OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
TWO CASE STUDIES OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS IN ONTARIO, CANADA

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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The purpose of this study is to understand the opportunities for professional learning teachers encounter over the span of their careers. I conduct two qualitative case studies of mid-career teachers from Ontario, Canada to obtain insights into their teacher development experiences over their first eight years in the teaching profession. The analysis of interviews conducted during this period led me to identify four learning opportunities that were significant for the participants: mentoring at the beginning of the career, learning from and with colleagues, mandated collaborative learning, and part-time graduate studies. The teachers highlight the limits and possibilities of these opportunities considering their professional needs and contexts. Drawing on these findings, some practical recommendations for the design and implementation of teacher development programs are suggested.
Acknowledgements

This thesis was a journey that I could not have walked alone.

I am grateful for the support and feedback of my supervisor, Professor Clare Kosnik. Her encouragement and support through this Master program and the completion of this thesis were invaluable. Thanks to Professor Clive Beck for the insightful discussions and comments he offered me over this study. Also, I would like to thank Professor Harold Troper, who served as a second reader of this thesis and gave me so thoughtful feedback.

Thanks to the participant teachers, Anita and Tanya, for sharing their experiences.

I greatly appreciate the constructive feedback of my writing group in the different stages of the writing process of this thesis. Thanks to Eveline Houtman, Janice Van Dyke, Julie Middleton, and Rebecca Cober.

To my friends and family in Toronto, thanks for your caring support and unfailing encouragement. Thanks to be there for me and for making Toronto more like a home. My special gratitude to Edgar Valencia, Paola Pulido, and Tugce Sahin. Edgar, gracias por ser mi cómplice compañero y por hacerme reír tanto. Paola, gracias por tu enorme generosidad y dulzura, y por darme tantos ánimos en el camino. Tugce, thanks for constantly remind me that life is much more than our professions, and that we always need to dance, live, and enjoy!

A cada uno de los miembros de mi familia en Perú, gracias por su inagotable amor y por confiar en que este proceso terminaría en buen puerto. Gracias por creer en mí y alentar cada una de mis aventuras. En especial, gracias infinitas a mi Mamita Dolores, por su enorme corazón y fortaleza.

A mis amigos peruanos de toda la vida: gracias por sus mails alentadores, por los chats llenos de buena vibra y por las infinitas sesiones de Skype. Gracias por acompañarme tan lindo a la distancia.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers play a central role in students’ learning and success (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kingston, Gu, 2007; Day, 1999; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, teaching is not a simple endeavour. Covering the government-mandated curriculum, maintaining students’ interest, and promoting pupils’ learning are examples of the simultaneous, sometimes competing “concerns” that teachers need to address in their daily practice (Kennedy, 2006). Because of the challenges of performing such a “multifaceted activity” (Kennedy, 2006), teachers need to be involved in a constant learning process.

This learning process is often referred to as teacher development or professional development. Over the course of their careers, teachers learn through professional development activities specially designed, usually by the school or school district, to help them acquire new skills or knowledge. Beyond these formal spaces, teachers continue to learn and develop personally and professionally through daily practice in their own classrooms and through casual interactions with colleagues. As part of their professional lives, teachers are engaged in an ongoing process of learning (Day, 1999; Day & Sachs, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) through formal and informal activities (Mesler & Spillane, 2010; Smaller, 2012).

The research on teacher development has adopted different foci to analyze the learning and change processes of teachers. One focus is the study of effective teacher development practices. Using mainly quantitative research methods, this research aims to identify teacher development practices that enhance teachers’ change and students’ achievement (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Another research focus investigates a particular set of activities designed for teacher learning, such as communities of practice. The study of teachers’ communities of practice observes the relationships that teachers establish with their
colleagues to understand and inquire into their teaching practice (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001; Little, 2012; Wenger, 1998). Since this kind of study is concerned with how the relationships and learning unfold within a community, qualitative research methods are privileged.

Alternatively, longitudinal research methods have been used to study teacher development in the context of their professional lives. One important assumption of longitudinal studies is that teacher learning and professional development are not simple consequences of the number of years of tenure in a teaching career. That is, learning and development are intertwined with teachers’ personal experiences, commitments, motivations and sense of efficacy, and also framed by educational reforms and policies shaping school culture and curricula (Day et al, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010). Thus, in studying teachers over the span of their careers, longitudinal studies aim to portray the ongoing learning processes within the complex professional lives of teachers.

The recent longitudinal study Teacher Change and Growth (Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Beck & Kosnik, in press) centers its attention on teachers’ professional development experiences over the course of their careers. This study seeks to identify key areas of professional growth and to recognize the different paths that promote such growth. My research is inspired by such researchers’ view of the value of using longitudinal research to analyze the possibilities and limits of ongoing teacher development.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the opportunities for professional learning teachers encounter during the course of their careers. I conduct two qualitative case studies of mid-career teachers from Ontario, Canada to gain insight into their teacher development experiences over their first eight years in the teaching profession. In analyzing interviews conducted with them during this period of time, I aim to identify the different kinds of learning opportunities that the
teachers encountered at various points in time. Moreover, I explore the teachers’ experiences of these opportunities to determine the teachers’ perceptions of the possibilities and limits of these opportunities, in view of their own needs and school contexts at the time that development opportunities were available to them.

The qualitative nature of this study and the use of longitudinal data have allowed me to provide detailed descriptions of the opportunities for professional learning available to the teachers in my study, and to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of those opportunities. Most importantly, this research gives voice to teachers’ perspectives on their experiences and learning opportunities during their eight first years of their teaching careers. In doing so, it provides insight into some elements that make learning opportunities more relevant and significant (or not) from their own perspectives at particular moments in time.

**Research Questions**

My inquiry is guided by the following two questions;

- What kind(s) of opportunities for professional learning did teachers encounter during their careers?
- How did teachers experience those opportunities?

**Definition of Main Concepts**

Throughout the different stages of this research (conceptualizing the research, outlining the literature review, analyzing the data, and writing the document) I have engaged with the academic literature on teacher development. My readings of this literature informed and constantly reshaped definitions of the main concepts that I use throughout this thesis.

The definitions of some of these key concepts are as follows:
Teacher development: Teachers’ ongoing processes of learning over the course of their professional lives (Day, 1999; Day & Sachs, 2004; Day et al, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

Teacher professional learning: A process of inquiry into and reflection on teaching practice that leads to changes in a teacher’s vision, knowledge, abilities, skills, values, and/or attitudes. These changes reshape, transform, or deepen the teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Opportunities for professional learning: Activities, actions, processes, or structures that promote teacher professional learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Paths to teacher development: The array of similar opportunities and processes for professional learning that teachers promote or encounter at different moments of their careers (Beck & Kosnik, in press; Desimone, 2009; Mesler & Spillane, 2010; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I introduce the purpose of this study. Chapter 2 presents a general overview of the literature on the nature and key dimensions of teacher development. It also describes some of the different paths to teacher development. In Chapter 3, I present and justify my research design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 outlines and analyzes four learning opportunities that were significant for the research participants: mentoring at the beginning of the career, learning from and with colleagues, mandated collaboration, and part-time graduate studies. In Chapter 5, I draw the main conclusions from the study and present some practical implications of the findings.
In this chapter, I present an overview of the research on teacher development. First, I introduce an overview of two main approaches to the study of teacher development. Later, framed in one of these approaches, I define the nature and the paths to professional learning.

**Different Approaches to the Research on Teacher Development**

In the research on teacher development there are different approaches to how teachers learn and change. In this section, two of these approaches are introduced: “professional development” (PD) and “teacher professional learning”. This general overview focuses on the main distinctions stressed in the literature: (i) the passive/active role of teachers in professional development activities, and (ii) the simple/complex relations between those activities, learning, and change.

Considering the first distinction, the PD approach places teachers in a passive role in development activities and their learning processes. This approach has been associated with top-down interactions, in which “experts” present new knowledge to teachers. As Wilson & Berne (1999) claim: “Traditionally, professional development has been conceptualized as a dissemination activity: locate new knowledge relevant to teaching, package it in an attractive manner, and get it into the hands of teachers” (p. 194). In these kind of interactions, teachers’ knowledge and experience does not play a central role since they are expected to just receive specific information and later introduce changes in their practices accordingly. A central point of this approach, then, is that the activities or strategies are *delivered* to teachers for the improvement of their practice (Wilson & Berne, 1999).

While the PD approach defines teachers as recipients of new knowledge, the teacher
professional learning approach postulates a more active role for teachers in their learning processes. This approach recognizes teachers' expertise since they hold and develop relevant pedagogical knowledge through their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001). In fact, the understanding of teacher development should focus on teachers' knowledge and their learning process, and not on the ways that best provide or deliver new knowledge to teachers (Webster-Wright, 2009).

The second distinction between these two approaches arises from understandings about how development activities promote learning and change. The PD approach assumes that learning and change in pedagogical practice are expected consequences after participation in a development activity (e.g., workshop or course). Opfer & Pedder (2011) clearly state this idea: “This research [on effective teacher professional development] is based on the assumption that teacher professional development consists of a repertoire of activities and methods for learning and that teacher learning follows more or less directly from the frequency with which professional development programs use these specific activities, structures, and so on” (p. 378). That is, the PD approach sustains a linear and simple understanding of how teachers learn and change.

The teacher professional learning approach critiques this linear and simple understanding of teacher learning and change. Loughran (2012) asserts that “PD is often cynically viewed by teachers as a one-way process of transmission with the intention of the information being absorbed one day and put into practice the next” (p. 50). Underneath these expectations, there is a notion of learning and change aligned with a “process-product conceptualization of causality” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) and a “linear approach for educational change” (Hoban, 2002). These notions underestimate the complexity of the relationship between teacher learning and teacher change.

Alternatively to this simplistic view, the teacher professional learning approach claims that
the learning and change processes are complex. To exemplify these complexities, Hoban (2002) states: “Although a one-step approach to professional development does sometimes encourage teacher learning, it often does not lead to educational change because teachers adapt innovation to suit their existing practices, which tends to maintain the status quo. In short, a simplistic approach to teacher learning is unlikely to be a catalyst for complex educational change” (p. 16).

