Okay. I feel the pressures placed upon us are to do what we’re told to do by the admin regardless of the sense that it makes or the reasonableness, whether or not it’s even possible....but if you don’t agree you get shot down in a way that I would never talk to anybody. So the pressures that I feel are that if you actually share what you’ve noticed or the problems you’re facing not in a way of bitching. We’re not bitching about the problems, we’re just saying here are the problems, what can we do about them? But if you express the problems then we were actually told, “Well that’s bad teaching”…and in some cases maybe it is bad teaching, but you don’t say that. So I feel like a lot of pressure comes from admin to do what we’re told to do regardless of the personal makeup of my class, whether or not it makes sense for my class, how much time I actually have with them, and the math and science curriculum is heavy. And I know there’s no curriculum police, but I actually feel like the curriculum’s important...and for all the talk of collaboration – still you’re told what to do, we’ve decided this is what you should do, which is really tricky. It’s very negative.

Zamina points to a different example but refers to the same feeling of being left out of crucial decision making, this time in the context of disciplinary issues in her classroom. She seems to feel that she does not have legitimate authority to make decisions (Barth, 1990).

This is the only place I’ve ever worked where if there is a discipline problem I’m not involved....if there’s an actual discipline problem and someone leaves the room because it’s elevated to a place where it feels unsafe for the other kids, and then it goes to the office, it doesn’t come back to us in any way. We’re not part of the solution. And if I ask what happened, it’s just, “Oh, we solved it,” which I find a little difficult because I don’t even think it’s just my experience. I think it’s more part of my belief system that if we’re all in this together and we’re all moving forward together, then we all need to be aware of how it was solved, and what the plan is, and what the next steps are. And so I feel that’s a little bit disconnected here...so that’s one of those things that I’m not following the rules necessarily; I’m just keeping things in my room a lot more because I feel like if there’s a solution I want to be a part of it.
Where Melanie and Julia identified a lack of comfort with voicing a contrary opinion that might result from administrative responses to dissent or a general culture of expected compliance, Ashley posits that the issue may be the lack of an effective structure for concerns to be conveyed:

I find a lot of decisions are kind of top-heavy. They come down the line as opposed to we make it as a team and then it goes up the line because if that was the way then I guess that our concerns would be heard and sometimes our concerns aren’t heard because maybe it just gets diluted going up there, you know? It’s sometimes hard, [the principal’s] so busy. Sometimes it’s hard to just get an ear and for him to listen. So I think that part has been hard, is the communication that way.

The impact on teachers who voiced this concern seems to go beyond simply feeling disempowerment to a deep sense of hurt and of being devalued. Melanie says that when “something’s imposed on me as a professional that I, at times feel very broken or maybe even disrespected” [Melanie] and that,

I’m tired of not being treated like a professional. And that’s because I don’t have children, because I don’t have thirty years experience, I have no idea what I’m doing. And I’ll be the first one [to admit], I’ve got tons to learn. I would love to learn and hear what you’re doing and read what you’re saying, and I love you coming in for PD. Love it. Learn from it. I just don’t think I come to the table completely empty-handed. [Julia]

5.3.1.4 Administrative decisions that inhibit individual professional growth and capacity building.

Related to teacher concern that their voices were not heard seemed to be a feeling that there were limited structural opportunities for leadership. Participants commented on the lack of leadership opportunities and the relatively small core group of teachers whom the administration counted on for a variety of things. Mariah, for instance, had been on
leadership teams in a previous school and felt that administrative decisions around leadership did not allow her to take on similar roles at this school.

The challenge for me has been the school’s organized very differently than any other school I’ve worked at...my previous school we had leadership teams and you were involved in some more of the school success planning and that type of thing. Whereas that part’s not as – it’s just it’s organized very differently. So kind of coming from a school where for three years I’ve been part of the leadership team, part of the school success planning, involved at the field office with the leadership to come here – that’s been the challenge to kind of figure out where do I fit in and what’s my role – so that’s been a challenge...I think there are certain people who are in certain roles and that’s just kind of how it is.

Ashley also mentioned teacher capacity and the limited opportunities for teachers outside a “core group”.

I’ve talked with [the principal] about this before. He has a core group of teachers he gets to do a lot of stuff...I don’t think he’s realized that because he always goes back to depending on that core group of people, he hasn’t built that teacher capacity that he could. You know? There are things about me he doesn’t know, there’s things about other people he doesn’t know...and I guess [because of the principal’s] familiarity with that core group, he knows things are going to run fine. But, for example, when there’s an event where they had to be away and another teacher filled in and ran an event and he was really surprised how well it ran. And I was like yes, that’s it, now he’s got it. Now he can see other people have amazing abilities [but] he’s still going back. Next year it will be interesting because a lot of that core group will be leaving and he’ll have to depend on other people. And he’ll see oh my gosh, this is an amazing staff when it comes to talent and he’ll see that that’s there and hopefully he’ll go to that. That’s, that’s my feeling. Because that core group also feels very stressed that there’s a lot coming from them and that other people who try to get in and do stuff, they kind of feel, I guess not rejected but kind of like snubbed, you know, that they don’t get that opportunity. And so for me teacher capacity’s huge.

