Uncovering Middle School's Teachers' Perceptions about Learning: A Reflective Practice Approach

By

Andrea Carnegie

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Andrea Carnegie
Department of Curriculum Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto

Abstract

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions play a significant role in how teachers experience learning and strongly influence what they will, or will not do in their classrooms. This study seeks to understand how teachers learn by using reflective practice to interpret teachers' collective experiences. Interpreting teachers’ perceptions will result in new ways of understanding the types of learning experiences and professional development programs that best support their needs. A phenomenological approach was utilized in order to interpret the collective experiences of nine middle school teachers. Data collection included focus group dialogues, semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Findings revealed that teachers desire the need to be in charge of their own learning; critical reflection and inquiry are significant for learning to take place and that teachers learn while sharing and exchanging best practices with each other and within supportive environments.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Recent and ongoing calls for reforms and changes in schools have focused on the need for improved student performance (Dufour, 2004; Fullan, 2003) that form the basis of many school improvement initiatives. The central premise of this argument is that if students are to improve in performance, then teachers need to teach 'better' than they have in the past. These new expectations have placed huge demands on teacher workloads, resources and with little or no time to learn, or to carry out these new initiatives. Moreover, a new focus has shifted to teachers as they must learn and accommodate the mandated changes required of them.

Current research has now turned to how to best prepare teachers for their changing roles. Significant attention has been paid to models of professional development and what constitute effective professional development for teachers. Many teachers voluntarily participate in professional development programs, however, there are conflicting views as to whether these programs have had any significant impact on teacher, as well as student learning (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Kooy, 2009).

Recent literature in teacher professional development focus on a philosophical assumption that the system of preparing teachers in this 21st century is 'broken' and consequently, teachers need 'fixing'. This body of research also implies that fixing the 'problem' of teaching, includes finding the 'best' models of professional development that work. More often, lost in this debate is the question of what brings about teacher learning. What do teachers
learn when they get together in communities? How do teachers learn essential knowledge and skills for classroom practice?

Schon (1987), offers two epistemological framework to describe teachers' ways of 'knowing', or coming to 'know' something. A teacher will know how to act in a certain situation because he or she is already anticipating already what will happen. Schon (1987) refers to this practice as reflection-in-action or 'knowledge-in-action' (p. 26). Teachers also gain knowledge through experience and the ability to 'act' on these experiences. ‘Reflection-on-action' differs from 'reflection-in-action' and refers to “the ordered, deliberate, and systematic application of logic to a problem in order to resolve it” (Russel & Munby 1991). Teachers’ ways of learning is caused from their ability to create new knowledge by drawing on familiar information and by being able to present this new knowledge in a freshly framed sense (p. 164).

Narrative inquiry theorists, Clandinin and Connelly (1996), argue that learning is constructed as people create and recreate new meanings through their various interactions of learning with and of others. At the same time social learning theorists Lave & Wenger (1991), maintain that learning is socially constructed through ongoing interactions with self and others within specific contexts. Drawing upon these arguments, Kooy (2009), proposes that teacher professional development opportunities should then take into consideration that teacher learning is negotiable, varied depending on contexts, and is reflective-based practice (p 16). Furthermore, Pajares, (1992), implies that teachers' own attitudes and beliefs play a major role in how they experience learning (p. 307). Teacher beliefs, attitudes and professional judgment strongly influence what they will, or will not do in their classrooms. If teachers’ perceptions play an important role in what takes place within the classroom, then it is also necessary to gain their understanding on the types of learning experiences that they find useful. This study calls for a
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deepen understanding of teacher beliefs and the tools that they utilize during learning in order to gain a more in-depth perspective on the types of professional development programs that teachers find useful.

**The Context of the Study**

Professional development programs for teachers have been around for decades, yet how these programs address and effect teacher, as well as student learning, remains unexplored. Traditional beliefs around professional development programs assume that if teachers were taught new skills they would in turn bring back these skills to their classrooms. This practice, however, failed to explain why teacher experiences vary from one professional development session to another and why many teachers find some professional development programs more beneficial than others. Current research is very critical of traditional forms of professional development as they prove to be ineffective, very costly and fail to offer any real on-going support to sustain learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Webster-Wright 2009; Kooy, 2009; D. Clarke & Hollingsworth 2002).

Recent literature has shifted focus to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and teacher professional development in communities of learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord 1997. While many schools and boards of education have collectively embraced the PLC model, these models differ in context from schools to schools and from one board of education to another. Lost in this debate, is the role that teachers play in defining their own learning. Kooy & Colarusso, (2012), discuss the need to define student learning in terms of teacher learning. “Teachers’ perspectives play a critical role of teachers in defining educational change, and in contributing to teacher, as well as student learning” (p. 119). If teachers are required to accommodate all these changes, then more attention needs to be given to uncovering how
teachers learn and to design professional learning opportunities that meet their needs and contribute to changes in the classroom.

In attempting to understand the nature of professional development and what works, it is important to begin to understand how teachers experience learning. Schon (1987), talks about teacher learning that comes from experience and the knowledge that comes from acting upon various experiences (p. 26). If teachers’ beliefs, attitudes and perceptions strongly influence their behavior and essentially what takes place inside their classrooms then professional development programs designed for teachers need to be more inclusive of teachers’ perspectives on how they describe their learning experiences. Professional development programs will become more effective when these ideas are incorporated into practice and become a part of the realities that shape teachers’ professional learning.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers’ beliefs attitudes and perceptions about learning through the use of reflective practice as a tool in teacher engagement. It is hoped that interpreting teachers’ perceptions about learning will reveal new ways of understanding the types of learning experiences that best support their needs. These behaviours in part, will reflect on how well teachers perform and what they do in their classrooms to impact student learning. Since teachers are the single most significant factor in affecting and shaping student learning, building excellence among teachers is a high priority.

A growing body of literature on teacher learning seeks to find the best models of professional development programs for teachers as the solution to ‘fixing’ the teaching ‘crisis’ in education. Inadvertently, these programs have been around for a long time and little have been
said about their effectiveness in contributing to lasting change in the classroom. At the same time, teachers are motivated to learn what they believe works ‘best’ for their students at that particular time. The ways in which teachers engage in this type of self-directed professional learning are important in contributing to the gap in the current literature on effective professional development. The study hopes to unlock teacher beliefs and perceptions on how best they learn and to what extent reflection used in different processes informs professional development and practice.

Research Questions

My over-arching research question is: What role does reflective practice play in uncovering beliefs about teachers' learning? From this question, I came up with four other sub-questions:

- What does it mean for middle school teachers to use reflective practice as a tool in learning?
- What themes emerge from middle school teachers' responses about how they experience this phenomenon?
- What conditions and structures need to be in place in order to support teacher reflective practice?
- What role does community play in supporting reflective practice?

In summary, this study's purpose is threefold: (1) it sets out to understand the beliefs and perceptions of teachers as learners by looking at how teachers use reflective practice as a tool in teacher learning. By asking the question of what role does reflective practice plays in teacher learning, the study hopes to: (2) uncover themes that underlies teacher learning. Phenomenological themes are understood as the structures of experiences (Van Manen, 1997 p.
78). By analyzing teachers' collective learning we will be able to 'understand' the essence of teacher learning through various themes. (3) To contribute to the literature on providing professional development programs in social contexts that support teacher, as well as student learning.

Background and Rationale for Study

My interest in this topic came from my own personal experiences as an educator. As a beginning teacher, I was very interested in participating in the various professional development programs that were available for teachers. Like many teachers, I took courses that offered me opportunities for additional qualifications in other areas, as well as participated in other professional development opportunities within my board.

Very early in my career, I realized that many of the professional development sessions that I attended were not able to help me address my needs as a beginning teacher, or offer any solutions to assist with some of the challenges that I faced as a fairly new teacher. Many of these sessions were too short, too much emphasis on presentation, as oppose to practicalities [more style over substance] and little acknowledgement of my classroom experiences. I became frustrated because these sessions were practically done in the same manner. There were no real ‘involvement’, - yes you were ‘told’ to do things – but you felt a real disconnect because you were not sure how this was going to help you in learning something helpful to bring back to your classroom. Many times after attending one of these workshop sessions I would return with packages of papers instead of practical ideas to support what I was doing in my classroom.
It was not long before I began to reflect on my own practices as a teacher and begin to notice the ones that motivated student learning. I realized that in order for me to fully understand how to support the learning needs of my students, I would need to also understand myself as a ‘learner’. Understanding myself as a ‘learner’ was a huge turning point in my journey as an educator. It was at this time that I fully realized that in order to become an effective teacher, I would also need to begin to take some learning risks in the classroom. This was a very daunting task and one that would open up a lot of vulnerabilities and revealed a lot about myself as a ‘teacher’. Still, this was very important and also very exciting. I also felt a huge weight taken off my shoulders because for the very first time, I came to the realization that I was not a ‘performer’, it was okay to make mistakes and that and that my students needed to see and know that I did not have the answers to everything – we were in this together. Teaching for me began to take on a different form. It began to look more ‘messy’ and most of the times not sure where I was going. More importantly, I was learning about my students and how to support them in their learning. It was a very exciting time for me. I became more interested in understanding the curriculum and how I could use it to find ways to support my students’ learning.