The literature from the teacher professional learning approach provides several routes to grasp the complexity of the teacher learning process. For instance, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2001) propose that teacher learning is the result of inquiry and reflection, which makes explicit the tacit knowledge embedded in the teaching practice. In addition, Opfer & Pedder (2011) suggest that teachers’ attitudes and values should have an important place in this insight process.

Another route to understanding the complexity of teacher learning is to frame the process within the classroom and school contexts (Hoban, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The students' characteristics and needs, the resources available, and the teachers' expertise are just some elements that constantly vary in each classroom and school scenario. The uniqueness of these scenarios leads to particular contexts for teacher learning. Furthermore, the broader school system should be taken into consideration since the school’s dynamics - that is, its norms, structures, and practices – could (or not) promote teacher learning (Hoban, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

In conclusion, the PD and teacher professional learning approaches offer different lenses for the understanding, design, and analysis of teacher development. Each approach is grounded in contrasting assumptions about the role of teachers in the activities. While the PD approach locates teachers as passive recipients of new information, the teacher professional learning approach places teachers as active in knowledge construction and brings them to the center of their own learning process. Another distinction focuses on simple and complex understandings of the linkages among activities, learning, and change. Whereas the PD approach assumes that learning occurs as a
causal consequence after participation in a development activity, the teacher professional learning approach suggests that learning and change are more complex.

This study is framed by the teacher professional learning approach. Using this frame as the general lens to understand the opportunities for professional learning of the two cases in this study will allow us to take into account the complex relations among their characteristics, experiences, and learning processes within the context of their respective schools. Accordingly, it should be acknowledged that the next sections are framed by the essential ideas of this approach.

**Paths to Teacher Development**

This section presents a general overview of the nature of teacher development and the paths that promote this process. Following the literature on these different paths, three classifications are introduced.

It is important to highlight that the last sections of this overview focus on two specific paths: informal learning and learning in collaboration. The recent literature on teacher development—particularly from the teacher professional learning perspective—stresses the relevance of these paths. In addition, informal learning and learning in collaboration are significant paths in the professional development of the cases studied.

This and the following sections aim to provide an informed frame to better understand the paths for teacher development, addressing mostly research from the US and Canada. Considering the space constraints and purpose of this research, the overview presented in this chapter is not an exhaustive or complete review of the literature on teacher development.

**What is teacher development?** Consistent with the teacher professional learning approach, teacher development is a *process* (Day, 1999; Day and Sachs, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). That is,
teachers do not learn just in isolated activities specially designed to revise their knowledge or gain new skills. Beyond these formal spaces designed for learning, teachers learn and develop through daily practice in their own classroom and casual interactions with colleagues. Accordingly, some authors suggest that teacher learning and development is an ongoing process that is part of professional life. To highlight this continuous process, the terms “ongoing learning” and "lifelong learning” are used since they best describe how teachers experience professional learning (Day, 1999; Day & Sachs, 2004).

Teachers embrace different challenges during their career. As a result, teachers' learning expectations and needs vary over the time. Despite these variations, Feiman-Nemser (2001) proposes that teacher development and learning should be seen as a continuum from initial teacher training to in-service learning experiences. She maintains that core requirements of teaching (e.g., subject matter knowledge, a repertoire of instruction skills, and dispositions to study and improve teaching) are revised, deepened, and reshaped during the teacher career.

Teachers encounter different opportunities over their professional life, through which their knowledge and skills are revised and reshaped. As Webster-Wright (2009) suggests: “Professionals learn, in a way that shapes their practice, from a diverse range of activities, from formal PD programs, through interaction with work colleagues, to experiences outside work, in differing combinations and permutations of experiences” (p. 705). Thus, there is a large array of opportunities for professional learning that teachers experience.

The following section offers three broad classifications of these opportunities. In reading this section, it is necessary to remember the different paths to teacher development discussed here are equally important. Each addresses different opportunities and can be equally significant to teacher learning, since different teachers have different needs and ways of learning.
Classifications of the paths to teacher development. There are different ways to organize and classify the various kinds of learning opportunities for teachers. In the review of recent literature on teacher development, some classifications are offered to better describe this large array of opportunities. In this section, three of these classifications are presented: (i) Formal/On-the-job (Mesler & Spillane, 2010), (ii) Organizational partnership/Small-group or Individual (Villegas-Reimers, 2003), and (iii) Formal/Informal (e.g., Desimone, 2009).

Discussing professional learning as a relevant aspect for the organization, Mesler and Spillane (2010) propose two broad categories: “formal” and “on-the-job” opportunities for learning (p. 325-327). Formal opportunities occur outside of classroom and school contexts and target very specific contents, for example workshops and courses. On-the-job opportunities happen in school or classroom settings and typically involve collaboration among teachers as a catalyst for learning. Some examples are informal conversations and lesson planning with colleagues.

Alternatively, Villegas-Reimers (2003) suggests that the various kinds of learning opportunities can be organized into two “models”: “organizational partnership model” and “small groups or individual model” (p. 69-70). The main criterion for the classification is the scale of the initiative and the organizations involved. Thus, the organizational partnership model includes large-scale learning opportunities designed in collaboration by an institution and a school, or by a network of schools. Small scale initiatives developed inside the classroom and school contexts characterize the small group or individual model. Seminars at the school, mentoring, and self-directed development are examples of this model.

One of the most popular classifications distinguishes between formal and informal opportunities for professional learning (e.g., Desimone, 2009). The main difference between these kinds of opportunities is their structure and planning. Formal opportunities imply previous planning of structured activities designed intentionally to promote learning. Workshops at the school level or
a network meeting with teachers from different schools are examples of formal opportunities. By contrast, informal opportunities occur without previous planning and might be unstructured activities or personal interactions that promote learning. A short talk during school break time is an example of an informal opportunity for learning.

My purpose in this subsection is to recognize the different dimensions and criteria used by these classifications to analyze the opportunities for professional learning. These classifications allow awareness of different “lenses” for observing an opportunity for learning. In analyzing the same event, these classifications guide observation to different aspects. For instance, an opportunity for learning may arise in teachers' lunch-time. Through talking, teachers might elaborate their pedagogical strategies or exchange vital information about recent policies at the school. While this event would be considered by Mesler & Spillane (2010) as an “on-the-job” opportunity because it arises in the school setting and presumes collaboration, Villegas-Reimers (2003) would claim that it is an example of the “small group or individual model” since it involves communication between teachers from the same school. Alternatively, this situation could be recognized as an informal opportunity since it was not a planned event and specific activities were not suggested to promote learning.

In the context of this study, these classifications are useful for the different “lenses” they offer. However, these classifications do not always be used to categorize or classify the various learning opportunities found in the cases studied. In fact, trying to fit the teachers’ experiences into one of these classifications is not a central focus of this investigation.

In the following section, the paths of informal professional learning and learning in collaboration are developed. A specific section is devoted to each since they are significant in the literature and for the experiences of the cases in this study.
**Informal learning.** Teachers learn not only in formal settings but also through informal daily interactions. A small talk with a colleague in the hallway, sharing a book in the teachers’ lounge, or a long talk with a grade partner about the workday on the way home, are informal situations in which teachers might gain a deeper understanding of an issue, get new useful information, or share relevant materials for next class.

Two main factors make a situation an opportunity to learn informally: the setting and the intentionality (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Smaller, 2012). First, informal learning occurs in non-structured contexts; that is, settings not designed specifically to promote learning. In the examples provided earlier, the situations (e.g., interactions in the hallway, the teachers’ lounge, or while commuting) were not exclusively designed for the discussion of practice or sharing knowledge and materials, although it did happen. Second, in these non-structured settings there is awareness that learning is taking place. Whether people intentionally looked to learn something, or just recognized later the skills or knowledge acquired in that situation; the learning intention or the learning outcome is explicit and evident to the learner in the informal situation.

The examples provided at the beginning of this section are just a few of the situations in which teachers learn informally. In reviewing the research on teachers’ informal learning, Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen (2009) describe an array of informal learning opportunities teachers encounter. According to these authors, teachers learn informally by (i) getting information from others, (ii) experimenting, and (iii) reflecting on the own pedagogical practice. Concerning the first kind of informal learning, the authors include ideas or information gained from interactions with other colleagues; but also the information gained from other sources, such as books, magazines and internet. However, teachers also learn a lot in their own classrooms by experimenting. In trying out new strategies or materials and observing their pupils’ reactions, teachers gain useful information and knowledge about how their students learn and how to adapt
their teaching practices. Finally, an important source of informal learning is reflecting on one’s own practice. In thinking about their practices, teachers elaborate the reasons for their decisions and how their actions lead (or not) to achieving their teaching objectives. This last form of informal learning is discussed further in the following section.

A final comment about informal opportunities for professional learning is relevant before going on to the topic of teacher reflection. Despite some attention having been given to the study of informal opportunities for learning, the body of research on this topic is limited and has developed without reference to the research on formal learning opportunities (Smaller, 2012). However, the connections between informal and formal learning are in fact extensive and the influences go in both directions. For example, attendance at a school board workshop might motivate a teacher to search for more information on the internet about a specific topic of that workshop that was relevant for his or her practice. Similarly, informal conversations during lunch time could turn into a monthly meeting for sharing materials and experiences. Because both types of learning opportunity for learning can be very powerful, and the connections between them go in both directions, it is important to integrate research on the two types of learning opportunities in order to gain a full understanding of how teachers learn and develop (Smaller, 2012).

**Teacher reflection processes.** Reflection is described “as a process in which practitioners make sense of dilemmas and challenges that arise in their work through a process of critical appraisal” (Camburn, 2010, p. 465). According to Schön (1983), this thinking process is part of the practice itself since doing and thinking are intertwined in the practice. In fact, his concept of reflection-in-action implies a thinking process in the flow of action. Surprising results or situations in the practice also motivate reflection. Unexpected positive or negative results of action trigger a thinking process about the ideas that support the practice. The reflection process then leads to a
revision of the understandings or frames of the practice that is taking place, and this may in turn lead to experimenting with different courses of action (Schön, 1983).