Jason also spoke of the concern that structures had not been put in place to mitigate the impact of possible gaps in leadership when turnover happens.

A turnover seems to be happening this year, so I’m curious to see how things will pan out over the next few years. ‘Cause there’s been some people who have a lot of responsibilities in this school and so when they leave you wonder, you know,
what’s going to fall off, what’s going to get filled by other people, or what’s new that’s going to come in.

5.3.2 Administrative decisions that positively impact teacher learning and sense of efficacy.

5.3.2.1 Sense of autonomy.

Several teachers spoke of the sense of autonomy or freedom they felt to experiment and take initiative in terms of their teaching practice without pressure to conform from administration. As Sheila said, “nobody really comes and says, ‘what’s the grade six team doing this year?’ Like, we don’t have that. And I think in other schools they probably do, I don’t know”. She expanded by providing an example,

There’s no [name of school] police coming around and, and saying, “Oh, take that down. Or you should be working on this text form by now.” You know, that’s not there. I kind of encourage it in my team ‘cause I know what our school goals are.

Similarly, Kendra, another experienced teacher, appreciated that she is “given the chance to do lots of new things without the pressure from admin to interrupt or interfere, although admin does have their own agenda”.

5.3.2.2 Culture of understanding, flexibility and patience regarding the imperfect implementation of collective goals.

Although teachers were keenly aware of the emphasis the administration placed on collaboration for the purpose of creating and implementing a particular approach, and while they felt pressures resulting from their own collaborative planning and the accompanying timelines, they also seemed to feel a sense of permission from the
administration that their efforts did not have to be perfect. Several teachers spoke of the
ability to revisit planning and recognize what didn’t work without feeling pressure to be
“perfect”. Jason, a mid-year teacher who is fairly new to the school said,

Like I’m only in my second year and wouldn’t say I grasp it a hundred percent…I get it, but, you know, you’ve got to digest it, you’ve got to translate it. We’re still
in the developing stages for some things. We’re still in the stages where we’re
trying new stuff and when new stuff fails, you get those kneejerk reactions of
“This is terrible, or this is stupid” right?…I feel like it’s a natural progression, that
this is a stage….like when you’re on the cutting edge there’s going to be high
stress, there’s going to be lots of failures, there’s going to be lots of successes and
you’ve gotta just sort of, you know, work your way through them. And you get
those ups and downs and through it all is the stress level that’s happening and…I
would expect that as the planning of it gets neatened up more and as teachers start
to give themselves a break and say like it’s okay.

Rebecca echoed that sentiment.

In terms of the school, I don’t find there are a lot of pressures other than just
timelines. There’s a lot being crammed in and I guess the whole [cross-curricular
collaborative planning process] is being finessed and it’s an evolving process.
And getting in at the end of this year now into that coordinating role has allowed
me to sort of see where everyone is and get involved in those conversations about
how can we, you know, mould and shape it so that the quality’s still there with
less pressure and figure out where those pressure points are for other people as
well. And can they be alleviated in any way and still maintain the program ‘cause
it’s obviously a valuable program. But other than that I don’t really
find any major pressures at the school. I think it’s a very relaxed building.

5.3.2.3 Deliberate efforts to build community.

School administrators seem to have made deliberate efforts to continuously build
community. Participants noted that these attempts have been important to increasing their
sense of belonging and to “buy in” to the culture of collaboration. Amanda noted that,

When I first started teaching here I was very intimidated because a lot of teachers
came from the same school. So [the principal] came from another school and he
brought some teachers with him. So there were already established working
relationships. So I felt really intimidated and I felt a bit like an outsider. And it
probably lasted pretty much the whole year, but there are lots of ongoing activities
to make people feel included. Like the staff meetings are always about people interacting and not just listening…and then the next year some people left and then new people came, and so the staff got a little bigger and so we were still doing all those getting to know you activities because the school was still new. So there was lots of opportunity to get to know people socially and co-worker to co-worker. And to be stimulated, but again you have to be interested in the direction that the school’s going. So it was better the second year.

5.3.2.4 Pressure to buy in to school’s philosophy.

One teacher in particular, while confirming what others had said about the pressure to buy in to collective goals, felt less that it was an issue of squashing dissent and more that it was a necessary step in creating a coherent and shared vision and approach. She uses a wonderful analogy to describe the impact this has had on her.