I found out that the more risks I took in my practice the more I learned about myself as a learner and gained a better understanding of the other learners in the classroom. Many times following a lesson and during my self-reflective process I found something that I would change if I had to teach that same lesson again. In fact I realized that the more I learned the easier it became for me to take learning risks inside my classroom. My confidence grew and soon I wanted to share some of what was working in my classrooms with other teachers. It was at this time that I became very interested in mentoring and I took on the role of mentoring pre-service, as well as practicing teachers. Taking on the role of mentoring gave me some satisfaction as I
was able to channel some of my frustrations by sharing some of the things that I was doing in my classroom. I began to look at things from a wider perspective and became interested in finding teachers that had similar goals and would not mind taking on small school-wide tasks that supported students’ learning.

I thought that an action-research was a great place to start. At the time I felt confident about the work I was doing in math and it seemed like a great place to start and to get support from other colleagues. In 2010, with the help from a few of my colleagues we implemented a successful school-wide math initiative. In our first year we saw teachers changing some of their instructional strategies and students becoming more engaged in math by using strategies that were more student-centered. With the support of the principal we planned and hosted our own professional development day in math on a board-wide Professional Activity Day. Later in the year we hosted our first annual Math Community Night for parents, students and teachers.

This experience was a motivating factor in propelling me to where I am today and my interest in teacher research. It was this interest that brought me back to university and to this study. At first, I was more interested in doing just the courses that I needed in order to graduate with a Master in Education. My interest in inquiry was fuelled after conducting my own inquiry about “Black Boys and Reading” while I was enrolled in a course with my now thesis advisor Dr. Kooy. I still had questions that I wanted to answer. Questions that pertained to the ‘disconnect’ between what I was doing in my classroom and the types of professional development programs that were provided and I was expected to participate in. My break came was I was invited by Dr. Kooy to participate in a longitudinal study of teachers in an online Professional Learning Community (PLC). This opportunity would later provide me with the time and the space to conduct my own inquiry about teacher learning.
My involvement in mentoring other teachers and the experiences I gained during the action research in math gave me two distinct hypotheses to go by: The first one proves to me that teachers are constantly involved in self-directed learning, they do it when mentoring, while working with other teachers on projects or, just by reading a piece of literature. Secondly and consistent with Schon’s (1987) theory, teachers are constantly thinking and rethinking about their practice. Reflective practice guides this research inquiry. By using the interpretive approach, it will uncover the themes inherent in teacher learning. It is through my own use of reflective practice that fueled my interest in this research study. The role of reflective practice and the tools teachers use are important in contributing to and addressing the gap in providing effective professional development for teachers.

**Theoretical Framework**

In examining the theoretical framework that guides this study, it is first important to ask the question of what theoretical framework, or frameworks best describe this phenomenon. Constructivist theorists have long attested to an epistemological assumption that 'learning' occurs from some reflective orientation between the learner and his or her environment. Dewey (1938), for example, suggests that the act of educating comes from the continuous interactions of the learner and what is being learned (p. 10). Dewey alludes to the notion that knowledge gained is never static as it is the meanings and values that people ascribed to learning becomes the data for further critical analysis. Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of individuals' interactions coupled with their social and cultural experiences on cultivating knowledge. Vygotsky terms this as zone of proximal development. Vygotsky explains that people construct knowledge when they are fully engaged within this zone through the reflective self, as well as interactions with people and the objects in the outside world.
Schon (1987), defines learning through the eyes of the reflective practitioner. Schon explains that people learn through the processes of reflection – in – action and reflection – on – action. Schon suggests that reflection – in – action stems from the interactions between peoples' beliefs and their experiences. Schon's view of reflection – in – action is that it can also be described as 'knowledge – in – action'. When people encounter new problems or situations they use reflection-in-action to improvise, or to test out new solutions to the problem (p.25). Schon explains that people are also capable of reflection – on – action when they are able to reflect on past actions after a period of time and begin to look if other alternatives exist.

Narrative inquiry theorists, Clandinin & Connelly (1996), argue that learning is constructed as people create and recreate new meanings through their various interactions of learning with and of others. Social learning theorists Lave & Wenger (1991), describe learning as socially constructed through ongoing interactions in a specific context. Still, critical learning theorist like (Mezirow, 2000); ascertains that adult engage in a continuous process of making meaning through constant reflection and replacing old meanings with new ones (p. 5). For critical learning theorists, learning is impossible without some type of interpretation as adults perceive new schema with old and existing ones. This type of reflective discourse is transformative and guided by humans’ thought actions as they interact with each other (Mezirow, 2000; Servage 2008).

**Theoretical Methodology Framework**

I used phenomenological approach to frame this study. Phenomenology has its roots in human experiences (Creswell, 1998 p. 9), and seeks to describe the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about a concept, or phenomenon. Phenomenology aims to derive a deeper understanding of the nature, or meaning of everyday experiences through the persons who have
had that particular experience and as to create a 'world-view' of it (Moustakas 1994, p.78). Phenomenological approach points to the need of doing research as the quest to question our experience in the world and also the search to want to know more about the world that we live in. According to Van Manen, (1997), phenomenology refers to this intimate desire to understand the connections to the world, “intentionality” (p. 87).

The focus on this philosophical framework will be on hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that studies humans. It is a study of the philosophy of the personal, the individual, which is pursued from an understanding of the self (logos) and other, the whole, communal, or social (Van Manen, p. 7).

Creswell (1998), identified some of the challenges faced from using phenomenology as a philosophical framework. Some of these challenges will be discussed later in Chapter Three in uncovering phenomenology as a philosophical paradigm in framing the study.

**Definitions of Key Terms & Concepts**

Professional Development – Professional development includes all the activities that develop an individual teacher's skills, knowledge and expertise, including formal in-service education. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1998, pg. 3). In this study, *professional development* refers to all the activities that teachers voluntarily, or involuntarily participate in with the intention of improving their practice and ultimately student achievement.

Ongoing Professional development – Ongoing professional development includes any type of professional development that takes place in a sustained learning environment. Ongoing professional development is at times referred to as Continuous Professional Development (CPD),
or Continuous Professional Learning (CPL). For the purpose of this study, ongoing professional development means continuous teacher learning with the intention of improving teaching practice through supportive and sustained learning environment over time.

Professional Learning Community (PLC) – A professional learning community is a learning community that focuses on shared vision and values about student learning. Hord, (1997), for example states that an effective (PLC) strongly adheres to a vision of student learning, a vision that acts as a consistently articulated and referenced guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning (Ontario Literacy & Numeracy Secretariat, 2007).

Teacher Learning Community – Teacher Learning Community refers to a culture of professionalism, collegiality and collaboration among teachers who share similar passion and interests. In a teacher learning community, teachers are often engaged in sustained continuous learning usually characterized in communities of practice.

Mandated professional development – Mandated professional development can also be referred to as school-based professional development programs. Mandated professional development programs are usually implemented by schools, or school boards to provide in-service professional development for teachers.

Student achievement – Student achievement refers to any indicator use to assess/measure students' academic success, or progress.

Reflective Practice – Reflective practice refers to the ability to evaluate, or question one's past beliefs; knowledge; assumptions or values through reflect-in-action, or reflect-on-action.

Reflection – in – action – Reflection – in - action is a tool used in reflective practice which stems from the interactions between peoples' beliefs and their experiences.
Reflection – on – action – Reflection – on – action refers to the ability to create new knowledge from examining and reflecting on past actions, knowledge and experiences after a period of time.

Phenomenology - Phenomenology refers to an interpretative approach that seeks to describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology has its roots in human experiences.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology – Hermeneutic Phenomenology refers to the human science that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences.
Chapter 2

Review of the Research Literature

Overview of Professional Development Literature

The bodies of literature that form the framework of this study center on: professional development, emerging models of PLCs and reflective practice. The first part of the literature relates to a general description of professional development. It goes on to describe emerging models of PLCs in schools. The second part of the literature examines effective practices in professional development including practices sustaining teacher professional development. The discussion ends with a look at how teachers construct knowledge with a focus on reflective practice and teacher beliefs.

Even though professional development programs for teachers have been around for decades, current research is often vague on what this should look like both in approach and practice. Teacher professional development differs in purpose and design from initial teacher education. (Day 1999), sums up the meaning of professional development:

Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual group or school and which contribute through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. (in Thornton, 2003, p. 4)

Professional development includes all the activities that develop an individual teacher's skills, knowledge and expertise, including formal in-service education. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 1998), refers to professional development as “all the activities that teachers voluntarily, or involuntarily participate in with the intention of improving
their practice and ultimately student achievement”. Involuntary, or mandated professional development can be referred to as school-based professional development programs. Mandated professional development programs are usually implemented by schools, or school boards to provide in-service professional development for teachers (p. 3).