Alternatively, the concept of “reflection on action” is used by Shön and other authors to describe a thinking process that takes place after the action (Camburn, 2010). “Reflection on action involves looking back at past experiences and reevaluating them by considering what worked, what did not work, and how one might approach similar situations differently. Some argue that this kind of reappraisal can serve to reinforce one’s commitment to particular courses of action or can give impetus to changes in practice when reflection yields new perspectives on one’s work” (Camburn, 2010, p. 466). That is, having a time specially devoted to thinking could help teachers recognize core aspects of their practice and adjust them as necessary.

**Learning in collaboration.** A community of practice is not just a group of people involved in an activity. It is a group of people whose relationships are developed around a practice oriented by a common aim (Wenger, 1998). This aim changes over time. The community gives different meanings to the aim at different times, and tensions and conflicts in the community lead to redefinition of the aim. In addition to sharing a common aim, a sense of belonging or membership characterizes people involved in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The learning process in the community does not develop as an independent and distinguishable process; learning happens during the practice itself (Wenger, 1998). That is, learning occurs as the members of the community pursue the common aim and their sense of membership is strengthened. As Wenger (1998) states: “communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning” (p. 86, emphasis in the original). Essentially, learning is embedded in the practice.

In the case of teachers’ communities of practice, the interactions among teachers develop
around understanding, problematizing, and inquiring into the teaching endeavor. Corcharn-Smith & Lytle (2001) postulate an understanding of teacher learning and development based on the concept “inquiry as stance” (p.49). They propose that teachers view their classrooms as sites of critical investigation, and share their analyses and interpretations of practice in a collaborative space. In that way, teachers engage in a collective process of building knowledge from practice, incorporating theory and knowledge produced by others (e.g., academic research). As Corcharn-Smith & Lytle (1999, 2001) suggest, this process places teachers in a new relationship with knowledge since they are able to build together relevant knowledge from their practice.

Inquiry into teaching practice occurs in conversations (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and “routines for talking” (Horn, 2005 and Little & Horn, 2007, quoted by Little, 2012). Through talking, teachers raise and recognize the complexities of an issue, analyze the multiples interpretations of it, and collaboratively come up with various courses of action. These conversations could be supported by the use of curricular artifacts. Sharing lesson plans, textbooks, and student work are helpful ways to exemplify and “unpack” the issues around teaching and student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Little, 2012). Thus, learning happens through dialogue and discussion, sometime supported by curricular artifacts.

In school settings, these dialogues and discussions should be motivated by a collective responsibility for student learning (Little, 2012). Indeed, the interactions and conversations about teaching practice by themselves do not lead to new understandings or different interpretations of practice. The central piece is questioning the practices in relation to student learning processes (Little, 2012). Talking about teaching practices could in fact lead to the maintenance of the same pedagogical views; whereas keeping in mind students learning will promote different understandings and, ultimately, transformation in teaching practice.

It should be acknowledged that tensions and resolutions are part of the learning process of
a community (Wenger, 1998). In particular, teachers may feel exposed when sharing their issues or curricular artifacts with the community; and tensions can arise through differentness of opinion. To reduce these sources of tension, facilitation or leadership can be provided to build (i) confidence in sharing pedagogical practice, and (ii) tolerance in understanding the different points of view in the community (Little, 2012). Ultimately, the community should be recognized by its members as a safe space to share their practices, and one characterized by respect for different points of view.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a general overview of key dimensions of teacher development. Two central ideas stand out from the teacher professional learning approach assumed in this study. First, teachers are active in their learning processes, which are guided by their needs, experience, and previous knowledge. Second, changes in practice do not follow directly from involvement in a professional development activity, since the learning and change is complex.

As discussed in this chapter, teacher development is a continuous process. The two main paths to professional development presented here – informal learning and learning in collaboration – highlight different but complementary ways in which on how teachers learn in their work environments during their professional lives.
Chapter 3: Context and Method

Research Design

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the opportunities for professional learning that teachers undertake over the course of their careers. This is a qualitative research case study, as defined by Merriam (1988, 2009) and Stake (2005). Qualitative research proposes an approach of inquiry in which interpretation plays an important role for “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13, emphasis in the original). Case study research design focuses on the examination of one or a few cases to understand a complex phenomenon (Stake, 2005). This research design concentrates its attention on a reduced number of cases since “[each] case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent” (Merriam, 1988, p.11). When a particular case is followed for some years, this research method makes it possible to identify changes in the phenomenon over time (Yin, 2003). Thus, the qualitative case study design allowed me to focus on two cases of teachers in order to understand the range of opportunities for professional learning that they undertake and to observe their learning experiences over time.

This thesis used a particular type of this case study research design: instrumental case study (Stake, 2005). In this type of qualitative case study, the cases are useful since they provide rich information about an issue. According to Stake (2005), “the case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, its context scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest” (p. 445). Accordingly, I decided to select cases that embodied a wide range and rich experiences for teacher professional learning.
This instrumental case study was conducted as part of a larger longitudinal study led by Clive Beck and Clare Kosnik, called Teacher Change and Growth (Kosnik, C. & Beck, C., 2009; Beck & Kosnik, in press). Kosnik and Beck’s study aims to investigate (i) teachers’ views of teaching throughout their careers, (ii) the topics and forms of professional development that were identified as effective by teachers, and (iii) the pre-service education that teachers felt best prepared them for professional growth. The first cohort of participants in the Teacher Change and Growth study was composed originally of 22 teachers and, as of 2012, their teaching experiences had been followed for eight years (by then a sample of 20). This thesis closely examines two of these teachers.

**Participants**

The case selection from the longitudinal study Teacher Change and Growth followed the primary criteria presented by Stake (2005): “The researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting a case of some typicality but leaning towards those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn. My choice would be to choose that case from which we feel we can learn the most” (p. 452). Having this in mind, the principal investigators of the longitudinal study, Clive Beck and Clare Kosnik, suggested two cases of teachers who had experienced a wide range of opportunities for learning. Both had been working as teachers over the eight-year period and each had been involved in different professional development initiatives at their schools and in their school districts. The analysis of these cases offered rich possibilities for inquiring into opportunities for professional learning. Their profiles are presented next.

*Anita.* A year after obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Linguistics and Psychology, Anita was admitted into the Bachelor of Education program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at University of Toronto (OISE/UT). This one-year consecutive degree program gave her
teaching certification for grades 4 to 10, with a specialization in social studies. Anita felt that her first bachelor’s degree had provided her with a useful background for teaching.

Following graduation, she secured a job as a teacher in a public elementary school where she worked for two years teaching grades 4/5 and 5. For the next six years, she taught grades 4, 4/5 and 5 at a different public school.

From the beginning of her career, Anita attended professional development courses and workshops offered by her school district or other agencies. As a novice teacher, she took some courses related to literacy and math. In her fifth year of teaching, Anita took an Additional Qualification (AQ) course in math. Later, she registered in workshops related to environmental education.

**Tanya.** Tanya obtained a Bachelor of Science in Child Studies, which provided her with a useful background and practical experience for her future career as a teacher. During this degree, she completed a senior kindergarten placement at a daycare centre, and a grade 2 placement in a school classroom. Later, Tanya pursued a Master of Teaching at OISE/UT. This two-year degree gave her a credential as a teacher, with a specialization in kindergarten to grade 6.

Following her graduation, Tanya got a job as a primary teacher at a public school where she worked for two years. There she taught grades 1 and 4. Over the next six years, she taught grades 2, 3 and 4 at another public school.

Tanya was involved in various formal professional development activities over the course of her career. As a beginner teacher, she attended several workshops and courses mostly focused on literacy. Later, in her fourth year of teaching, Tanya enrolled in a part-time PhD program in literacy education. Since then, she has gained most of her professional learning through doctoral courses and readings and through conferences she has attended.
Tanya had a range of leadership opportunities available to her beginning in her second year as a teacher. These positions were encouraged by the principal in her school. These opportunities were available at her school (e.g., co-planning professional development days) and also at the school district level (e.g., participating in committees working towards particular educational initiatives).

Data Collection

**Interviews.** The main instrument of data collection was the interview. As Bogdan & Biklen (1998) state, “the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the word” (p. 94). Specifically, this study used semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009; Punch, 2009); that is, specific topics and questions were defined in advance, but the interviews were conducted with flexibility to gain additional information or explore new topics.

The interviews took place in the period 2004-2012, as part of the longitudinal study Teacher Change and Growth. In each round of data collection, all participants responded to the same set of open-ended questions but again with same flexibility. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and in person. Each teacher was interviewed twice a year over the first three years of the study, and once a year in each of the subsequent five years. Each interview was approximately one hour in length and was recorded and transcribed. As I was not part of the research team during these years, I did not conduct the interviews. This thesis is based on an analysis of the transcripts of 11 interviews per case.
Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the inductive and comparative method described by Merriam (2009). Drawing partially on Grounded Theory as presented by Glaser and Strauss, Merriam (2009) describes qualitative data analysis as a process that alternates between segments of data and abstract themes derived from interpretation. That is, concepts or themes emerge from the data itself in a process of constant comparison of the segments of data with the researcher “looking for recurring regularities” (Merriam, 2009, p. 177).

Accordingly, I began the process of analysis by identifying segments of data that contained potentially meaningful information about the opportunities for professional learning that the teachers experienced. I read the interview transcripts and selected segments in which the teachers described experiences that allowed them to acquire new or refine their existing (i) pedagogical strategies, (ii) resources for teaching, and (iii) views of teaching. The product of this first examination of the data was a preliminary list of codes identifying patterns based on the repetition of these experiences over the course of their first eight years of teaching.

Using this preliminary list of codes, I read the transcripts thoroughly for a second time in order to (i) index where the codes occurred in the transcripts, and (ii) refine the codes. In this stage of the analysis, some codes were renamed, and also new codes were added to the original list. These new codes emerged from the particular experiences of each case.