So in the beginning it was really intimidating, but the environment was conducive to being a part of a team. If you kind of clicked with everybody I think like everyone was pointing in the same direction, but then you would have some people not going in that direction and kind of resisting the direction… So there was always, like, a pull and a push feel. If you bought into the philosophy then you were swimming upstream with everybody else. But if you didn’t, then I think it was difficult for those people to kind of, I don’t know, feel included….The school-specific pressures are like towing the line. Like this is our direction. If you don’t go there you’re not going to have an easy time…. I totally agree with the direction though. Like it’s made me a better thinker, it’s made me a better teacher. It’s been difficult, but I’m on the wave. Like I’m surfing it. But I’ve seen people who can’t and don’t believe in it and there’s that pressure because I feel like they kind of are isolated a little bit and then they end up leaving… So that’s school-specific pressures. Like the pressure is to follow the school philosophy. But I understand why that is because you have to have a foundation; you can’t be doing all kinds of different things because then how do you know its working and what isn’t? So I see the importance of a consistent style and a consistent philosophy for everyone because it’s better for the students, and then it’s better for the data because you know it’s authentic. So I was surfing the wave…And I’m happy to be on the surfboard…Sometimes I don’t agree with my surfing instructors…but I’m still on the surfboard. [Amanda]
Chapter Six: Discussion

In this final chapter, I first review the purpose of the study and then discuss each of these conclusions in relation to the findings of this case study and also in relation to the research literature outlined in the literature review. Through this discussion, I will suggest implications for practice and for further research. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and offer some final thoughts.

6.1 Revisiting the purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to examine and explore the relationships between teacher learning, teacher sense of efficacy and the pressures and supports of an intentionally designed learning community. I deliberately chose to interview Grade 6 teachers in order to investigate the perspectives of teachers who were facing the additional pressure of standardization and accountability arising from Grade 6 EQAO testing. The school chosen for this case study was a fairly new school, opened as an intentionally designed learning community with a clear school vision. The principal and his administrative team implemented a number of formal structures to shape teacher collaboration including mandatory team meetings. The mandatory team meetings were focused on the planning and implementation of a cross-curricular integrated grade wide culminating activity connected to curriculum expectations across multiple disciplines and meant to serve as a catalyst for teacher collaboration and also a concrete mechanism to apply teacher learning regarding school-wide goals and professional learning around critical thinking, creative thinking and teaching the whole child. In addition, teachers
engaged in professional learning at staff meetings and professional development directly related to the school’s vision and goals.

As an external provider of professional learning and a colleague who had worked in a consulting role with teachers and administrators in the school, my initial impression was that this was a school with a thriving and robust learning community, I knew it was evolving and imperfect, but that somehow the administration had achieved the balance of pressure and support that was necessary to sustain a high level of learning and collaboration even in the face of increasing pressure from the school board to attend to scores on provincial assessments, to standardize professional learning mechanisms and to adopt accountability measures to those ends. I sought to understand the impact of administrative decisions on teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy from the teachers’ perspectives. Teachers were asked to respond to questions that sought their perspectives on and experiences of the collaborative environment within the school, the impact of collaboration on them, the pressures they felt as teachers in the school and their own sense of efficacy. Although the interview data confirmed many of my original impressions, several unexpected findings emerged that revealed important nuances that challenged my assumptions and beliefs and shed light on a variety of areas in the literature regarding teacher learning and sense of efficacy within the context of intentionally designed learning communities. I believe that through this study important issues have been unearthed and conclusions clarified that present significant implications for both future research and practice.

6.2 Revisiting the findings and drawing conclusions
Overall, the findings indicated that when the principal put various structures in place to apply pressure and provide support mechanisms in order to move the school vision forward, teachers’ reactions to those structures did not always align with administrative intentions. The terms “pressure” and “support” may seem to imply an inherent value judgement with pressure being seen as negative and support being seen as positive – perhaps the proverbial carrot and stick approach but refined for 21st century sensibilities. Nonetheless, the findings from this study suggest that teachers’ perception of pressure and support mechanisms, the value they ascribe to each and whether they see each as a positive or negative force in terms of their professional learning and their sense of individual and collective efficacy, is influenced by the complete picture of the formal and informal structures put in place by school leadership and the interplay and coherence of those structures. In keeping with complex systems theory (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), the subsystems of a school system [the individual teacher, collectives and school within the broader social and political context] are interdependent and mutually influential. Furthermore, I believe this case study has helped clarify some of the particular ways in which they are interdependent and reciprocally influential. I would suggest that just as a relationship of interdependence exists among these subsystems, similarly an important interdependence exists among the formal and informal structures in an intentionally designed learning community and that it is crucial for administrators to attend to the interplay of these structures as they consider how to support and nurture teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy.
The findings suggest three implications with regards to this case and that these implications may “speak to or help form a judgment about other situations” (Schofield, 2002, p. 179) where principals intend to implement formal and informal structures to establish, develop and nurture a learning community within the school.

1. The presence of pressure and support mechanisms is not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community. Teachers’ experiences of pressures and supports are variable and influenced by teacher sense of efficacy and by administrative decisions about the implementation of those pressures and support mechanisms.