**The One-Time Workshop Model**

Traditionally, the underlying assumption of professional development programs meant that if teachers were taught new skills they would in turn bring back these skills to their classrooms. Thus, professional development at its best is linked to student achievement. This model is based on the assumption that if you ‘changed' teachers' ways of ‘knowing’ there would be a lateral change in students' outcomes (Clarke & Hollingsworth 2002). The workshop model became a very popular model of choice used in the delivery of teacher professional development programs. This kind of professional development according to some research prove to be ineffective, very costly and fail to offer any real on-going support to sustain learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Webster-Wright 2009; Kooy, 2006; 1996; D. Clarke & Hollingsworth 2002).

Many teachers also criticize conventional forms of professional development programs and that these programs offer an over-simplistic view of how they acquire knowledge and does not address some of the challenges they face in their classrooms on an everyday basis. Even though these programs seem very unpopular with most teachers, they are still common today in many schools and for the most part seem to be the only real choice. Subsequently, in the wake of recent school reforms there is a body of literature that calls for high-quality professional development that lead to effective teaching practice and improved student outcomes. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2005), for example,
emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional development and its impact on future educational outcomes for students. The need for 'authentic' professional development programs that focus on the teacher as a 'learner' emerge from a renewed interest in providing professional learning opportunities in teacher education (Webster-Wright 2009; Kooy, 2006)).

**Summary**

Recent reforms brought about many changes in schools' restructuring (Dufour, 2004; Fullan, 2003) and form the basis of many school improvement initiatives. In the US for example, *The No Child Left Behind Act (2001)*, brought about a lot of changes to policies and subsequently, the increased need for more accountability and standardized outcomes for student. In Ontario, the government launched its own research on the study of literacy and numeracy in Ontario schools. The *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat* (2007), was established to focus on improved students' performance in literacy and numeracy through capacity building among teachers. The need for 'high-quality' professional development changed the conversations around to what 'models' would best 'fix the problem' of how teachers teach and at the same time raise the standards of student achievement. Hargreaves & Fink (2003), have been especially critical on what they describe as the efforts to reform education through the use of standardized tests results and institutionalized school based practices:

The evidence of research we have undertaken with our colleagues on the long-term impact of educational change in Canada and New York State is that standardized reform is destroying diversity and seriously endangering the lives and futures of the weakest members of the school system - those who are poor, who are learning through a new language or who have special educational needs. Standardization is endangering these students to the point of educational extinction where failure to meet the regimented standards is denying severely disadvantaged students the right to graduate. Similarly, high pressure improvements in test results in the short run are being bought at the expense of a long-term recruitment and retention crisis in teaching – since teaching driven by short-term results is not the kind of teaching that teachers want to do. (p. 696)
The understanding that any real educational change is unlikely without a deep commitment to teaching and learning that is sustainable and occurs over a period of time is further supported by the argument made by (Beavers, 2009; Lohman, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009; Kooy, 2006). Consequently, to fully evaluate the direct impact of teacher professional development on student growth and educational change, will require long-term sustained effort and a real commitment to support teacher learning overtime.

**Emerging Roles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

The term 'Professional Learning Community' (PLC), is by far one of the most ambiguous term that currently characterizes teacher education literature. The idea that teaching is an isolated profession and calls for greater teacher collaboration in communities, turn the conversation to the development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in schools. The argument suggests that successful schools adopt six main principles of PLCs: (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord 1997; Fullan 2003).

- **Ensuring Learning for All Students.**
  The premise is that a commitment to student learning was at the center of all professional learning. When teachers met in communities it was to decide only on how best to improve student achievement. PLCs were implemented to be at the heart of student learning and should not be used otherwise. 'Successful' schools were said to have followed this model of learning.

- **Focus On Results**
  A focus on students' outcomes was also a principle identified in PLCs. Teachers engaged in learning communities must be focused on establishing goals to improve student learning. 'Highly'
effective PLCs meant that teachers understand the importance of using data as a tool to drive instruction.

ɨ A Focus on Building Relationships
The idea that teachers engaged in professional learning communities are involved in shared vision through the sharing of ideas, beliefs and practices.

ɨ Collaborative Inquiry
An important aspect of PLCs was collaboration. Teachers work in grade level teams and other groups to share skills and reflect on student work.

ɨ A Focus on Teacher Leadership
The idea that school leaders are responsible for supporting and encouraging distributed leadership among teaching staff.

ɨ Alignment
The need to recognize that professional learning communities aligns the needs of all learners. 'Successful' schools understand how to establish a collective sense of shared purpose around student success.

The Professional Learning Community model came under severe scrutiny in teacher educational literature. One of the criticism of PLC is that without these core principles, professional learning communities are unclear as to how teacher learning should look like in practice. Another criticism levelled at PLCs is the absence of a real direction as to how PLCs should be implemented in schools. Many schools and school administrators struggle with what these sessions should look like and makes it very difficult to examine their effectiveness. The
absence of any clear and established framework results in the tendency for many PLCs to revert back to the one-size fits all solution.

Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995), suggest that the problem of preparing students for 21st century learning requires “most teachers to rethink their practice and teach in ways they have never taught before” (p. 9). Professional development that offer little, or hardly any opportunity for this kind of critical reflection would not be a good alternative in providing the types of learning that teachers must engage in to create confident learners in the classroom. Many research also show that when teachers are in charge of their own learning, they encourage their students to also take individual responsible for their own learning (Louis Seashore & Marks 1998). The argument is that if PLCs are to be effective and create lasting changes then teacher learning is meaningful, respecting of individual choices and takes place within supporting contexts.

**Effective Practices in Professional Development**

**Role of the Teacher as a Learner**

The general consensus in current research is that if teacher professional development is effective then it must focus on content, as well as context (Borko 2004 p. 4). Structures of effective professional development focus on what teachers already know, or specific pedagogical content knowledge which includes teacher-subject mastery and the ability to make sound pedagogical decisions around practices that influence students' learning. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon (2001), report that the effectiveness of professional development design specifically for teachers that reflect this type of approach also take into consideration the context of teacher training which is most relevant to the needs of the participants, as well as the
organization. A common theme emerging from this literature is that teachers are the change agents of any professional reform. Professional development that is consistent with the theme of change and changing practices also emphasize the importance of teachers as 'active' participants in their own learning Lohman, 2006; Gregson & Sturko, 2007; Kooy & Colarusso 2012).

The role of the teacher as a 'learner' gained momentum as professional development that encourage engagement, enable teachers to become active participants in their own learning. Lieberman & McLaughlin (2000), explain that in this learner-centered environment teachers unlearn, as well as learn new professional habits and expertise through active discussion, reflection and trying out new skills in order to refine their practice. If teachers are unable to recognize their own individual strengths and gaps in their own practice then they will be unable recognize gaps in their students’ learning.

Teacher Collaboration in Communities of Learning

Teacher learning that takes place in communities of practice is said to develop interdependency and bonds of collegial relationships sustained overtime (Kooy, 2009 p. 10). Furthermore, Timperlea (2009), emphasizes the need for learning to take place in environments that build trust and allow teachers to become the decision-makers in their own professional growth. Teacher learning that takes place in a supportive environment would also support students' learning in a positive environment.

Researchers have often used a variety of terms to describe teacher learning of this kind. For example, the term Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is used to describe teacher learning that happens over a period of time. Webster-Wright (2009), describes Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) as the learning of professional which takes place all the time under
certain circumstances. The argument is that CPL focuses on 'learning' as oppose to development and 'active' instead of passive (p.713). For the purpose of this literature review, I am not concerned about the terms as that debate is not relevant to this study. The study involves how these professionals learn and what structures and conditions need to be in place for learning.

Educational literature that supports authentic learning experiences for teachers suggest that teachers are given time to absorb new materials, reflect on their practice and develop new skills (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Webster-Wright 2009; Kooy, 2006; 1996; D. Clarke & Hollingsworth 2002). This type of preparation cannot take place overnight as teachers need the time to consolidate and practice the new skills they have acquired in their classrooms. Kooy (2006), describes an example of how teacher learning in communities can be used to foster teacher collaboration as teachers engaged in distinct narratives about their experiences. In a study of women teachers and book clubs Kooy (2006), depicts the lives of thirteen women teachers; four experienced and nine novice teachers in their stories to reconstruct their experiences of professional knowledge (p. 9). The use of book clubs in this sense was not only used as a site for teacher inquiry, but in a larger sense, to add to the gap of learning as it takes place in a community, overtime, built from trust and shared collegial interactions (p. 12). The existence of learning in a book club provided the opportunity for these women teachers to take charge of their own learning through reflective dialogue and to create new narratives discourse through the interactions with self and others. By coming together in book clubs inquiry and narratives develop through the engagement of text.