Later in this process, I developed themes based on the connections between the codes. I reviewed the transcripts again, this time aiming to (i) refine the themes and (ii) distinguish the context of the opportunities for professional learning. For instance, I observed the institutional context in which the opportunities were embedded (e.g., school and school district policies), and also the individual circumstances of the teachers (e.g., the number of years of teaching experience they had when they experienced a professional learning opportunity).
These themes are presented in the findings chapter of the thesis. During the writing process, I kept returning to the transcripts looking for clarification and contextualization of the themes in Anita and Tanya’s experience.
Chapter 4: Findings

The analysis of Anita and Tanya’s learning experiences allowed me to identify some aspects that made the learning opportunities they experienced more relevant and significant (or not) from their own perspective. In this chapter, I present four learning situations that were significant for the participants: mentoring at the beginning of the career, learning from and with colleagues, mandated collaboration, and part-time graduate studies. In the sections in this chapter I address each of these learning situations in turn.

Mentoring at the Beginning of the Career: Tanya’s Experience

In this section, I describe the mentoring experience of Tanya. This section starts with a brief description of the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) of the Ontario Ministry of Education, which frames her mentoring experience. Later, I present the implementation of the mentoring component at Tanya’s schools and the supports it provided for professional learning and growth. Tanya’s mentoring experience is significant for two reasons. First, Tanya was a novice teacher when the program was launched, thus she had a first-hand experience of the beginning of the program. Second, she participated as both mentee and mentor; she was a mentee during her first three years of teaching and also a mentor in her fourth and fifth years of teaching.

NTIP was launched in the 2005/2006 school year by the Ontario Ministry of Education. It was proposed as an alternative to the Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test for teachers entering their careers (Glassford & Salinitri, 2007). This paper-pen test aimed to evaluate skills and knowledge necessary for starting the teaching profession. The test proposal was discarded after several discussions among various stakeholders including the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Ontario Association of Deans of Education, the Ontario College of Teachers, and the various teacher
federations. Instead, a comprehensive induction program with an important evaluation aspect was
developed to support novice teachers (Glassford & Salinitri, 2007).

After NTIP program was launched, it went through some changes (e.g., eligibility criteria for
the program, funding guidelines, and the template for programming the induction activities) that
can be observed in various manuals and documents that were published to support the
implementation in 2006, 2008 and 2010. However, the core components, described below,
remained constant in these publications:

- Orientation. School districts provide comprehensive information about NTIP to teachers,
  mentors and principals. Also, through this component, new teachers become familiar with
  classrooms, schools, curriculum, school districts, and Ontario’s educational system.

- Professional development and training. Learning activities (e.g., classroom observation,
  common planning time, in-service sessions) should take place at times that are convenient
  to teachers and in formats that suit their classroom schedules. Professional development
  topics should be selected according to the school context and its students’ characteristics
  and needs.

- Mentoring. Defined as an ongoing relationship between a new teacher and an experienced
  teacher, the mentoring component promotes activities and strategies that are best-suited
to the needs of the new teachers. Some suggested options are classroom observation,
  common planning time, professional dialogue, and joint attendance at courses or
  conferences.

NTIP includes a teacher performance appraisal that requires classroom observation
conducted by the principal. This appraisal follows the Standards of Practice for the Teaching
Profession, which the Ontario College of Teachers developed (Ontario Ministry of Education,
2010b).
The results of this appraisal are noted on the teacher’s certificate (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). The 2005/2006 school year was considered a transitional year for NTIP (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Accordingly, the core components presented earlier were implemented, but the teacher performance appraisal and the notation on the certificate did not occur in the transitional year.

Some Ontario school districts were already implementing mentoring activities before NTIP was launched, which was the case in Tanya’s school district. However, she wasn’t part of the mentoring initiative from her school district in her first year of teaching because of the type of contract she held. Since Tanya held a Long Term Occasional (LTO) contract and her school district only funded mentoring activities for teachers who held permanent contracts, she was excluded from the district’s mentoring initiative. Nevertheless, her school offered her informal and non-funded mentoring activities with an experienced teacher she selected.

In her interviews, Tanya did not discuss her informal mentoring experiences in detail. She did, however, strongly criticize the district’s policy on not assigning formal mentors to LTO teachers in their first year. In year 2 she said:

The School District has a side-by-side mentoring program but you can't be in it if you're an LTO. You can only enter as a contract teacher, which to me sounds very bizarre because most of our first-year teachers are LTOs. So, they let you struggle for that first year that you're an LTO, and then once you're contract and you kind of have an idea of what you're doing the mentoring program kicks in [laughing]. Which to me sounds strange; if you're a full-year LTO and you know you're going to be at the school for the whole year, I would think that mentoring would help in that first year.

As Tanya claimed, new teachers need mentoring support and the conditions of their contracts should not exclude them from participating in the initiative. Despite the fact that NTIP was not in place when Tanya started working, her critique is relevant. The program guidelines for the 2005/2006 implementation stated that funding was only provided to new teachers with permanent positions, and not offered to other first-year teachers. However, the same document
included a note about this particular group: “As the program proceeds, the Ministry will work with its education partners to address the needs specific to these teachers” (p. 6). Fulfilling the expectations, the most recent manual of NTIP (2010) proposes: “Boards are to include their beginning long-term occasional (LTO) teachers in the induction elements of the NTIP” (p. 9). Unfortunately, these changes in the program were not in place when Tanya began her career.

The mentoring component of NTIP offers release time for mentoring activities during the school schedule, through contracting supply teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, 2010a). In Tanya’s experience, the mentoring activities took place at programmed meetings during the release time, but also in short and non-scheduled times. For instance, as a mentee, the meetings were held with the mentor and another mentee during the release time programmed. As a mentor, Tanya and her mentee had scheduled meetings, but also received numerous “drop-ins”.

With respect to the timing of the mentoring activities, the guidelines of the program (2006) state, “Since there are multiple entry points for new teachers, relevant components of mentoring should be available throughout the year” (p. 12). Commenting on the timing of the mentoring meetings, Tanya said in year 2:

The support we’re given isn’t necessarily always given the way that we need it. [For instance] the mentoring program and the days that we have at the end of the year, that isn’t when I needed the help... I needed the help year one, in September or even in August, when I was starting to think about it. So that’s an obstacle.

Thus, Tanya felt strongly that release time should be scheduled early in the school year to be of maximum benefit for the mentee.

The use of release time is determined by the mentor and mentee. The documents of the program present guidelines, but ultimately the decision is made by the teachers. As Tanya commented in year 2 that, “[We used] the time as we wished, whether it was planning or watching a lesson, or something like that”. This situation was similar when she assumed the mentor role; in
year 4 she said: “We were given a half-day to work together, but there are no parameters around that or what it should look like.”

Tanya’s comments suggest that a strength of the mentoring component is that the details of its implementation are left to the participants. This attribute recognizes the variability of the needs of new teachers. As stated in the implementation guidelines, “Mentoring opportunities should be tailored to meet the needs of individual new teachers ... [and] also be differentiated on the basis of teacher assignment and experience (e.g., elementary/secondary panels, itinerant positions, occasional teaching)” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p.19). Similarly, Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009) suggest in their review of the recent empirical research about mentoring that the most effective practices of mentoring seem to be the ones that respond to the novice teacher needs and characteristics. Nevertheless, the authors provide characteristics of effective mentoring practices: regular meetings, some autonomy to mentees to develop their own pedagogy, and opportunities for classroom observations.

In Tanya’s experience, these mentoring interactions provided pedagogical support. For instance, Tanya found helpful the time given for program planning and the guidance in completing the report cards. As she expressed in year 3 when in her role as a mentee:

My grade 4 teaching partner and I used all those days to plan because that’s what we needed, we needed the planning time. And our mentor did her own stuff and would check. If she had something that would be helpful, then she would tell us. But we didn’t need her to sit and tell us how to do things. We needed time. And I think as a new teacher, giving them time, whether there’s someone there with them or not, is fabulous.

Reflecting on her experience as both mentee and a mentor, Tanya considered that mentors should have experience in the grade of the teacher they are mentoring. In her opinion, having a common assignment allowed mentors to provide specific and relevant guidance on pedagogical practices and resources for program planning. As she commented in year 2 when she was a mentee:
If your mentor is at the same grade level as you and you could use the time to really sit down and talk things out, maybe discuss certain children that are challenging you or plan, I think it would be wonderful.

Her experience as a mentor confirmed this position. For instance, she had a positive reaction when her mentee was re-assigned to a new mentor because of a mismatch of assignments. As she said in year 5: “And she was re-assigned a new mentor in her grade, which I think is optimal. So she then had a wonderful Kindergarten teacher helping her to plan Kindergarten.”

Regarding the optimum profile of the mentor, Hobson et al. (2009) emphasize that, “Mentoring tends to be more effective where mentors teach the same subject specialism as their mentees” (p. 212). Following Tanya’s comments, I would add that experience teaching the same grade level is necessary in the mentoring pairing. This is aligned with the research of Hobson et al. (2009) and Fantilli & McDougall (2009) that concludes that successful mentoring relies on the compatibility of the mentor profile with the mentee’s teaching assignment. The authors also report on other important aspects of a successful pairing, such as the participation of mentees in the selection of mentors, and mentor training before assuming the role.

In addition to her appreciation of the pedagogical support, Tanya commented on the importance of the emotional support the mentoring process provided. Tanya emphasized that novice teachers are learning several aspects of classroom teaching at the same time and find it difficult to maintain a work/life balance. In response to novice teachers’ need to “vent” during this stressful time, the mentoring offers a “space to talk”. Recalling her own experiences, Tanya commented in year 4:

I just do a lot of listening. [laughing] And it’s interesting because I think back to my mentor in my first year who also had to do a lot of listening. It’s about seeing the compassion in the first-year teachers and how important every single issue is in their classroom. And with the parents and with the students and with the lessons, and in the school, and dealing with their colleagues, and everything is of the utmost importance. And I think because you’re so
tired in your first year, and you’re trying so hard, and your classroom is your life, it’s hard to put some of those things in perspective.