2. A balance of pressure and support is not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community. Rather, a coherent and balanced system of formal and informal structures of pressure and support seems important to support teacher learning.

3. Open communication channels are not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community. Structures, mechanisms and culture must facilitate transfer of learning in meaningful ways between subsystems in order to support teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy. These implications are further elaborated below.

6.2.1 The presence of pressure and support mechanisms is not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community.
The findings suggest that teachers’ experiences of external pressures and supports and whether they were beneficial or detrimental to their learning and sense of individual and collective efficacy are variable. More specifically, those experiences are influenced by teacher sense of efficacy and by administrative decisions about the way those pressures and support mechanisms are implemented. Although the presence of a balance of support and pressure mechanisms is an indicator to an outside observer that a learning community exists within an organization (Clausen et al., 2009; Fullan, 1992), the findings indicate that the way those pressures and supports are conceived of and implemented by administration and their resulting impact on the learning community requires careful thought. Three examples are provided to illustrate this conclusion.

First, teachers did not experience EQAO as a source of pressure as a result of administrative decisions about messaging and school focus. As noted in the literature review, the research on pressures related to standardization and accountability and the impact of those pressures on innovative schools has found that standardized reform undermined cross-curricular, interdisciplinary efforts at innovation (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006) and slowed down the work of the community of practice (Printy, 2008). In this case, however, an innovative school operating as an intentionally designed learning community, teachers reported feeling little or no pressure related to Grade 6 EQAO testing. In my experience as a consultant working with schools in several boards in Southern Ontario, teachers’ sense of pressure related to preparing their students for EQAO testing at the Grade 3 and 6 levels, which, from their perspective, interferes with their ability to deliver a rich and responsive curriculum. That did not seem to be the case for the teachers I interviewed for this study. As was seen in the findings, teachers’
reported not feeling stress related to EQAO and feeling like the school focus on critical thinking contributed to a strong base program that already prepared the students for the standardized assessment. They reported feeling like the EQAO simply reflected the curriculum and that as long as they were teaching “a good base program” [Kendra], the students would be prepared.

The findings suggest this lack of pressure from EQAO is a result of the way this particular structure was implemented in the school and related to administrative decisions with regards to this structure. These influencing factors included messaging by the principal, the administration and the grade level coordinators that reinforced that EQAO was “not an add-on” [Mariah] and decisions to highlight the professional learning around critical thinking as directly related to EQAO rather than engage in separate sessions for teachers and/or students that were focused on responding to EQAO test questions. This is one example that illustrates that it is not enough for administrators of intentionally designed learning communities to simply ensure that a particular pressure or support mechanism is present but rather that the way that particular mechanism is implemented and addressed makes a world of difference to how it is experienced by teachers.

Second, the collaboratively planned integrated cross-curricular grade-wide project is a source of both positively and negatively experienced pressure as a result of administrative decisions regarding design and implementation. The inaugural principal conceived of a designed learning community amongst staff driven by a unique vehicle for both teacher and student learning. Although the concept has grown since the school’s opening to include a wide-ranging list of elements, fundamentally this vehicle for student and teacher learning is anchored by cross-curricular, integrated culminating assessment
tasks that all students in a particular grade work towards, grounded in critical and creative thinking.

This structural element introduced by the administration had the potential of being experienced as either pressure or support by teachers. During the interviews, teachers made many references to both the value of the project itself and the value of the collaboration required and made possible by it. As reported in the findings, they described the collaboration that occurred as a result of this structure as “contagious” and “very positive” [Jason]. They said that it “improves my teaching” [Kendra], “makes me a better teacher” [Amanda] and makes meeting the expectations of excellence “doable” [Rebecca]. Undoubtedly, teachers viewed structures that fostered collaboration as a positive support mechanism.

Yet, they also experienced negative pressure as a result of the way this particular intentionally designed structure meant to foster meaningful collaboration was implemented in this context. We are reminded by the literature that context matters (Bruce et al, 2010; Hochburg and Desimone, 2010; Skerrett, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009) when attempting to establish a learning community and when studying the effectiveness of a learning community on teacher learning. Indeed, a very specific context for collaboration has been created at this school, nonetheless, perhaps some broad conclusions may “speak to or help form a judgment about other situations” (Schofield, 2002, p. 179). The teachers in this study felt pressure that seemed to be a by-product of the design of this collaborative structure. Perhaps the administration intended the structure to apply pressure for teachers to meet to plan and for those planning meetings to result in a concrete product that would be implemented, thereby creating a purpose and
need for collaboration. Teachers certainly felt that pressure but often appreciated it, noting the value of the collaboration for them and for their students. But a negative pressure was also created that was perhaps unintended: teachers felt a sort of self-imposed pressure related to implementation timelines that the collective itself had created. As reported in the findings, one teacher noted,