Learning of this kind is liberating as it allows teachers, irrespective of what discipline, or years of teaching to come together and learn in a safe and trusting environment. Many teachers, especially novice teachers, at times are afraid to participate in professional development sessions.
They do not believe that they know enough [content], and this is going to become transparent in a workshop offered by outside 'experts' and in an environment that is unfamiliar. A safe environment may provide an opportunity to open up and to express thoughts and ideas freely. Many teachers are also feeling burdened down with the many mandated changes required of them. Having a safe environment in which to learn has the potential of lessening teacher ‘anxieties’ and as such, increasing productivity. More attention needs to be given to learning that takes place within teacher-led communities and where teachers are given the opportunities to utilize tools that sustain learning overtime.

**Teacher Knowledge**

**Introduction**

Teacher learning is a very important component of educational change. One of the most contentious issue in teacher educational research is around providing effective professional development for teachers, yet, surprisingly little attention is paid to teachers' beliefs about their own learning. In understanding the role of the adult learner, Merriam & Brockett (2007), described the adult learner as one who can independently directs his or her learning. Even with this knowledge, the majority of research have been spent on trying to 'find' the best models of professional development programs for teachers that yield the 'best' student results. More recent research call for greater teacher involvement in their own learning. Kooy & Colarusso (2012), for example, emphasize the need to define student learning in terms of teachers’ own learning (p. 119). In order for teachers to have greater impact on student learning, teachers would have be able to reflect, evaluate and find gaps in their own learning in order to make any real and lasting change.
While many professional development programs have focused on one particular aspect of teacher learning—pedagogical content knowledge, teacher learning that has any real impact on student learning requires more than teacher subject mastery, or understanding of content knowledge. Shulman & Shulman (2004), explain that teacher learning is compromised if learning focus only on knowledge of content and how students learn. Learning that takes place in settings where teachers are able to listen and share their ideas with others, also gives them insight into their own practice.

**Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice in teacher educational research has been used synonymously with the term *reflective teaching* and has been used to describe multimodal practices in teacher discourse from 'teacher inquiry'; to teacher as a 'reflective practitioner'; 'teacher researcher' and 'teacher as a problem solver' (Calderhead, 1989). Reflective practice may have had some roots in the Deweyan school of thought on progressive thinking. Dewey (1938), problematize the notion of 'educating', or learning as the relationship between continuity and growth. Dewey described learning as an 'act', or a continuous transaction between the individual and what is happening in his or her world (p.44). According to Dewey, the act of learning is messy, it's not smooth and requires deep analytic reasoning, a willingness to self-analyze and to construct and reconstruct continuous modes of inquiry. For Dewey, the knowledge gained in one experience, becomes the mode of inquiry in the following experience.

Schon (1987), describes the notion that competent practitioners are asked all the time to make important decisions on the job all the time. This kind of knowledge is described as 'practical knowledge' as it takes more than skills, abilities, or possession of a body, or bodies of knowledge [pedagogical content]. This type of knowledge comes as a result of a combinations of
experiences – beliefs, attitudes, professional judgment. When a physician makes the decision not to operate on a certain patient as a result of where the bullet was lodged, he or she is demonstrating reflection-in-action. That physician is demonstrating practical knowledge which occurs as a result of one's experiences, intellectual knowledge, coupled with beliefs and attitudes (p. 25). This physician might have been a very skilful surgeon, however, other forms of knowledge are used to make important decisions in practical experiences.

Teachers are asked to use their professional judgment to make decisions every day in the classrooms that goes way beyond their base of pedagogical knowledge, or content knowledge. These decisions in turn affect teacher, as well as student outcomes. 'Reflective practice' is important in defining how teachers' learn and needs to become a very important component in teacher development programs. Practicing teachers, for example, need to be given access to and be introduced to the variety of tools, resources and the time to practice and develop reflective practice skills. Reflective practices enables teachers to be in charge of their own learning and provide them with the opportunity to begin to examine the impact their practice might have on students’ learning.

**Teacher Knowledge and Reflective Practice**

In this section, I will draw upon the work of some very important scholars in this area of teacher research around the use of reflective practice. Most of this theory is grounded and will expand upon the earlier work in Schon (1983), & (1987).

Reflection has come to be widely recognized as a crucial element in the professional growth of teachers. Terms such as ‘reflective teaching’, ‘inquiry-oriented teacher education’, ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘reflective practitioner’ have become quite prolific in discussions of classroom practice and professional development. (Calderhead, & Gates, 2004 p. 1).
The term 'reflective practice' has become quite 'catchy' and sometimes has come to mean everything except, what it’s not. The quest to derive new and elaborate meanings and to re-frame new narratives in teachers discourse has a common theme in teacher education research. The need to re-conceptualize teachers' learning in terms of beginning to fully understand the uniqueness and complexities of teachers' professional development is a driving force behind the need to come to terms with what is meant by 'teacher reflection'.

Many teachers come to the profession with a sound knowledge base of teaching (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Over the years, teachers develop a base repertoire and skills around content knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of how students' learn. Many teachers also come to the profession with beliefs, attitudes, values which might have been shaped from previous experiences. To conceptualize teacher learning is to understand that teacher learning comprise of many complex intricacies which often is a bridge between theory and practice (Russel & Munby, 1991 p. 165). 'Reflective Practice', provides the link between theory and practice and enables teachers to develop their own knowledge by examining and evaluating their own practice and by making important decisions while learning. For professional development programs to be effective they must account for the meaningful interactions between teachers, their practice and the context they work in on a daily basis (Reitano & Sim, 2010).

The work described by Zeichner and Liston (1996); and Calderhead 1989 & 1992), are examples of some of the current work that now influence reflective practice in pre - service teacher education programs. Calderhead & Gates (2004), identified goals synonymous of reflective practice that were useful to teacher education programs. These goals can also be adapted to teacher professional development programs: (i) to enable teachers to analyze, discuss, evaluate and change their own practice, adopting an analytical approach towards teaching; (ii) to
foster teachers’ appreciation of the social and political contexts in which they work, helping teachers to recognize that teaching is socially and politically situated and that the teacher’s task involves an appreciation and analysis of that context; (iii) to enable teachers to appraise the moral and ethical issues implicit in classroom practices, including the critical examination of their own beliefs about good teaching; (iv) to encourage teachers to take greater responsibility for their own professional growth and to acquire some degree of professional autonomy; (v) to facilitate teachers’ development of their own theories of educational practice, understanding and developing a principled basis for their own classroom work; (vi) to empower teachers so that they may better influence future directions in education and take a more active role in educational decision-making.

**Role of Reflection- In- Action in Teachers' Knowledge**

Schon (1987), explains that people had the potential to learn from prior experiences and they do so when they are called upon to make important decisions on a daily basis that affect their practice. Teachers are asked to make every day important decisions in their classrooms that contribute to shaping teacher, as well as student learning. This kind of knowledge attempts to bridge the gap with between what is often reported in theory and practice (Russel & Munby, 1991). “For us, the essence of reflection-in-action is this “hearing” differently, or “seeing” differently, a process that calls “reframing”. Teachers’ ways of learning is caused from their ability to create new knowledge by drawing on familiar data and by being able to present this new knowledge in a freshly framed sense (p. 164).

Russel & Munby (1991), describe the framing and re-framing done by two experienced educators as they struggled between making the right decisions for their students based on what was important at the time. One teacher gave the account of how she struggled to find the right
balance for her Grade One students while trying to manage her class and at the same time, respecting the individual needs of her students. This teacher spoke about the challenges encountered while attempting to balance between a teacher-centered and a learner–friendly approach class. She struggled with the question of how much teacher intervention was too much intervention. She wanted her students to be in charge of their own learning, while making sure she was covering the materials expected.

In the second example, we saw how a middle school science teacher used re-framing not only to make decisions about his students' learning, but also to critically reflect and develop himself as a learner. This teacher's inquiry based approach to students' learning also directed his own professional orientation to learning. This teacher was able to encourage his students to challenge their own thinking, to ask and answer questions and to formulate their own understanding about science. This teacher through reflection-in-action was able to construct professional knowledge based on his understanding of current research and his philosophical approach to students' learning.

**Role of Reflection- On- Action in Teachers' Knowledge**

Teachers have the ability to create new knowledge by drawing on familiar data and by being able to present this new knowledge in a freshly framed sense (Russel & Munby 1991 p. 165). Teachers create knowledge through evaluating and reflecting on their prior experiences and behaviours with others, over a period of time which lead to a change in practice. This type of experiential learning shows that teachers are able to be in charge of their own learning through the ability to reflect and make changes to their own teaching practice. Reitano & Sim (2010), describe the use of Video Stimulated Recall (VSR) as a tool to study how one group of teachers use reflection – on – action to evaluate their own learning. The study involves a 12 month
longitudinal study of ten beginning social science teachers with their last 6 months spent in the classrooms as in-service practicing teachers. The study shows how the teachers were able to use reflection-on-action through (VSR) to assist their transitions from pre-service to practicing teachers. Video Stimulated Recall (VSR) was chosen because as a tool it was least 'intrusive' for these new teachers and it offered the opportunities to capture an accurate bit by bit episode of the process as it unfolds (Calderhead, 1981; Pirie, 1996), cited in (Reitano & Sim 2010).