In her role as a mentor in year 4, Tanya recalled: “I just get a phone call saying ‘Are you in your room? I need to see you,’ and she’ll come up, and I’ll listen for twenty minutes until she feels better... I’m kind of the emotional mentor.” The importance of the “emotional mentor” role is consistent with the findings of other research. For instance, Hobson et al. (2009) claim that “effective mentors provide their mentees with emotional and psychological support, and make them feel welcome, accepted and included” (p. 212). Also, Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) address the relevance of mentoring as a space for mentees to talk through their emotions in order to deal with the anxieties related to the new practice.

In conclusion, Tanya’s mentoring experiences both as a mentee and as a mentor reveal the importance of the pedagogical and emotional supports this role provides to novice teachers. In this particular case, the implementation of the mentoring component of NTIP responded to the needs of teachers entering the profession. The emotional support gained through the mentoring relationship seemed to be a key aspect of the mentoring process experienced by Tanya in her mentee and mentor roles.

Learning from and with Colleagues: Anita’s and Tanya’s Learning Experiences with Teachers at Their Schools

In this section, I present the various ways Anita and Tanya learned from and with their regular colleagues (beyond the special mentor-mentee relationship). Their experiences in the first year of teaching were very different. Later in their careers, they encountered similar opportunities for learning with and from other teachers.

As beginner teachers, Anita and Tanya experienced the challenges of being new in the teaching profession. Tanya commented in her first interview in year 1 that her work as a teacher
was “very unexpected at times”. Similarly, Anita in her first year mentioned specific challenges she faced related to setting up her teaching program and being familiar with the curricular resources. In this initial year, both teachers recognized the need for support and guidance from their colleagues.

Anita and Tanya had rather different experiences of support, collaboration, and mutual learning with their school colleagues. Anita perceived the staff at her first school as a community eager to share and provide guidance. In her first interview, responding to the question of whether or not she had a mentor in the school, Anita said in year 1:

I don't have an official one [mentor], but I feel like I have a lot because all of the other teachers have been really great and giving me advice when I've asked for it, or helping me talk through problems that I'm having... They're very sympathetic... they have been extremely helpful, they're very positive and willing to help me out, they show me resources and point me in the right direction.

The teacher community at Anita’s school not only offered specific guidance about teaching practices, they also helped her in dealing with emotions regarding new professional challenges. As she remarked in year 3:

I've been very lucky to be surrounded by people who have been very supportive of me and who have always backed me up when I've gotten discouraged or down, or I just needed a lesson plan. I've always had someone there to rescue me.

By contrast, Tanya felt that she had to deal with the challenges of being new teacher by herself. She encountered difficulties collaborating with or receiving guidance from the teachers from her grade division because they had a different vision of teaching. Whereas she implemented some constructivist practices and gave students time to discover and engage in their learning process, the teachers in her division advocated for more traditional practices and the use of worksheets. In year 6, looking back, Tanya reported:

In my first year, when I taught Grade 1, I was at a very different spot in terms of my philosophy than my other team members; and I found that really, really challenging. Because at that point, I felt I needed help or support from the other people on my team. But instead they were discouraging me from doing hands-on activities, and saying things like: “Just come in in the morning and pick up one of every worksheet and your day is done.
Make your life easier.” And I found that really difficult because I didn’t want to offend them, but I was frustrated, because I didn’t think that’s the way literacy should be taught.

The role of a teacher’s vision of teaching in promoting or constraining collaboration was also mentioned by Anita. Her vision was based on constructivist principles; for instance, she promoted students’ exploration and inquiry, and built community in her classroom. In her third year she commented that sharing a similar vision of teaching with the teachers in her second school facilitated collaboration:

We’ve been doing a lot of collaborating with the other Junior teachers ... looking at where we’re going as a division, and what we’re trying to teach the children, and what our vision should be. And it’s really nice because most of us have a common vision and have positive outlooks as teachers so we’re able to collaborate well.

In fact, Anita’s observation here relates to a key process in the development of a community of practice. Wenger (1998) suggests that learning happens during the practice of community itself, and this seems to be the case in Anita’s experience of the two different groups of teachers in the two schools she worked at.

Another way in which Anita and her colleagues learned from each other was through observing each other teaching. During her first and second year of teaching, the principal organized classroom observations that were useful for Anita since they provided a model of specific pedagogical practices. For example, in her first year, Anita implemented reading groups but stopped them later, as she recognized “it just didn't work out very well.” Then, she observed and talked with a more experienced teacher that used that strategy. The observation was useful “because I was able to model the way it works on hers, it worked out so much better.” As she explained in her second year, observing other teachers in their classrooms was a rich opportunity to learn:

The only way I learned about it [guided reading] was through watching another teacher do it with her kids. And I was like "Okay, I can kind of do that" and then I kind of put my own twist on it too. So it’s very similar to what she does, but the only way I learned about it was
from watching her. I learned a little bit by reading about it in books; but you don't actually understand what it's like until you can see how it works.

Despite the fact that the principal organized the classroom observations, this was not perceived as a top-down professional development activity. As Anita commented, the mid-career teachers at her school were glad and comfortable to be observed, but also wanted to observe other teachers. The collegial environment at Anita’s school was an ideal context through which promote classroom observation. As Lasagabaster & Sierra (2011) suggest, “the establishment of a congenial relationship with those to be observed is a basic step, as observation must be built on a foundation of trust” (p 450). Set in this context, Anita recognized classroom observation as a useful way to learn from others.

Later in their teaching careers, Anita and Tanya learned and collaborated in small groups of teachers from the same grade (grade partners). They interacted in various formats with grade partners; the general purpose of the collaboration was program development. Meeting to co-plan was one of these formats. Organized in advanced, Anita and Tanya met with their grade partners to discuss the structure of the units and resources they would use. Tanya experienced this way of collaborating from very early in her career (in her second year). In fact, she preferred these meetings because by then she shared similar visions of teaching with her grade partners. Anita had these meetings in her fifth year of teaching. For her, the co-planning meetings were a significant experience that helped her to improve her skills for program planning. As she observed in year 5: “Now, having a true grade partner that teaches the exact same grades I do, just planning more with someone else or doing moderated marking with someone else, that has been really the big change.”

The time constraints of the school schedule also required alternative formats to the co-planning meetings. For instance, Tanya and her grade partner in her third year opted to communicate through email: “I think there’s no time. My grade partner and I co-plan over the
email. It’s very hard to physically meet face-to-face. So it is email frequently throughout the day and that's easy for us.”

In addition, Anita was involved in yet another format of interaction with her colleagues: she had short casual conversations around teaching practices and lesson planning with her grade partners. She labeled this kind of interaction “informal” because it happened without prior organization. As she described in her fourth year of teaching:

At this school, I tend to confer quite a bit with my grade teaching partners. I go in informally and say, “Hey, what are you doing this week?” or “What unit are you on?” or “What are you teaching in language right now? What are you teaching in math right now?” and we just kind of check up on each other to see what we’re doing.

The experiences of Anita and Tanya reveal the various ways in which teachers can learn with and from their colleagues. Early in the teaching career, having a community that offers guidance and support is especially important. Moreover, interacting in small groups with grade partners leads to significant learning, particularly in the area of program development. Both Anita and Tanya recognized the value of “bouncing ideas off each other” and “talking through” their pedagogical practices. As some researchers emphasize, these conversations are particularly important since they allow teachers to inquire into and reflect upon their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Little, 2012).

Mandated Collaborative Learning at the School Level: Anita’s Experiences of “Moderated Marking” and “Teaching/Learning Critical Pathways”

This section describes how Anita experienced two ministry-mandated initiatives in collaborative teacher learning. The initiatives “Teacher Moderation” and “Teaching/Learning Critical Pathways” (TLCP) were proposed by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) of the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2007 and 2008, respectively. First, I present a brief introduction to the initiatives and later, Anita’s experiences of them.
“Teacher Moderation” proposes collaboration and discussion of students’ work among teachers to develop common assessment and teaching practices. As specified in the guidelines for implementation:

The school community benefits when teacher moderation becomes an integral aspect of professional learning. Through the collective wisdom of all participants, school teams delve deeper into the assessment data leading to greater consistency, alignment, and targeted instruction. (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, p.2)

As stated in the LNS document, TLCP presents a model of collaboration among teachers within the school:

The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) is a promising model used to organize actions for teaching and student learning. The TLCP... is designed as the work of the professional learning community (PLC). The basic idea of the pathway is that classroom practice can be organized in a practical, precise and highly personalized manner for each student, with the intended outcome being increased achievement for all students. The model which sequences the work of each PLC is an organizer for deep learning and inquiry. (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008, p.1)

The initiative suggests specific activities organized into three stages for developing the TLCP (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008):

- First stage, “Setting up the TLCP”: Teachers identify the areas of students’ needs and review their current practices regarding those needs.

- Second stage, “TLCP actions”: Collaboratively, teachers design teaching and assessment strategies related to the students’ needs discussed. In this stage, teachers collect and share evidence of student learning.

- Third stage, “Outcomes of the TLCP”: Each teacher brings a piece of students’ work and analyses it in-depth with the group (Teacher Moderation process). Teachers reflect on their students’ learning process, and also on their own teaching and learning in the TLCP.

At Anita’s school, the implementation of both initiatives was mandated by the school district. “Teacher Moderation” started in 2009. The next year, this initiative became part of the TLCP.
This was seen as requiring meetings within her grade division, consisted of three main activities. First, together identify specific skills and abilities that students need to improve. Second, collaboratively discuss and design strategies to teach those skills and abilities. Third, define common criteria to evaluate the progress and achievement. These activities closely resembled the suggestions for implementation stated in the LNS documents.

Anita perceived that these mandated activities emphasized accountability. Despite the fact that she believed that promoting accountability of teachers’ work could be beneficial to professional practice, she criticized the top-down direction of the teacher development initiatives that took place in her school. In year 7 she commented:

I’m all for accountability and making sure we have good teaching practice. And I’m always happy to learn new practice. ... [However] I don’t think good professional practice has to come top-down like that. There are ways of motivating people to improve their credentials and things like that without such a top-down method.