The [collaboratively planned grade-wide cross-curricular curriculum and culminating project] I feel is pressure...because I feel – and, but the thing is but it’s teachers who planned it. Like we sat together and we planned it, but when we tried to implement it just fell apart. It didn’t work....but I feel like many of us felt a lot of pressure to try to get this finished...and it, and it turned into something – it turned from a great idea to a very stressful process to actually go through...I mean I can’t blame anybody....’cause we planned it and we thought that it would work out fine. But it didn’t. And that – and it became a pressure. It became stressful. [Melanie]

Third, although generally seen as positive, the pressure to collaborate is negatively experienced when there is uneven support for collaboration, leading to a perception that some forms of collaboration are valued whereas others are not. In the interviews, teachers discussed the pressure they felt to collaborate and to give of themselves. Several participants discussed feeling that the principal expected that they would give their time and share their interests and enthusiasm outside the classroom. Participants appreciated this orientation and the encouragement to participate in ways that were sometimes “outside their comfort zone” [Amanda, Ashley]. Interestingly, when structures were designed by administration to translate this vision into mechanisms for collaboration and participation in the school, the uneven application of and attention to collaborative cultures impacted teachers’ perceptions of those structures and mechanisms. The pressure to collaborate was not supported evenly in terms of time allotted and provided by administration so subject-specific teams felt a pressure to collaborate that
was not matched by the support of time. They were expected to meet on their own time and so it did not happen. One participant suggested that this was hypocritical, noting that “for all the talk of collaboration there’s not – still very you’re told what to do, we’ve decided this is what you should do, which is, it’s really tricky. It’s very, it’s negative” [Julia].

To conclude, the literature suggests that a number of variables should be present if we are to identify that a learning community exists in an organization. Those critical attributes, as identified by different authors, were outlined in the literature review. This school has attended to many of those elements. Nonetheless, the absence or presence of those variables seems to be merely the beginning. The nuances in the ways each of those variables is implemented and experienced is crucial to understanding the quality of the learning community being examined and the extent to which it supports teacher learning and sense of efficacy.

6.2.2 A balance of pressure and support is not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community.

A coherent, cohesive and balanced system of formal and informal structures of pressure and support is important to support teacher learning. The literature review provided an exploration of the role of the principal in facilitating teacher learning within intentionally designed learning communities. Printy (2008) found that effective principals create the structures necessary to facilitate learning in a variety of ways. I would like to
suggest that this case study has shown that understanding the interplay, interdependence and cohesiveness of the formal and informal structures created by the principal is crucial to fulfilling this criterion of an effective learning community. The administration in this case study has instituted a number of formal and informal structures of both pressure and support to which teachers made reference in the interviews.

*Formal structures instituted by administration*

- Staff meetings focused on professional learning.
- PD provided by an external consultant focused on one of the three school goals: critical thinking.
- Whole school commitment to planning, scaffolding and carrying out a grade wide integrated cross-curricular culminating task focused on teaching for and demonstrating school goals of critical and creative thinking within each curriculum area.
- Regular meetings of cross-curricular grade teams to plan and examine implementation of the integrated learning activity.
- Grade level coordination of collaborative teams by designated teacher leaders.
- Release time for teachers to co-plan.
- Explicitly stated focus on collaborative environment.

*Informal Structures instituted by administration*

- Deliberate efforts to build community.
- Clear messaging regarding priorities.
• Hiring and interviewing practices that take into consideration school culture and school goals.
• Encouragement/pressure for teachers to “step outside their comfort zone” and try something new.
• Permission to experiment; lack of pressure to conform.

Although teachers certainly appreciated many of these formal and informal structures, they also identified ways in which those structures were made less effective or sometimes undermined by the absence of corresponding structures or mechanisms that would create a more cohesive and coherent approach.

Some structures identified by teachers as potentially beneficial to enhance/support those already instituted by administration

• Common planning times (i.e. scheduling timetables so teaching teams have common preparation times).
• Creative ways of finding time during school day for subject-specific teachers to plan (e.g. rethinking supervision during assemblies to allow subject teams to plan).
• Scheduling that recognizes equal importance of all subject areas.
• Facilitating collaboration time so that collaboration is experienced more evenly (i.e. across subject-specific teams in addition to collaboration with cross-curricular grade level teams).
• Openness to considering teacher perspective and the impact on student learning when making administrative decisions (e.g. scheduling, disruptions to class time, shape and structure of cross-curricular integrated culminating task and accompanying scaffolding).

Lack of attention to structures suggested by teachers seems to undermine the effectiveness of those structures and mechanisms put in place by administration within this intentionally designed learning community. It may also undermine teachers’ faith in the administration’s commitment to stated goals of collaboration regardless of the formal and informal structures instituted by administration.

6.2.3 Open communication channels are not enough to positively impact teacher learning and nurture an effective learning community.