The teachers in the study were able to video tape episodes of their teaching and use the taped sessions to provide materials to evaluate their own teaching. Teacher evaluation was done based on two criteria: knowledge of content and principles around teaching and learning. The teachers were able to evaluate their growth by discussing their teaching practice with other teachers in the study. Over the period of 6 months, the teachers observed how their learning moved from an emphasis on content knowledge, to a focus on understanding about students' learning.

In a similar study, Williams & Grudnoff (2011), examine the use of reflective practice as a tool and how it was used by both novice and experienced teachers to explore teaching growth. The study involved 12 novice teachers and 12 experienced teachers in a primary school in New Zealand. The study employs semi-interviews as the instrument for collecting data. The researchers found out that both novice and experience teachers use reflective practice as a tool in teaching. While experience teachers were able to use reflective practice both as a evaluative tool and a tool to improve their practice, it took the novice teachers much longer to move from using reflective practice as an evaluative tool to influence any change in their practice. The teachers in the study were able to video tape episodes of their teaching and use the tape to provide materials to evaluate their own teaching based on knowledge of content and principles around teaching and
learning. The teachers were able to evaluate their growth by discussing their teaching practice with other teachers in the study.

Over the six months, the teachers saw how their learning move from an emphasis on content knowledge, to a focus on understanding about students' learning and to a focus on pedagogical content knowledge. While the novice teachers in the study appreciated written reflections as a means to examine their role as a teacher, the experience teachers were reported to be more 'conscious' of their teaching and welcomed reflective practice in communities as a tool to interrogate and 'critique' their teaching practices (p. 287). The study was able to draw on the use of these two distinct group of teachers and their abilities to use reflective practice as a tool in learning. The ways in which teachers use reflective practice as a tool in learning needs to be further examined in the larger scope of designing and providing professional development programs for teachers.

**Teacher Beliefs**

Different epistemological assumptions in educational research have conceptualized teacher knowledge to include content knowledge, or subject mastery knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge – knowledge of teaching. Other researchers argue that teachers’ knowledge is much broader and should include knowledge that develops as a result of experience, philosophical thinking, values, judgment, attitudes and the personal meanings that are attached to these overtime (Schon, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly 1996; Calderhead 1989; Reitano & Sim 2010). Moreover, researchers like, (Pajares, 1992; Nespor, 1987), explain that much of what teachers do in their classrooms are strongly linked to the meanings, beliefs and assumptions that they hold.
Belief can be defined as values, judgments, opinions, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems; ways of looking at things; or filters through which individual screen new knowledge (Pajares, 1992). The reasoning behind this argument is that belief becomes an intricate part of the human existence and essentially determines the decisions that individuals will make in their daily lives (p. 307). Other researchers imply that teacher beliefs is a strong indicator influencing their choice around the types of professional development programs in which to participate (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Teacher beliefs constitutes an integral component influencing their orientation and eventually the decisions they make during their everyday practice. Beliefs are also subjective and this is why it is important to garner the information from an entire group as oppose to speaking to one particular individual. Many teachers believe that they make decisions based on ‘the needs’ of their students at a particular time. If teachers’ beliefs play an important role in the choices they make in their classrooms daily, then it makes sense to find out about how this belief influences their attitudes and perceptions around the types of professional development programs they find useful.

**Summary**

The chapter started out by examining the current status of professional development programs for teachers. It then proceeded to look at effective practices in professional development. The chapter ended by looking at how reflective practice is used in teacher learning. The literature made use of three useful studies to support this argument. Chapter Three will examine the methods of data collection and analysis and an overview of the philosophical framework employed in this study.
The study requires qualitative methods to analyze and understand the data. Creswell (1998), suggests taking into consideration the amount of time, depth of difficulty and rigor in designing a qualitative study. “Qualitative inquiry represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration without apology or comparison to quantitative research” (p. 9). Qualitative research in particularly important in this study as it seeks, to understand, to uncover, derive some meaning as oppose to seek a ‘specific truth’. Qualitative inquiry, differs from quantitative as it ‘provides highly descriptive data in the form of words and pictures rather than numbers’ (Merriam 2009; Strauss & Corbin 1990). My intent in doing this study is not to look for a specific model to describe teacher learning, but rather to uncover and make some sense as to what teachers are saying about learning.

Qualitative researchers conduct phenomenological inquiry in a naturalistic setting as it seeks to understand the phenomena a specific context (Patton 1990; Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Creswell 2007). I chose the school as the site to carry out this research as teachers would feel very comfortable sharing their ideas and best practices in a setting where they know each other. The school is a suitable setting as the teachers will be required to stay after the instructional day to participate in the Professional Learning Community, or the focus group sessions. Teachers are very busy and as the researcher, I will need to be respectful of their time as they will be giving up a lot to participate in these sessions over a period of six months. Many teachers are also ‘critical’ of professional development programs that are done ‘off-site’ and with other people who they are not familiar with. Being the researcher and also a teacher at the school presented a real opportunity for me to observe the teachers as they interacted with each other in their own natural environment.
Researchers have identified some basic characteristics of qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen 1982; Patton, 1990; Creswell 1998). Creswell, (2007), outlines several guiding principles which sets up framework for this further inquiry (p. 38-39):

**Researcher as Key Instrument**

The qualitative research, “Allows the researcher to collect data themselves through observing, examining documents and interviews.” Due to the nature of my study, I use the opportunity to go over my field notes from sessions and to ask follow-up questions from interview sessions in the case of re-clarifying thoughts.

**Multiple Sources of Data**

Qualitative researchers depend strongly on words and pictures as their means of gathering evidence for their work (Patton, 2002). Information from a variety of sources enables the researcher to acquire ‘rich and thick descriptions’ from the data provided (p. 39). Even though phenomenology studies rely mainly on interviews, I intend to also use focus group dialogues and reflective journals as other sources of data. Reflective practice plays an important role in this inquiry and one of my goals in this inquiry is to show how reflective practice can be used as a tool in teacher learning. Using focus group dialogues and reflective journals are two examples of reflective practice tools that can be utilized to support teachers’ learning.

**Inductive Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers work with the data from the ground up. They try to look for different patterns and categories from the data they have collected and try to group these into themes. The great thing about inductive reasoning, unlike deductive, it is not necessarily looking for some type of conclusion – rather it is trying to establish some various themes from the codes presented. In this study one of
my goals is to find out about the themes that emerge about learning from their various conversations and from their responses.

**Participants’ meaning**

During the research, I am interested in what the teachers have to say about learning. I chose to use phenomenology because it seeks to expose ‘people’s conscious experiences of their world’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). It is not my intention to come up with a specific model that describes teacher learning. My goal is to uncover what teachers are saying about how they learn. It is my hope that the findings from this study reveal valuable information contributing to the literature around professional development and how these can be better planned to support the learning needs of teachers.

**Natural Setting**

The school that this study takes place is a large middle school with approximately 800 students and approximately 55 teaching staff. The school is very diverse with students and staff coming from various ethnic backgrounds. The teachers at the school – which includes the study, range in experiences from 0 to 30 years of teaching. In terms of teaching assignments; most teachers teach math as well as science and language arts and social studies as their core teaching subjects. Teachers who provide instruction in French as a second language, music, or physical education are considered ‘planning time teachers’. Some teachers also provide support for students depending on their academic orientation – these teachers are referred to as In School Support Persons, or ‘ISSP’.

**Research Questions**

My over-arching research question was: What role does reflective practice play in elementary middle school teachers' learning? From this question, I came up with four other sub-questions:

- What does it mean for middle school teachers to use reflective practice as a tool in learning through sustained social/self-mediated professional development?
What themes from middle school teachers' responses emerge about how they experience this phenomenon?

What conditions and structures need to be in place in order to support teacher reflective practice?

What role does community play in supporting reflective practice?

Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach in this study suitably supports this research since 'phenomenology' seeks to describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon' (Creswell, p. 51). Phenomenology has its roots in human experiences and by uncovering teachers' beliefs - new ways of understanding how teachers learn will be revealed.