In particular, Anita felt pressure to follow exactly what had been agreed upon at the meetings. In year 5, in response to a question about whether or not she felt she had to cover the mandated curriculum, Anita said:

In an indirect way. We are doing more moderated marking, so I need to be doing the same projects as my grade partner. We have a special learning community as a Junior division, but this year we needed to be a little bit more accountable in what we were doing in class. So there’s a little bit of pressure that way.

In her year 6 interview, Anita reiterated this idea:

We were held highly accountable ... as a Junior division. We had moderated marking sessions [and] we had release time to plan lessons and to plan assessments... So the Board really emphasized it this year. So I just felt pressure to always be doing that.

Anita felt that this pressure to be accountable also guided the prioritization of specific skills and abilities to be discussed in the meetings. As she commented, the data used to identify skills and abilities came mainly from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests. These
tests measure student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics in grades 3, 6 and 9 (EQAO, n.d.).

The LNS documents promote identifying areas of students’ needs from the data but it do not suggest using EQAO data exclusively. Essentially, the utilization of student evidence in the collaboration is meant to “ground teachers’ deliberations in the realities of practice” (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007, p.204). Hence, including student artifacts and refining assessment practices are important elements for a successful teacher development program (Timperley et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, the TLCP implementation seemed to prioritize EQAO data at Anita’s school and at others in Ontario. In a case study of a network of 17 schools implementing the TLCP, the LSN research team (2009) found that EQAO data was used mainly at the beginning of the implementation. In the case of Anita’s school, the implementation prioritized the results from EQAO tests consistently over the years. Consequently, the skills discussed were too specific, mostly related to reading, and corresponded to testing skills. For instance, Anita mentioned that in the TLCP meetings the teachers discussed how to improve three main reading abilities (“inferencing, summarizing, and making connections”) and focused on student skills in writing short format answers. As she mentioned in year 7:

It’s called [Teaching-Learning Critical] Pathways, and it’s basically just coming together as a staff, figuring out from the data, the EQAO data – and they say other data but really it’s the EQAO data – what kinds of skills your students need to practice and learn. And using that data, to then come together as a team of teachers and figure out how you’re going to basically plan a unit, how you’re going to teach those skills in the classroom.

The attention to EQAO test results was still present the following year, Anita’s eighth year of teaching. She reported:

We’ve based what we do mostly on our EQAO data, what kinds of questions our kids are not answering very well... So this year, one of our pathways was on how to answer a question thoroughly in a short answer format. And so, we would design questions together as a staff, and implement the teaching in our classrooms.
Anita highlighted two main consequences of prioritizing attention to skills and abilities using the EQAO assessment results. First, because considerable time was invested in developing the skills and abilities agreed upon as significant in the TLCP meetings, other abilities were not covered during school time. For example, Anita mentioned that since a strong emphasis was given to reading, writing skills were set aside. Second, the skills prioritized were not necessarily the most relevant to the needs of her students and, at times, interfered with the lessons she had planned for her class. Anita reported that the time would have been better invested in topics her students needed more help with (e.g., writing). As Anita said in year 6:

I spent most of my time teaching about that area that we had "chosen" or that we were told to do... And it was all based on reading, which can be cross-curricular, you can incorporate that into so many things. But it just seems like I just spent all my time focusing on teaching lessons around those concepts. And, for instance, writing kind of went out the window [laughing], and other things got sacrificed for that.

Although Anita did not indicate where the directive to prioritize EQAO test results came from, it was clear that it was imposed upon the teachers from the outside. Thus, in the context of the TLCP, teachers’ capacity to make decisions regarding their student’s needs was considerably reduced. In year 7 Anita noted: “I think teachers do have a good sense of the skills their students need to learn... I don’t know if basing it on EQAO marks is the best thing.” Her point of view is supported by Timperley et al. (2007):

For teachers to benefit from the enhanced expertise and resources that professional learning communities can offer, it appears essential that they should have some room to exercise professional discretion. Otherwise, the learning opportunities offered teachers would merely emulate student drill-and-skill sessions. (p.205)

Anita’s experiences of these initiatives illustrate a top-down and test-oriented policy implementation. This is particularly visible through the teachers’ lack of agency in deciding the aims of collaboration and the kind of data to be analyzed. Hence, resembling the pressures teachers feel...
to “teach to the test,” these initiatives seem to follow “test-based professional development” educational policies.

Anita’s experience exemplifies the current situation of Ontario teachers. Such pressures towards accountability vary from country to country. For instance, comparing professional development experiences in Finland and England, Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen & Poikonen (2009) identified stronger accountability and performativity pressures in England than in Finland. In the English cases studied, “teachers’ professional learning was directly linked into the government’s standards agenda with most professional enquiry narrowly focused on the collection, review and analysis of performance data” (p. 419-420), which was not observed in the Finnish schools. The authors concluded that the accountability and performativity “straitjacket” limited creativity and reflection processes in teachers’ collaborative environments.

Similar to the English cases described by Webb et al. (2009), the accountability pressures and the emphasis on EQAO data in Anita’s TLPCs reduced the potential for collaboration, and ultimately, the eagerness of teachers to work together. Anita expressed this in year 8, her fourth year of being involved in mandated collaboration:

“This year it [TLCP] kind of fell apart a little bit... [T]here's not really much point in doing a pathway together if people aren't willing to do the activities that we've set out to do, or if they're not willing to follow the timeline, or if they are not willing to design activities together... it makes it difficult to do.

These accountability pressures seem to be guided by a drive to enhance pupils’ learning, but in the process, teachers’ professional roles are being overlooked (van Veen & Kooy, 2012; Webb et al., 2009). As van Veen & Kooy (2012) suggest, educational policies should recognize “the teacher as professional and informed decision maker” (p. 254). Similarly, Timperley et al. (2007) state that teacher input and cooperation to shape professional development initiatives at school are important for effective professional learning. Clearly, Anita’s experiences suggest that there is a need to rethink teachers’ roles in the design and implementation of teacher professional
Part-Time Graduate Studies as an Opportunity to Learn: Tanya’s Experience in a PhD Program.

In her fourth year of teaching, Tanya started a part-time PhD program in literacy education. The requirements to obtain the doctoral degree include course work, a comprehensive examination, and a thesis based on original research. As a part-time student, Tanya needed to complete these requirements within eight years.

In year 3, Tanya articulated that her decision to continue studying was motivated by her eagerness to learn: “I think the more time I spend here [in the classroom], the more stuff I want to know, and the more stuff I want to learn.” She also recognized that a PhD degree might open up further opportunities beyond the classroom: “Going back for doctoral studies is the natural choice because I think it will open more doors.”

Tanya’s learning experience in the graduate program was mainly shaped by the opportunity to work and study simultaneously. The nature of part-time studies permits having work responsibilities along with taking graduate courses and conducting research. Tanya’s professional practice at the school and her academic experience at the university were connected.

The analysis of the first five years of Tanya’s participation at the PhD program suggests two ways in which her practice and studies were linked. First, her course work required intense academic reading, which shaped her pedagogical vision. Tanya’s graduate course work had a strong reading component. As she said in her first year in the program (and fourth year of teaching):

I have had plenty of opportunity in the PhD courses to read materials on literacy and multi-literacies, and my first course was a Foundations [of Curriculum] course, so that was a nice general course that covered a lot of topics with general journal articles. So I do lots of professional reading right now.
In particular, Tanya remarked that the readings allowed her to broaden her pedagogical understanding in the area of literacy. For instance, as she remarked in year 5, reading about multi-literacies and digital literacies led her to think on issues that she “wouldn’t have thought of without the coursework”. Thus, Tanya (being in her fifth year of teaching) recognized that her vision of literacy was expanded through the readings:

I think my overall vision was always that they [the students] would just love reading... But now, when I picture a Literacy program, there are more aspects to it. So we are not just talking about traditional chapter books, but we’re talking about those graphic novels, how to read a web page and what skills you need for reading a web page, or those types of digital literacies which weren’t part of my vision before. I guess my understanding of literacy, my vision of literacy, is broader... the coursework and the reading I've done outside of the classroom has greatly influenced that.

The second way in which Tanya linked her professional practice and her academic experience was through reflection. Tanya’s graduate work provided her with time and resources (e.g., class discussions and professional readings) to reflect on her teaching practice. An important reflection exercise was involved in her thesis project, a self-study on her teaching practices. Self-study research is a methodology that involves a critical examination of the self, conducted by the self (Samaras & Freese, 2009). She highlighted this during an interview conducted when she was in the fourth year of her graduate program (and seventh year of teaching):

I have a lot of time to think about my profession through my graduate work. It’s easy to get caught up, I find, in the day-to-day work of the classroom, and not find ways to reflect on your practice or gain professional development that will allow you to change your practice. But because my classroom work is running parallel to my graduate work, I get to jump back and forth between the two both roles on a daily basis.

Despite the advantages of graduate studies for professional development, some challenges should be recognized. One important challenge is related to the high cost of graduate studies. In year 3, before entering the PhD program, Tanya mentioned: “I'd love to go back to school [university], I'm missing it a lot. [But] I need to teach [laughing] I need the money.” Another
Other researchers have studied full-time teachers enrolled in part-time graduate studies and have documented similar benefits and challenges. For example, Wolstenholme (2008), in reflecting on her graduate studies at an English university, commented that her part-time PhD studies helped her to broaden the understandings of her practice in relation to inclusive education and policy. Castle, Peiser & Smith (2013), drawing on three case studies of Masters students from different universities in England, found that the teachers’ engagement in academic reading and research increased their professional confidence (e.g., explaining the theoretical underpinnings of a curriculum change). The researchers concluded that “it seems that the MTL [Master of Teaching and Learning] can provide a very effective framework for teachers’ professional development” (p. 37). Despite the benefits to their teaching practice, the teachers in both studies also commented on the difficulties of finding a balance between work and academic demands. As Wolstenholme (2008) said: “Anyone who has worked part-time on a PhD will appreciate how difficult this can be, with the feeling of having two jobs” (p.2).