Structures, mechanisms and culture must facilitate transfer of learning between subsystems in order to support teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy. In the literature review I noted that researchers were divided over whether threats to a learning community were related more to the imposition of structures and controls or the lack of them (Lieberman and Miller, 2008; Printy, 2008; Skerrett, 2010). The findings from this case study suggest that the issue of control over structures and the direction of the learning community are closely related to the need for structures that foster open communication channels (Clausen et al., 2009; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Based on the findings, I believe that open communication channels between the subsystems outlined
by Opfer and Pedder (2011) are not enough. Rather, there seems to be a need for well-designed mechanisms that allow for the learning that happens within each subsystem to not only be communicated to other subsystems but to be transferred and absorbed in meaningful ways and in all directions. The lack of such a mechanism seems to be, perhaps, one of the single greatest threats to the learning community in this case. Such a mechanism also seems vital to fulfill Clausen et al’s (2009) requirement that effective leadership of a learning community requires administrators to share leadership in such a way (emphasis mine) that teachers buy in and start genuine power-sharing.

In this case study, teachers were explicit about their frustration that their voices were not being heard. Although they seemed able to engage in challenging conversations (Borko, 2004; Fullan, 2006) with their colleagues without fear of reprisal or humiliation, they felt that there was little room to voice concerns or disagree with administrative decisions and that there was pressure to “tow the line”. Although it was outside the scope of this study, I would like to suggest that it is possible that had the administration been interviewed for this case study, leaders’ perspectives on teacher voice and agency might be quite different. Perhaps administrators would articulate a belief that their doors were always open and that they often invited and heard opinions of teachers but ultimately needed to make decisions given their understanding of the big picture. They might be surprised to hear that teachers perceive their voice as not being heard.

My belief is that, although an administrator might believe that “communication channels are open”, the feeling of voicelessness or lack of agency with regards to administrative decisions may be an indicator of the absence of a concrete mechanism for learning in one subsystem to be transferred, in meaningful ways, to other subsystems.
How exactly does the school principal ensure that individual teacher learning is integrated into the understanding of collectives and to school wide administrative approaches? How exactly does the school principal ensure that his or her learning and that of the entire administrative team not only influences but is absorbed and understood deeply by individual teachers and collectives within the school? What mechanisms exist for subsystems to challenge, trouble and play with the learning that has happened in other subsystems? I believe these are critical questions for administrators to consider as they work to design learning communities in their schools.

6.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

6.3.1 Thesis Limitations.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the potential concerns regarding credibility (Borko, 2004) and how I attempted to address them in this study. Having already developed relationships with teachers and administration within this school as a consultant to the administration, a coach for teachers during their planning and external provider of professional development, I had concerns early on about how I might ensure that my research was objective and that participants’ responses were not coloured by their prior relationship with me. Through my graduate studies and developing understandings of research, I came to realize the complexity in attempting to make research objective; rather I must account for myself, my beliefs, my assumptions and my influence as researcher in the context of the data collected and the conclusions drawn. I recognized this during the interview protocol as I reassured participants of confidentiality and the ability to withdraw at any moment. Some participants also checked in with me during the
interview, asking to confirm that their answers would be confidential or trying to decide how much to “filter” in their responses. Some participants also seemed to be relieved to have a forum to voice their concerns and seemed hopeful that my research might be a vehicle for what they seemed to perceive as the potential for positive change. As I watched these reactions surface, rather than trying to discount these concerns or divorce them from the data, I tried to allow them to inform my conclusions and attempted to understand how the reactions were connected to the information the participant was providing at that point in the interview. Throughout the interviews, I checked in and asked follow-up questions when these reactions of hesitancy emerged and participant responses to those follow-up questions about their levels of comfort or discomfort also yielded rich information.

Another limitation related to my involvement with the school is my orientation towards this particular case and my reason for selecting this particular site. In discussing the problematic nature of generalizability in qualitative research, Schofield (2002) distinguishes the researcher’s option of studying what is, studying what may be and studying what could be. She notes that for the sake of greater transferability of conclusions, researchers might pay greater attention to selecting sites for case studies that are focused on a typical school but recognize that this approach does not take into account the need to study situations that are atypical in order to give us some insight on where the field is headed. Rather than selecting a typical school, she suggests that some researchers study “the leading edge of change” (p.186) or what may be. When I started this research, perhaps I felt that I was “studying what could be”; that is, locating a site that “we know or expect to be ideal or exceptional on some a priori basis and then
studying them to see what is actually going on there” (p. 189). Although merit exists in this approach, Schofield (2002) warns:

If one is unduly committed to that viewpoint, one’s analysis of both what happens and why may be heavily influenced by it, and one may not ask whether other more fruitful perspectives might emerge from a more dispassionate approach to studying the situation. (p. 189)

Herein lies the root of another possible limitation of this study. Did my belief that this was indeed an example of an effective learning community influence my examination of the data? I do not believe so. Indeed, the data from teacher interviews challenged my beliefs and assumptions and I was forced to re-examine my hypothesis in light of teacher perspectives. Some of those prior beliefs were confirmed but others were unseated. Teachers’ perspectives in this case shed light on the nuances and tensions that existed even within this school - widely recognized as an innovative and desirable place to work and learn, as reported by teachers in this study themselves.