Van Manen (1997) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a way to 'explicate' meanings from things that are in some sense implicit from 'actions'. It is this 'essence' that makes phenomenological approach unique in capturing the human experience which in itself can create more questions than answers (p. xv). For the purpose of this research I intend to utilize three tools associated with reflective practice; focus session dialogue, semi-structured group interviews and reflective journal to capture the meaning of the collective experience through language. The use of multi-modal tools, in this respect will provide multiple opportunities for teachers to engage in texts and enables me to formulate a collective interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative inquiry that employs multiple sources of data also provide for rich descriptions and the opportunity to derive meaning from a variety of sources (Moustakas 1994). Meaning itself, is ‘multi-dimensional’ (p. 78). By uncovering the phenomenon, I hope to uncover what (Van Manen 1997; Moustakas, 1994), describe as ‘the structures of experiences, or themes from a particular phenomenon.
Current research in teacher educational literature is focused on finding the best models of professional development programs for teachers which will have an increased impact on student outcomes. The current argument centers on the need for high quality professional development for teachers in communities of which are sustained over a period of time. More often lost in this debate are teachers own perspectives on how to best support their learning. Teacher learning is complex and more needs to be known about teachers, how they learn and the types of professional learning required to meet their needs. Reflective practice is a defining component of how teachers learn, yet a lot of attention have not been paid to how it can be used to support teacher learning. Schon (1987), offers two epistemological differences to describe teachers' ways of 'knowing' or, coming to 'know' by engaging in reflection- in- action and reflection – on- action. The data from these different sources will provide rich analysis explaining how teacher learning may be grounded in the two principles above.

**Research Design**

The primary participants in this study will consist of 9 middle school teachers who volunteered to participate in this study. The researcher will also participate in this study in the role of both the researcher and as a facilitator. Teachers’ work in the classroom is guided by their questions, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs and these will be drawn upon particularly from the focus group interactions. The teachers all range in teaching experiences from two to thirty years.

**Research site – the School**

The school where the study takes place is a large middle school in a suburb of the Greater Toronto area in South Western Ontario. There were approximately 850 students and 55 full time teaching staff. There are approximately twelve homeroom classes at each grades level – 6, 7 & 8 and classes could range from 25- 29 students in each class. Teachers works in teams of 5’s and usually two math and science and two language arts and social studies teacher make up a team. The team is
usually rounded out by a support staff, or a teacher who provided planning time. The school is vibrant and boasts a lot of extra-curricular activities like clubs and athletic events that students have the opportunity to participate in.

The school is very diverse – of which a large portion of the student population is of South Asian descent. It is also made up of other students of various ethnic backgrounds which include Somalian and Afro-Canadian students. Due to the high population of English Language Learners, there is a full time English Second Language teacher (ESL) on staff. The staff is also diverse and for the most part, is representative of the student population. Teachers teach subjects in various disciplines like math, science, social studies and language arts. Students also take music, physical education, visual arts and French classes. Most of these areas are considered ‘planning times’ and these teachers’ assignments are based on providing planning times for ‘core’ subject teachers.

The grade 6 students at this school participate in the Grade 6 Literacy and Numeracy Test each year which is a the provincial test administered by the Ministry of Education Numeracy & Literacy Secretariat. Each year the scores from this test are evaluated and written up as school success goals and as a part of the larger school improvement plan. Literacy and Numeracy are essentially very important as most of the professional learning is provided in that area. Language Arts and Math teachers participate in the Teaching & Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP), a model of professional development that tend to focus on data from student work samples to form the baseline assessment in a learning cycle. In this type of professional learning teachers work with their grade level in subject-specific teams.

The school also has a General Learning Disabled Class (GLD) for grades 6, 7 & 8 students. There is also a full time teacher librarian, guidance counsellor, principal and vice-principal. The school is a fairly new school in its sixth year of existence. Most of the teachers in the school range in teaching experiences from 0 to 30 years of teaching. The school also offer different community base
Recruitment of teacher participants

It is important that in a phenomenological study, that all the participants in the study experience the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). “Criterion/purposeful” sampling works well when all participants studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 118). Purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007.), as a result, was used by the researcher for several reasons:

(1). All the teachers in the study were practicing teachers at the same middle school in Southern Ontario where the researcher is also a teacher.

(2). I wanted to use teachers from a variety interdisciplinary areas. The teachers taught in areas of Math, Science, Social Sciences, Language Studies (French & English) and Special Education.

(3). Creswell (1998), explained that a phenomenological study may be challenging to many use in ways, one of which is the researcher's need to make sure that the participants in the study have experienced the phenomenon (p. 55).

Before recruitment of the teacher participants I had to first speak to my principal about the study and obtained verbal consent (see Appendix C) before beginning the study. My principal was excited about the study and the possibility that would be involved in establishing a professional learning community on site. He suggested some possible names of teachers he believed would be great in the study. However, I needed to ensure that the teacher participants selected would be people who matched the criteria presented above and a focus group larger than twelve would have been a bit challenging. So in selecting the participants, I
sent out an initial email to approximately twelve teachers on staff. In the email, I explained what the study was about and attached (Appendix B), consent protocol for teachers to sign prior to the study. The teachers were also told that the study would require meeting after the instructional day for approximately 1 hour for the next six months. Of the twelve teachers, nine teachers agreed to participate. The teachers were motivated because they believed in the prospects of having a real professional learning community on-site with the opportunity of engaging in real conversations with their colleagues. A few of the teachers who agreed to participate was just excited about getting the opportunity to share in learning with colleagues from the same school, as they had never experience that type of learning before.

Introducing the Research Participants

Participant 1 Robert: He is the only male teacher in the group. He had been teaching for approximately 30 years and spent most of his teaching career working with students from elementary to high school. He also recently completed his doctorate in Philosophy in Education and also had a vice-principal stint for about 3 months. He was in his fourth year at the school and taught in language and social studies in a single-gender all-boys classroom. He is also an active researcher in the areas of history and philosophy of education and facilitates teacher continuing development courses.

Participant 2 Charlene: Female in school support teacher. She was in her sixth year of teaching and fifth year at the school. She taught in a 6, 7 & 8 GLD cluster. She also facilitates additional qualification courses in Special Education for teachers.

Participant 3 Carmen: Female grade 8 french language teacher. She was in her sixth year at that school and her tenth year in teaching. She had recently completed her Master in Education. She had also previously taught grade 6 french language.
Participant Simone 4: Female grade 6 math and science teacher. She was in her sixth year at that school and had about 9 years of teaching experience. She had also recently completed her Master in Education and was now taking her Principal’s Qualification courses as she had interests in becoming an administrator.

Participant 5 Kelly: She was the one of two teachers in the group on a Long Term Teaching Assignment (LTO). Even though she had only been teaching for three years, this was her fourth teaching assignment in four different schools. Her teaching assignment was grade 7 social studies and language arts.

Participant 6 Karen: She was a fairly new teacher to the board even though she had many years of teaching experience from the Caribbean before migrating to Canada. She worked previously in a private school for a few years before being hired by the board. She taught grade 8 math and science.

Participant 7 Carol: She was also a grade 8 french language teacher. She was in her fifth year at the school and seventh year in teaching. She had also been a grade 7 french teacher.

Participant 8 Nadine: She was a grade 7 french language teacher. This was her fifth year of teaching and the only school she had taught in. Prior to this, she had also taught grade 8 french.

Participant 9 Melissa: The second of the two long term occasional teacher. She taught grade 8 language and was mentored by one of the other teachers in the group. This was her first long term teaching assignment and she taught social studies and language arts.

The Researcher: The researcher is also a teacher at the school. She taught grade 8 math and science. She was in her sixth year at the school and ninth year in teaching. Prior to grade 8 she taught grades 5, 6 and 8.
Ethical Considerations

To protect human subjects’ participants and maintain confidentiality, I used pseudonyms. Data collected was stored in a safe place by the researcher and was only be retrieved for data analysis. Before the study I obtained research approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board (REB) board and the participants’ school before beginning data collection. (See Appendix B & C for approved informed consent approval forms). I also obtained written consent from each participant before conducting the study. I also offered to share the findings with the teacher participants if they asked to see this after the study was concluded and before it was published. The teachers were not bound to the study and were able to withdraw voluntarily without consequences.

Data Collection

Data collection involved a series of processes, some of which including locating the correct site/context of the study and building relationship with the participants in order to obtain good data (Creswell, 1998). I also needed to think about the research instrument that will be used to collect data for the particular study. Creswell (1998), identifies four main tools that researchers can use to assist them in collection of data: observations, interviews, documents and audio-visuals (p. 120). The purpose of the study was to uncover teachers' beliefs about reflective practice as a tool in teacher learning. My hope was to reveal new ways of understanding how teachers learn and to contribute to the literature around providing effective professional development for teachers.

Language plays a significant role in how we communicate, understand the world, and the experiences of others as well as our own. “It is only through the collectivity of language that we can access experience....and its through phenomenological language we explore these possibilities” (Van Manen, 1997 p.66). I used three different data instrument for this inquiry: semi-structured interviews, focus group dialogue and written/reflective notes from these sessions.
Interviews

In phenomenological studies, researchers often use interviews as the primary data source (Creswell 1998, p.120). Stake, (1995), describes the interview as the “main road to multiple realities” (pg. 65). The intent is that by conducting in-depth interviews with the participants being studied, the researcher hopes to obtain a rich description of the experience from a group of people who has experienced the phenomenon. It hermeneutic phenomenological studies, the interview can serve different purposes: (1) It can serve as a means to explore and gather experiential narratives material that may provide a foundation for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. (2) It can serve as a tool for conversational [with the interviewee/s] about the experience of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997 p. 66).