Tanya considered her PhD studies to be a turning point in her career. The possibilities for expanding her vision of teaching and reflection on her practice through her graduate work made her part-time PhD studies a significant learning opportunity. Indeed, this experience shaped her identity as a teacher, as she remarked in her sixth year of teaching:

I think graduate studies really helps change people’s ideas of themselves as teachers. I’m not sure additional qualification courses do the same thing. Again, I haven’t taken them so maybe it’s not fair to judge. But when I’ve seen people enroll in graduate studies, their identities change more.

Tanya’s positive graduate studies experience offers an example of how a sustained relationship with theory (through readings, course work, and research) can lead to relevant professional development. As Kosnik and Beck (2009) state, linking theory with practice should be
a guiding principle for initial teacher education programs. While Tanya’s experience refers to a
graduate level and in-service moment in her career, this space allowed her to understand and
recognize the “implications of the theory for practice” (Kosnik and Beck, 2009, p.9).

Conclusion

In the four sections of this chapter, I describe various learning experiences of Anita and Tanya
during their careers. The first and second sections illustrate both the challenges and supports they
encountered in their first years as teachers. It is interesting to observe the different beginnings of
the two case studies. Tanya’s challenges in her first year were shaped by not having a formal
mentor and being surrounded by colleagues with a different view of teaching from hers. In
contrast, Anita was part of a collaborative community with similar views of teaching, where she
found pedagogical and emotional support.

The second and third sections present Anita and Tanya’s experiences later in their careers,
particularly their experiences learning from and with others. Both teachers mentioned the
opportunities to learn about program development by participating in program planning teams.
These spaces were significant to them because they had the chance to “talk through” their
pedagogical practice and “bounce ideas off each other”. Nevertheless, Anita’s collaboration
experience, framed by top-down and test-oriented government initiatives, highlights the
constraints on the objectives and paths of teacher learning when professional development
activities are externally mandated.

The fourth section presents Tanya’s experience in part-time graduate studies. Having full-
time work running in parallel with part-time studies allowed Tanya to connect theory and practice.
Her course work exposed her to new pedagogical theories, which broadened her vision of teaching.
Moreover, her studies provided her with time to reflect on her pedagogical practice. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the challenges of finding a work/life balance in this context.

Finally, this chronological account of the learning experiences of Anita and Tanya describes the challenges they experienced at different moments in their careers, and the learning supports they encountered within their schools and outside of them. In the next chapter, Conclusions and Implications, I discuss the main conclusions of the thesis and provide some recommendations for the design of professional development activities and for future research in this area.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

This chapter is organized into four sections. Section 1 presents general conclusions; Section 2 outlines practical implications for the school system; Section 3 discusses limitations of the study; and Section 4 suggests some possible directions for future research on teacher development.

General Conclusions

In this section, I present general conclusions from the findings outlined in the previous chapter. Given that the study focuses on the experience of just two teachers, these conclusions must be considered tentative. However, the teachers’ careers over an eight-year period permit some insights into the role that opportunities for professional learning had in their development as teachers.

1. *In the early years of their careers, teachers can benefit from concrete ideas for pedagogical practices and program development.*

In their early years in the profession, teachers need support to face the various challenges of learning to teach (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). According to Feiman-Nemser (2001), teachers face six “central learning tasks” at the beginning of their careers in the classroom (p. 1027-1029):

- Gaining local knowledge of students, curriculum, and school context
- Enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways
- Designing responsive curriculum and instruction
- Creating a classroom learning community
- Developing a professional identity
- Learning in and from practice
This study provides evidence to support the relevance of two of these learning tasks: enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways, and designing responsive curriculum and instruction. The early teaching experiences of Anita and Tanya underscore their need for concrete ideas to develop their instructional repertoire (e.g., models of practice) and to design lesson plans (e.g., ideas of pedagogical practices and materials). Both Anita and Tanya received support to fulfill these needs.

In interviews early in her teaching career, Anita referred to her need for concrete models to implement reading strategies. She obtained practical ideas on how to implement these strategies through observation of the classroom practice of a more experienced teacher at her school. In struggling to come up with responsive and relevant curriculum design, both Anita and Tanya were able to develop concrete ideas for their lesson plans through working with other teachers at the beginning of their careers. The spaces for collaboration were varied and included TLCP sessions, grade division meetings, and grade partner work. These spaces were used to discuss and organize their lesson planning and, at the same time, were offered as an occasion to talk through their pedagogical practices.

The importance of conversations on concrete matters has been highlighted by several authors (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Little, 2012). As Feiman-Nemser (2001) notes:

Professional development takes place through serious, ongoing conversation. The conversation occurs in communities of practice. It focuses on the particulars of teaching, learning, subject matter, and students. By engaging in professional discourse with like-minded colleagues grounded in the content and tasks of teaching and learning, teachers can deepen knowledge of subject matter and curriculum, refine their instructional repertoire, hone their inquiry skills, and become critical colleagues. (p. 1042)

The cases of Anita and Tanya not only demonstrate the need for concrete ideas to support pedagogical practices and program development, but also offer examples of useful practices of professional learning to respond to these needs.
2. **Teachers benefit when provided with emotional support as part of teacher development programs.**

Teachers’ emotions are a central aspect of teaching since they shape classroom practice, teachers’ learning processes, and their motivation to teach (Hargreaves, 2005; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Considering the centrality of emotion in the teaching profession, it is relevant to include an emotional dimension in professional development programming.

In this study, the experiences of Anita and Tanya underscore the importance of receiving emotional support, particularly at the beginning of the teaching career. Anita found emotional support in her school’s community, while Tanya received it from her mentoring interactions. The case of Tanya is interesting because in her mentoring role, she was able to help her mentee to deal with emotions related to the challenges of being new to the teaching profession. As Tanya recognized, there is an important emotional component in the mentoring relationship (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000; Hobson et al., 2009). However, as I present in the next point, some other conditions are necessary for a mentoring process to be beneficial.

3. **Mentoring can be very helpful provided the mentor is well-selected, the timing is precise, and the relationship is encouraging.**

Mentoring programs aim to help novice teachers with the challenges of being new in a profession. As Fantilli & McDougall (2009) assert, “almost instantly, a beginning teacher has the same responsibility as a teacher with many years of service.” (p. 814). Thus, sustained support is necessary during this challenging period (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). However, mentoring programs are not “straightforward – pairing a new teacher with a more senior colleague ... recent literature suggests that in reality it takes many forms, within many different contexts, and with differing results” (Smaller, 2012, p. 140). This thesis sheds some light on useful
mentoring practices through the experiences of Tanya in her role as mentee and, later, as a mentor. Based on her statements about the challenges and rewards of the mentoring process, three elements emerge as critical to providing new teachers with a helpful induction into the career.

The first element concerns appropriate mentor selection. According to Tanya, the pairing process should be guided by a match in the teaching assignments of the mentee and the mentor (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Hobson et al., 2009). Having similar subject matter or grade experiences allows the mentor to provide specific pedagogical guidance to the new teacher. The second element addresses the timing of the mentoring. Tanya was critical of the late beginning of the mentoring program for new teachers and suggested that mentoring activities should commence in the first year of teaching and should be scheduled early in the academic year (or even before it starts), so they can be of maximum benefit to the mentee. The third element concerns the quality of the relationship between mentee and mentor. This relationship should be empathetic in order to address the emotional needs of new teachers.

4. **Collaboration can significantly enhance teacher professional learning; however, the benefits can be constrained by educational policy pressures and different visions of teaching within the collaborating group.**

In their review of teacher development strategies in high-achieving countries, Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson and Orphanos (2009) conclude that introducing time for teacher collaboration within the school schedule is an effective practice. Moreover, the literature on communities of learning highlights the potential of collaboration for inquiring into practice placing students’ learning at the center of the teaching process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001; Little, 2012; Wenger, 1998).
The experiences of Anita and Tanya illustrate some of the benefits of collaboration for the teaching practice, but also highlight some constraints to the interaction among teachers. For instance, Anita’s participation in mandated collaboration initiatives from the Ontario Ministry of Education underscores the accountability and test-oriented pressures on teacher communities in her school. As she commented, these pressures restricted teachers to defining the goals and procedures of collaboration, which later reduced teachers’ motivation to participate in the meetings.

Another element that can constrain the collaboration is practitioners’ differing visions of teaching within a teaching community. For example, Tanya had a frustrating collaboration experience with her grade division since those she was working with held different visions of teaching from hers (constructivist activities vs. “worksheet” activities). By contrast, Anita and her school colleagues held similar visions of teaching, which facilitated the sharing process. Thus, both Tanya’s and Anita’s experiences suggest the importance of conducting a discussion of visions of teaching in order to establish common ground on which to build collaboration in a community of teachers.

5. University graduate degree work can be a valuable means of teacher professional learning through fostering connections between pedagogical theory and teaching practice.

Teachers involved in formal graduate studies benefit from new theoretical perspectives and the connections they begin to make between theories of education and classroom practice (Castle, Peiser & Smith, 2013; Wolstenholme, 2008). Graduate studies help teachers broaden their understandings of teaching (Wolstenholme, 2008) and also have a positive impact on teachers’ professional confidence (Castle, Peiser & Smith, 2013).
In this study, I analyzed Tanya’s experience as a part-time PhD student. Similar to other graduate programs, Tanya’s studies required intense academic reading. In her opinion, her assigned readings allowed her to familiarize herself with new theoretical frameworks of education, teaching, and learning. In addition, her course work and research activities provided her with opportunities to reflect on her teaching practice. The mutual influence of her academic work on her professional practice shows the potential of translating theory into practice.