Finally, as Schofield (2002) summarizes:

The classical view of external validity is of little help to qualitative researchers interested in finding ways of enhancing the likelihood that their work will speak to situations beyond the one immediately studied – that is, that it will be to some extent generalizable. (p. 177)

Thus, a danger exists that a study focused on a single case such as this one may prove to be too particular to be of use to readers grappling with albeit similar challenges but in very different contexts. I anticipate that readers may argue that this case is different because it was a new school and when it opened, the principal could ‘hand pick’ his staff, ensuring that the staff was comprised of teachers who shared his orientation to learning. Similarly they might argue that the size of the school, with a complement of 10 Grade 6 teachers provided an opportunity for collaboration that would not be possible in smaller
schools. Undoubtedly there are limitations of this study. It occurred in a particular place, at a particular time and under particular circumstances (Wolcott, as cited in Silverman, 2010) and as such only limited generalizations are warranted. That said, I hope I have increased the likelihood of what Goetz and LeCompte (1984) called comparability, that is “the degree to which components of a study – including the units of analysis, concepts generated, population characteristics, and settings – are sufficiently well described and defined that other researchers can use the results of the study as a basis for comparison” (as cited in Schofield, 2002, p. 179) by offering thick descriptions of the site, the nature of support and pressure structures and mechanisms discussed and the participants.

6.4.2 Future research.

The understanding of teachers’ sense of efficacy in this case was gleaned from teacher responses to questions about the impact they believed they had on student achievement and from unsolicited comments about their sense of collective efficacy which were included in responses to other interview questions. Adding a quantitative measure may enhance that understanding. For example, a mixed-method approach that utilizes the quantitative research tools developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) may be useful in follow up research. Such an approach could measure teachers’ sense of efficacy in relation to the support and pressure structures and mechanisms instituted by principals in an intentionally designed learning community. This may deepen our understanding of the impact of pressure and support mechanisms on teachers’ sense of efficacy.
The findings of this study prompt many additional questions that have been raised throughout this report. For example, what is the relationship between the teachers’ perspective on pressure and support mechanisms and the administrations’ perspective? How do those perspectives compare in terms of the level of teacher voice, agency and empowerment within a professional learning community? What are some powerful ways for principals to accurately and thoughtfully assess the level of teacher learning and teacher sense of efficacy and how might those assessments support their ongoing work of nurturing learning communities within their schools? What criteria might guide principals’ decisions regarding the effectiveness of informal and formal structures that support collaboration that increase teacher efficacy? How do districts intentionally and actively build the capacity of principals to design and assess effective learning communities in their schools? Those are but some of the exciting directions that future research might take, building upon some of the results and tentative conclusions of this study.

6.5 Final Thoughts: A tentative attempt at a metaphor that captures my learning

One class of criteria for evaluating case studies discussed by Lincoln and Guba (2002) is applicability, “the extent to which the case study facilitates the drawing of inferences by the reader that may have applicability in his or her own context or situation” (p. 211). Applicability goes beyond transferability (the use of thick description to allow the reader to identify similarities and differences between the case and their own context in order to draw comparisons). Lincoln and Guba (2002) suggest that
applicability is also achieved if the case can be used as a metaphor. Learning from that case, in part, comes from the extent to which it can serve as a vehicle for the reader and the writer to think about the extent to which the case is similar to the metaphor (i.e. the ground) and the extent to which it is dissimilar (i.e. the tension).

The teachers in this study used insightful metaphors when describing their own perspectives. One spoke of feeling like she was on Highway 401 and needed to find a way to veer into traffic that was already travelling at top speed when describing her entry into this learning community. Another spoke of how she felt like a piece of the puzzle, not like she was being jammed into the one on the table, but rather how she felt she belonged. And finally, there was the metaphor of a surfer, riding the waves of educational innovation at the school, not always agreeing with her surfing instructors but believing in them and their vision and remaining on the surfboard.

Those metaphors provided powerful visuals to support my growing understanding of their perspectives and now I would like to offer a tentative metaphor that has helped me make sense of my conclusions and might help the reader do the same. As I gained clarity about my ideas regarding the cohesive and coherent system of formal and informal structures of pressure and support required to support teacher learning within an intentionally designed learning community, I began to see parallels to the design of a bridge. Most bridges have major support beams – those towering pillars that reach into the river the bridge is crossing and deep into the earth below. They are perhaps the most visible indicators that what we are looking at is indeed a bridge. Perhaps there are parallels between those beams and the formal and obvious, clearly visible support and pressure mechanisms instituted by administration in a school’s learning community: the
professional development at staff meetings, the use of release time for collaborative planning, the deliberate organization of co-planning and co-teaching teams, the use of school budgets to support teacher attendance at conferences or external consultants or professional development coaches.