For this study, I employed semi-structured interviews as a tool to collect and gather data that will form the basis of the texts used to provide a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the teacher participants. The interviews will be approximately 60 minutes in length and use both closed and open-ended questions (Appendix A) to obtain data. Interviews will be taped and recorded with a digital tape recorder. Interviews will then be transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Reflective Journals

I will act as facilitator and researcher for the purpose of this study. Data from focus group dialogue will be recorded and further analyzed for purposes of providing important information contributing to the argument on teacher learning. Teachers often use journals as a teaching strategy in writing with their students. Teachers also make use of logs, and self-notes as reflective tools in their practice. Van Manen (1997), discusses the use of dairies, journals and logs as sources commonly used in human science research as they were likely to contain reflective accounts of human experience (p. 73).
Focus Groups

“Focus groups are a data collection technique that capitalizes on the interaction within a group to elicit rich experiential data” (Asbury, 1995, p. 414). Focus groups are usually made up of 6 to 12 participants and it depends on the dynamics of the participants in the group to stimulate dialogue (p. 415). This focus group is made up of 9 teacher participants that were purposefully chosen as they range in years of teaching experiences, as well as teaching in diverse disciplines. For this instrument, the researcher will examine the audio, or video-tapes of the five focus group sessions over the period of eight months dialogue including our final wrap-up in June. The teachers will meet in their focus groups once every six – week period. Focus group sessions after the instructional school day once every six weeks for approximately one to two hours. The use of audio & visual instrument presented me with the opportunity to analyze the phenomenon – through a different medium. Focus groups were chosen as an instrument because it represented one tool that can be utilized during reflective practice. My hypotheses was that the use of focus groups would yield rich information that would reveal themes about how teachers perceive their learning.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves “working with data, organizing it, breaking into manageable pieces, synthesizing and looking for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and to share with others” (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). My data analysis began with my first focus group session. During our first focus group session I did not want the teachers to feel uncomfortable so I told them that I would be taking notes as they spoke. My first session was in the form of field notes. I spoke to the teacher participants about using audio, or possible taping one or two of the sessions for data collecting purposes. All the teachers, except one, had no concerns as long as the audio and tapes stayed within the community and was used for what data purposes- according to the consent protocol that they had agreed to. We decided to solve this problem by making sure that the camera did not
center on that teacher during our video-taping sessions. After our first focus group session in November of the school year, I wrote my first reflective journal using information that I had taken from my field note sessions.

We did not meet again until January because the intention was to meet every six weeks in order to be respectful of teachers’ time and busy schedule. At the time and because I was participating in an online longitudinal research with my supervising professor, I used one of the online collaborative learning tools (vplc) to post a few of my reflective journals. I kept a log of reflective journals which I wrote after each focus group session. One of the first step in data analysis is to ensure that you begin to organize your data from different sources into manageable pieces. The SSCHR-funded online longitudinal study that I was involved in provided me with some release time [once every month] and gave me the opportunity to further discuss my study with my colleagues in the study. This ‘forced’ me to begin to analyze my data as soon as I collected them– and because I was told by my advisor to go ahead and begin to organize my data into manageable categories. At first, my only two sources were my reflective journals and notes taken from the examination of audio-visuals from focus group sessions. Data analysis resumed after I continued my semi-structured interview sessions. Data taken from six interview sessions were transcribed and the notes were reviewed to see whether any themes arose from the texts. From this, I created several codes in order to identify categories, or concepts emerging from the data (Patton, 2002p. 39).

The third stage of data involves 'reduction', where the data is further broken down into manageable themes (Creswell, 1998 p. 144). In phenomenology, themes are “understood as structure of experience” (Van Manen, 1997), which is used to describe and make sense of the phenomenon – by getting to the 'root' of the experience itself (p. 87). This also goes hand in hand with inductive analysis and working with data from the ground up. At the same time, I tried to uncover some type of meaning, or understanding from the different texts to find out how the teacher participants experience the phenomenon. In doing so, I attempted to interpret the data by analyzing the themes
“Interpretation involves making sense of the data, (Lincoln & Guba) in Creswell, (1998). In this stage the researcher tries to understand the phenomenon by re-examining the themes and trying to look for the big picture (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998). During the final stage of data analysis I tried to present my findings in a narrative form so that readers can understand.

**Validity Instrument /Researcher Subjectivity**

Credible research requires verifying and confirming the validity of the findings. Since I am both the researcher and participant, I am aware of my involvement in the process and is aware that this may suggest a particular interpretative bias and that the two roles cannot be separated one from the other. For this reason, I chose to use ‘triangulation of data’ as a means of validity tool. Qualitative researchers use multiple sources of data to corroborate different evidences from multiple sources to shed light on a particular theme (Creswell, 1998; Patton 2002). Triangulation of data provides the researcher with the opportunity of corroborating evidences from multiple sources of data.

As a qualitative researcher I am clearly aware of researcher bias in undertaking a qualitative study. Moustakas, (1994), suggested that researchers set aside all biases, pre-judgments – a process he described as 'bracketing' in phenomenological inquiry (p. 78). However, I would argue that it is impossible for researchers to totally separate themselves from all forms of researcher bias. Phenomenologists believe that being aware of one's own experiences may help the researcher become ‘familiarized’ with the phenomenon during the study. As a teacher, I am aware that “my experiences could also be the experiences of the teacher participants in the study. Every qualitative researcher is aware of ‘researcher subjectivity’ – and in this case my relationships to the participants in the study and that my ‘own assumptions’ about teacher learning could influence my ‘positionality’ in the study. I intend to make use of researcher 'reflexivity' by making my own journal notes throughout the study and using this as an instrument of validity. In this process, I plan to turn the
study 'upside down', by examining my own experiences as an 'instrument' of study. The researcher hopes by putting herself 'out there' that this will clarify researcher bias.

Summary

The chapter started out by setting the stage of the research design and the philosophical framework used in the study. The chapter then described the participant selection, ethical considerations and the context of the study. The chapter proceeded to discuss data collection and instruments used to collect data. The chapter continued by describing the process of data analysis. The chapter ended by looking at instrument of validity and the researcher as a tool of validity instrument. Chapter Four will proceed to analysis of data.
Introduction

The purpose of this study was in threefold: 1) it sets out to understand the beliefs and perceptions of teachers as learners by looking at how teachers use reflective practice as a tool in teacher learning. By asking the question of what role does reflective practice plays in teacher learning, the study hopes to: (2) uncover themes that underlies teacher learning. Phenomenological themes are understood as the structures of experiences (Van Manen, 1997). By analyzing teachers' collective learning we will be able to 'understand' the essence of teacher learning through various themes. (3) To contribute to the literature on providing professional development programs in social contexts that support teacher, as well as student learning.

Research Questions

My over-arching research question was: What role does reflective practice play in uncovering beliefs about teachers' learning? From this question, I came up with four other sub-questions:

- What does it mean for middle school teachers to use reflective practice as a tool in learning?
- What themes emerge from middle school teachers' responses about how they experience this phenomenon?
- What conditions and structures need to be in place in order to support teacher reflective practice?
- What role does community play in supporting reflective practice?

The Research Process
School is a very busy place. I find September and the beginning of the school year to be the most challenging. Teachers are involved in getting their classes ready, getting to know their students, becoming familiar with supervision and other business and the odd times for many teachers - reorganization. Many teachers are unsure about how their classes will look at the end of September, so the uncertainty and waiting can be a challenge. I knew that September was not the best time to send out my email about the study. I used the time to speak to my principal about the study - he was really excited as he believed that a ‘teacher learning community’ on-site would do wonders for the school’s climate.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was taken from three main instrument/tools:

- Focus groups
- Semi-structured interviews
- Reflective Journals

A questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the first focus group session (Appendix D.) I wanted to gain first-hand insight as to teachers’ perceptions around professional development and to later compare it with the findings. At the beginning, I attempted to take field notes from our focus group sessions. I found this practice quite difficult as it interfered with listening. Because the focus group sessions were audio and taped recorded I decided to write my reflective journal following each session. Denzin (1994), describes the need for qualitative research to be more about transferability and dependability instead of reliability and dependability. Qualitative research depends to a large extent on the ability of the researcher to provide ‘thick’ descriptions from data that is consistent and can be corroborated against another source. By using the method of ‘triangulation’, I believed that I would have been able to get
some rich descriptions by combing through the data and listening for the consistent themes and messages that could be transferred from the various texts.