6. Teacher input and decision-making are necessary for effective teacher development programs.

Different authors have claimed the necessity of teachers’ input into the design and implementation of teacher development programs (e.g., Timperley et al., 2007; Veen & Kooy, 2012). However, the idea of considering teachers’ input into professional development programming clashes with the current socio-political educational context of accountability and performativity, which diminish the significance and value of teachers’ professional judgments (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). As Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) emphasize,

[H]and in hand with the intensification of teachers’ work over the past 15 years has come an unwillingness to trust what is seen as the ‘subjectivity’ or teacher professional judgement in favour of more ‘objective’ measures such as standardised testing and other forms of competitive assessment. If the human dimension of education is to be acknowledged and valued, the reclaiming of teacher professional judgement as a trusted and respected tool, developed through and based upon reflection on and in professional knowledge and practice, is critical. (p. 138)

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s professional development initiatives that were reviewed in this thesis provide examples of different approaches to the inclusion of teachers’ input and decision-making. For instance, Anita’s participation at two mandated collaboration initiatives illustrated the restrictions these initiatives placed on teachers’ decision-making, particularly on the processes and goals of their collaborative work. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these
restrictions had a negative impact on the potential of the collaboration and, ultimately, reduced teachers’ eagerness to collaborate.

By contrast, the mentoring component of NTIP is guided by the assumption that new teachers have different needs, thus the initiative does not impose specific activities or topics to be developed in the induction process. Tanya’s participation in this initiative illustrates the possibilities of giving more control to teachers over how they use the time allotted to them for professional development. As Clark (2012) argues, “One example of a policy move towards more structured informal learning which recognizes the beginning teacher’s need for practical knowledge is the Ontario New Teacher Induction Program” (p. 155). Tanya’s positive experiences with the mentoring component of NTIP suggests the benefits of providing release time within the school day schedule for the mentor and mentee to decide the induction routes.

It is important to recognize the Ministry investment in teacher professional initiatives focused on collaboration in different formats (in groups and pairs). However, the contrasting experiences of Anita and Tanya in the initiatives described here lead one to conclude that teachers’ input and decision-making is necessary for effective teacher development programs. As Clark (2012) envisions, “Providing teachers with greater autonomy over their own professional learning will have positive benefits not only for teachers, but, most importantly, also for their students” (p. 160).

7. **Teacher development programming at a system level should consider the ongoing nature of learning and be designed as a continuum.**

The Ontario Ministry of Education professional development initiatives reviewed in this thesis respond to the different needs of teachers in particular stages of their careers. However, these initiatives seem to be disconnected from one another. According to Feiman-Nemser (2001), the
lack of a “connective tissue” among different professional development initiatives reduces its potential and strength. Hence, the author emphasizes the importance of developing a continuum for teacher learning, from pre-service teacher education programs to in-service initiatives for experienced teachers.

Following Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) proposal, I consider that the initiatives from the Ontario Ministry of Education might benefit from building bridges among them. A starting point in this direction could be observed in the guidelines for the mentoring component of NTIP. As stated in the NTIP document, “The desired outcomes [of the mentoring] are improved skills and knowledge for new teachers, as well as a more collaborative and professional environment in Ontario’s schools” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 18). Following this guideline, there is room for connecting, for instance, the mentoring process with the collaboration initiatives proposed by the Ministry. A possible avenue for linking these initiatives could be the mentoring pairs’ joint attendance at TLCP meetings. In this way, new teachers could be introduced to collaboration practices in the context of a particular school.

**Practical Implications**

In this section, I outline practical implications for different levels of the educational system. These implications are based on the findings and conclusions of this study.

1. **Government-led initiatives and policies for teacher development.**

Top-down oriented teacher development initiatives and policies that presume a passive role for teachers have been unsuccessful (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Alternative initiatives and policies that offer teachers an active role in their own learning processes should be encouraged. Including some room for teacher input and decision-making in professional
Teacher development initiatives and policies should also take into account that teacher learning and change are complex processes. The short-term oriented activities, such as isolated one-day workshops, might not promote teachers’ learning. There is a need to sustain programs to support teacher learning throughout their careers. As suggested earlier, the design of initiatives as a continuum might be extremely beneficial for teacher development programming (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

2. **Schools’ practices and principals’ leadership.**

Collaborative practice among teachers within the same school seems to be a promising alternative for teacher learning and professional growth. Principals’ leadership in the organization of these communities of practice is important. Again, teachers’ input and decision-making should be taken into account at this level. Thus, principals should discuss with teachers the collaboration practices that best meet teachers’ needs and can build upon the school’s existing organization and dynamics. At some schools, grade division meetings might be the best approach to collaboration, whereas other schools might benefit from small teams or even grade partner collaborations.

Another factor that principals should consider when organizing collaborative spaces is teachers’ differing visions of teaching. Such a discussion should not aim to align all teachers to a
particular perspective on or approach to teaching. However, an agreement on some elements of
the vision of teaching (for example, objectives of schooling and the kind of student-teacher
relationship the school promotes) might facilitate the collaboration.

3. **Teacher initiative.**

Teacher initiative and commitment to learning is evident in the pursuit of different opportunities
for professional learning undertaken by the participants observed in this thesis. For instance,
Tanya’s involvement in mentoring suggests a commitment to the learning processes of new staff at
the school. Moreover, the collaborative interchanges in which Anita and Tanya chose to be involved
demonstrate an eagerness to share practices and resources. Also, Tanya’s engagement in graduate
studies demonstrates a motivation to learn about a range of perspectives on education, as well as
inquiring into practice.

Despite some difficulties observed in the schools and the pressures from mandated
professional development policies, teachers in this study sustained their motivation to learn. As
Tark claims (2012) “teachers generally maintain great investment in their ongoing learning
regardless of top-down professional development programs” (p. 108). Thus, including teacher input
and decision-making in professional development might be an invaluable practice that will
capitalize on teachers’ drive to learn.

4. **Mentoring programming.**

In order to create a beneficial mentoring process, some considerations need to be addressed. I
have commented previously in this chapter on the importance of the mentor profile. Nevertheless,
there is a need for appropriate training for mentors before commencing mentoring activities. Such
training might focus on appropriate practices for collaborating with and guiding new teachers. In
addition, mentor training should highlight the importance of providing emotional support to beginning teachers.

Considering the strong need that new teachers have for concrete ideas for pedagogical practice in the early years, mentoring programs should include opportunities for classroom observation. These observations should not present one particular pedagogical practice as a unique model that the mentee should replicate in his or her classroom. In fact, these observations should start as a conversation about the decision-making process embedded in the teaching practice.

5. University programming.
Graduate programs in education offer teachers opportunities for significant learning and professional growth through fostering connections between theory and practice (Castle, Peiser, & Smith, 2013; Wolstenholme, 2008). The findings of this thesis tend to confirm the benefits of these connections for reflection and practice. Despite the current potential of graduate programs, universities could improve their programs by consulting practicing teachers. Such consultation might be focused on teachers’ interests and needs related to current challenges in schools. Another area of this consultation should be teachers’ application of theory in their professional practice. That is, graduate programs might benefit from concrete examples of how teachers are putting theory into practice.

Limitations of the Study
As reported in the Methods and Context chapter, this study is part of the longitudinal study Teacher Change and Growth. The selection of a few cases from a larger sample and the use of already collected data from the longitudinal study pose some limitations to this thesis.
The two cases investigated in this thesis do not represent the full range and diversity of teachers in Ontario. The principal investigators of the longitudinal study and I consider that the two cases selected for this study are exceptional because of their high involvement in various professional development activities over the course of their careers. Although this characteristic distinguishes them from other teachers, at the same time exploring the cases of Anita and Tanya offered a rich landscape for analyzing different opportunities for professional learning.

Another limitation faced in this study is related to conducting a secondary analysis of qualitative data. The main source of data for these case studies is interviews conducted within the framework of the longitudinal study. Particularly, I identify two main problems of conducting a secondary analysis: (i) some of the transcripts presented partial descriptions of the opportunities for professional learning, and (ii) I had limited knowledge about the participants and their contexts.

I became aware of the first problem early in the analysis process. Despite the fact that in-service professional development was a topic under investigation in the interview guides, it was not the center of the inquiry. Consequently, the professional development activities and the teachers’ experiences of those were not explored in full depth in some of the transcripts. Nevertheless, the longitudinal data set allowed me to partially overcome this problem. For instance, Anita’s comments about her participation at the TLCP during four consecutive years helped me to build a picture of her experience at that initiative.

The second problem arose in a later moment of the data analysis. I realized that I had limited knowledge about the participants and their contexts. My familiarity with the longitudinal study and the cases is based on my participation in the study as a research assistant. In this role, I have been exposed to the details of the research design and I have also read previous publications from the longitudinal study. Particularly, the case studies of Anita and Tanya included in the publications gave me many details of their profiles and context. However, lacking personal contact
with the participants and their context (e.g., visits to the schools in which they work) limited my interpretation of the transcripts.

Conducting a study as part of a larger research project poses challenges, as I have experienced in this thesis. However, through working on a data set collected during eight years I was able to gain insight into some of Anita and Tanya’s experiences of learning.

**Suggested Directions for Further Research**

The cases of Anita and Tanya illustrate some of the possibilities and challenges of different opportunities for professional learning available to beginning teachers. Some of the conclusions of this study focus on the opportunities and experiences from which novice teachers might benefit at the beginning of their careers. Despite the importance of this particular stage in the careers of teachers, the ongoing nature of teacher development should be investigated. Thus, the use of longitudinal methods might be helpful to grasp the distinct needs and learning processes of teachers at different moments of their professional lives.

Despite the fact that teachers do provide valuable insights about the opportunities for professional learning that they find beneficial, this research area could benefit from other voices within the school context. For instance, research about the role of principals in teacher development programs could describe exemplary leadership practices that support teacher learning environments in the schools.

Moreover, understanding the broader frame of government policies regarding teacher development might be useful. Some of the findings of this study were related to Ontario teacher development initiatives. I obtained valuable information from the Ministry of Education guidelines for understanding Anita and Tanya’s participation in these government initiatives. A document analysis of the government policy publications (e.g., program guidelines, official communications,
etc.) could lead us to better understand the implementation processes of these initiatives.

Moreover, it would be interesting to identify the conceptual foundations of the teacher development initiatives. For instance, how do the documents define the teaching profession and the teacher’s learning processes?
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