That said, a bridge can not be supported by those beams alone. It requires a complex and often hidden system of cables and trusses, subsidiary pillars and cross-beams that work in concert to protect against the various forces at work that threaten the stability and function of the bridge. Similarly, the informal structures at work in a school need to be equally intentional and thoughtful in the way they support the more formal structures of a learning community. How does scheduling and timetabling reinforce or undermine stated goals of collaboration? What are the mechanisms that define the role that teacher learning plays in administrative decision-making? At what intervals and as a result of what impetuses are the structures revisited and assessed to see if they are in need of maintenance, repair, rebuilding or reinforcing?

I’d like to extend the metaphor a little further. In Ontario, the science curriculum requires that children investigate structures in several grades. For example, The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8, Science and Technology (Ministry of Education, Government of Ontario, 2007) states that in Grade 1 they are expected to “investigate structures that are built for a specific purpose to see how their design and materials suit the purpose” (p. 47). In Grade 3, they are to “investigate strong and stable structures to determine how their design and materials enable them to perform their load-bearing function” (p. 73) and in Grade 5, they are required to “identify forces that act on and within structures and mechanisms, and describe the effects of these forces on structures and mechanisms” (p.
101). To provide opportunities for their students to demonstrate their understanding of these overall expectations in the curriculum, I have heard many teachers describe how they have students experiment with building bridges that can sustain a certain weight, how they invite students to decide with each iteration what is working, what is contributing to the strength of the bridge, what to keep, what to modify and how to provide secondary support. I hope that principals who see themselves as architects and designers of the professional learning communities within their schools consider this approach when they build structures and mechanisms to support teacher learning - not just allowing, but actively planning for teacher experimentation with various learning structures and opportunities for teacher learning from those experiences to transfer in meaningful ways to the collectives in the school and to the school as a system.
References


APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Letter

May 2011,

To the participants in this study,

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between three interrelated constructs that have been studied in the literature individually and in various paired combinations: teacher learning, sense of self-efficacy and a climate of accountability and standardization. I hope to uncover the key factors and conditions that have influenced the growth and development of a designed learning community and the sense of self-efficacy despite, or perhaps as a result of, accountability and standardization pressures.

This study will be carried out under the supervision of Dr. Barrie Bennett, Department of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a M.A. thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

The study involves the use of a pre-interview questionnaire. This will be followed by a face-to-face interview of approximately 30 minutes. During the interview you will be asked questions about will be asked about your opinions, perceptions, and feelings associated with the pressures and supports related to their professional learning environment within the school and to a variety of accountability or standardization measures (Grade 6 EQAO testing, Teacher Performance Appraisal process, etc.). As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and how you feel about the work that you do. After the interview, I will write brief notes that will be used to assist me in remembering the surroundings of the interview (i.e., characteristics of the site).

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons cannot be identified. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments will be placed on your responses nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as an educator. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (905) 780-6554 or at usha.james@utoronto.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Barrie Bennett at (416) 978-2023 or b.bennett@utoronto.ca. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

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Email: usha.james@utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.
Name: _____________________________________ School: _____________________________
Signed: _____________________________ Date: ______________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____
Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: _____
Please keep a copy of this form for your record.
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

The interview will be semi-structured. The questions below will serve as a guide. At the start of the interview I will thank the participant for taking out the time to be interviewed. I will reiterate that the participant can withdraw at any point, can decline to answer a question, and may stop the interview at any point. I will explain that the interview will be audio taped for the purposes of transcription, and that only myself, my supervisor and a professional transcriber will have access to it. I will ask them if they have any other questions or concerns that they would like me to address before we start the interview. Finally, I will orally provide a general overview of the topics that will be discussed.

Central Research Question:
How is teacher sense of self-efficacy affected by the simultaneous influences of a professional learning community and the pressures of standardization and accountability?

Opening question:
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, such as your what you teach, how long you’ve been teaching, how long you’ve been teaching at this school, how you came to be at this school…

Overall impressions of teaching community

• If you had to describe what it was like to be a teacher at this school to an outsider, what would you say?
• What do you like best about working here?
• What do you find most challenging about working here?

Sense of self-efficacy

• How much can you do to help your students think critically?
  o How much can you do to help students who are struggling?
Professional learning community

• How do you feel about the way teachers work together in this school. Tell me a little bit about the level of collaboration and how it affects you.

Accountability and standardization

• What do you feel are the expectations that are placed upon you in this school? How do you feel about them?
• What are the greatest pressures placed upon you as a teacher?
• How does the Grade 6 EQAO test affect you and your classroom?

Conclusion

I will thank them for their participation. I will let them know that they can contact me at any point if they have any questions or concerns and that I will be providing them with a summary of my findings.