**Focus Group Dialogue**

We met once every six weeks from October to our final wrap up session in June. Each session lasted approximately an hour to one hour and a half. There were times when it was very challenging getting all the teachers together at any one time as some teachers were also involved in extracurricular activities at the end of the day. As a participant and the researcher during, I wanted my role to be as limited as possible so I told the teachers I was reluctant to take on the role of a ‘facilitator’. I wanted to interfere in the process as little as possible because I wanted the teachers to see, if given the opportunity, how teachers use reflective practice to engage in learning. During our meetings I listened intently to what teachers were saying, attempted to take field notes, asked teachers questions, clarified points and tried to reframe questions that I thought were relevant to the study. Focus group sessions were audio recorded and videotaped for data collection purposes at a later date.

**Meeting 1:**

I sent out my first email of invitation and introduction to the study at the beginning of October of 2011. Our first meeting date was October 6th. We met after the instructional day in my classroom from 2:45 - 3:50. I welcomed the teachers and re-explained the purpose of the study. They were given an initial questionnaire to fill out (Appendix D). This initial questionnaire was very important because it gave me a first-hand glimpse into the teachers’ present perceptions around professional development. I was also able to use this to compare with the data I later collected from the focus group sessions and interviews. I wanted to look for patterns of consistency, or to see if teachers’ perceptions changed as they interacted with each other.
Meeting 2:

We met for a second time on Friday, October 14th. It was lunch time and we met from 12:08 to 12:48 for forty minutes. We had our first official discussion as to what our teacher learning community should look like. We established some general goals during the meeting. Two teachers were away from school and another two had to organize extracurricular activities. The other 5 teachers decided we should go ahead with the meeting as it was already October and we could not anticipate what November would look like as it was report card writing season.

Meeting 3:

Over the next six months we met once every six weeks for a total of seven times which included our final wrap up in June. On our third meeting on November 18th, we realized that it was difficult to meet every month, so we decided that we would meet once every six weeks for approximately 1 hour and to one hour and a half. We discussed video-taping the next three sessions when next we meet. All the teachers [except one] had no concerns with taping and recording our meetings as long as the information was going to stay in our community. We decided that December was a busy month so we set our meeting for January 10th.

Meeting 4:

Due to report card writing and March break we had to cancel our January 10th date and instead set our 4th meeting for March 28th. We began at promptly at 2:45. Seven teachers were present today and two were away because of personal reasons. We met in Robert’s classroom as he volunteered to tape our session using his lap top. Today, we decided that the focus should be technology. Robert was going to share with us some of the ways that he was using technology as a tool to engage students in his classroom. Everyone seemed to be in a good mood. This was our fourth meeting and they were beginning to feel very comfortable with each other. I listened while they discussed the possibility of this kind of learning. Our session ended at 3:45 p.m.
Interviews were in the form of semi-structured protocol were scheduled after the focus group dialogues. Initially, I wanted these done at the end of the school-year in June. It was very difficult because as a grade 8 teacher myself, I was in charge of organizing our graduation and scheduling time to meet was challenging. Instead, we decided that interviews would be scheduled for our return the following September. Interviews were audio recorded and video-taped with a digital camera. Interviews took place the following year from October to November. Of the nine teacher participants that started out, only six were available to participate. One of the teachers had moved on to another long-term teaching assignment at another school. When contacted, she said she was very busy at the time. Two other teachers were going through some challenges and were also unable to participate.

First interview Charlene:

My first interview was on October 17th at the school. My first participant was the ISSP teacher who for the purpose of this study I will refer to as Charlene. The interview questions (Appendix B) were sent to her three days prior to my visit. The interview was held in her classroom at the end of the day. I was a little nervous before the interview because I was only doing this for the second time. I took my digital camera and tape recorder to record the session. I decided to use both devices just in case one failed and I knew how challenging it can be to work with technology at times. She was not nervous as she had participated in research prior to this and was involved in interviews like this before. It lasted for approximately 1 hour. A few times, I thought we were interrupted because the recording seemed as if it had stopped. During the process I replayed a few of the taped sessions just to ensure that we had captured everything as I was still trying to become more familiar with the device.

Second Interview Carol & Nadine:
By the time I had my second interview session planned, I found the process a little less frightening. I was a lot more comfortable with the devices as I had been transcribing data by listening to and replaying the data from the first interview. My second interview took place on November 8 approximately three weeks after the first. This interview was with two of the French teachers who I will refer to as Carol and Nadine. This interview was done during the day as it was a PA day and we had planned to meet after the parents teachers’ interviews that Friday.

The interview took place in one of the teacher participant classroom. They were also given the same semi-structured open-response questions ahead of time. They told me that they did not get a chance to review the questions. I got there for 12:00 noon. We chatted for about 15 minutes while I set up the devices. I did not want to take up a lot of time because one teacher had to leave by 1:30 p.m. It lasted for approximately 45 minutes. It was a little different from my previously recorded session because they were engaged and during the discussions they answered some of the questions that would have been later asked. I also noticed that Carol spoke much more than Nadine and interrupted on few occasions. Nadine did not mind and agreed on some of the things that Carol mentioned. Other times she mentioned that she did not see things in the way. I realized that unless I specifically asked someone to respond Carol was more eager to respond first. Nadine would follow up her response with a: “I agree”, or “I don’t see it this way”. I found that their responses to the questions were lengthy. Occasionally, I had to reframe the questions to ensure that I had an understanding of what they were saying.

**Third Interview Simone & Karen:**

My third semi-structured interview took place on November 21st. These two teacher participants were a grade 6 math and a grade 8 language teacher. For the purpose of this study I referred to them as Simone and Karen. We met after school in Simone’s classroom. The questions were also given ahead of time. Both Simone and Karen had made some notes from the questions which they had with them during the interviews. We started at 2:58 in the afternoon and the session
lasted for about an hour. Unlike the previous interviews where Carol and Nadine, at times, did not see ‘eye to eye’ on certain points these two seemed to agree on all their discussion points. Simone was much more talkative than Karen. I am not sure if this was as a result of the limited number of years that Karen was teaching in the Canadian school system. For the most part, she was considered herself a math teacher even though her teaching assignment at the time was language arts. During the interviews, I noticed that Simone referred to her notes while responding to certain questions.

Fourth interview with Robert:

My final interview took place the following week with Robert over the telephone. He was away from work a while and had returned from a personal trip outside the country. He was willing to participate in the interview but he could only do it over the phone. We scheduled the interview for 6:00 on November 27th. I had sent the questions to Robert ahead of time and he had gone ahead and he had already sent me a written response to the questions prior to his trip. The interview lasted for about 45 minutes in length. Following the session I replayed back the audio because I wanted to see how much of his interview matched what he had previously written. After each session I began to transcribe my interview notes. I found that the group interviews provided much more data and was more difficult to transcribe. I had to replay the sessions several times for consistency and to ensure that I had recorded the information correctly.

Reflective Journals

I believed that reflective journals would have been a great way to capture the conversations that teachers had as they interacted with each other. During our focus group sessions, I wanted to take field notes during the discussions. I attempted this in the beginning but I found it quite challenging to listen and write at the same time. I also thought that reflective journals would be a very good opportunity to place ‘myself’ within the study. Seeing that it was difficult to totally ‘separate’ myself from the study, I wanted and a forum to ‘position’ myself and to use these as a means of ‘examining’, my own experiences, against those of the participants. I often use journals to
write down my thoughts and find it to be a very powerful reflective tool. I found that writing a journal after each focus group session was refreshing and it assisted me in capturing my own personal reflections about the process.

**Reflective Notes 1 (See Appendix E):**

I recorded this after our first session. What stood out to me after our initial session was how eager it was for the teachers to come together for the first time in this type of community. The French as a Second Language teachers were especially receptive about forming a Professional Learning Community on-site. This shows that teachers as professionals can negotiate their own worthwhile learning experiences.

**Reflective Notes 2 (See Appendix F):**

The teachers were really committed to the process of establishing a Professional Learning Community on-site. I was amazed at how quickly they took charge and began to discuss what the PLC should look like and the types of learning experiences that they should engage in over the next couple of weeks.

**Reflective Notes 3 (See Appendix G):**

The teachers seemed more relaxed after meeting for the third time. Some of the teachers described how they are now using the ‘idea’ community in their own classrooms. It seems that they were more inclined to bring back practices to their own classrooms, if they believe that it is worthwhile and that it will benefit their students.

**Reflective Notes 4 (See Appendix H):**
Today proved that if teachers are left alone they can take charge of their own learning. This was a very good example of teacher collaboration through sharing of best practices. Through discussions, teachers were also sharing how they would transfer a particular practice in their classroom. I believe that this practice is consistent with what Schon, (1987), refers to as ‘reflection-on-action. Schon explains that teachers learn new skills through reflecting on old ones as they share and interact with others.

**Reflection Journal 5 (See Appendix 1):**

This experience is one example that teachers’ beliefs determine what they will, or will not do in their classrooms. It is obvious that these teachers foster a learning community in their classrooms based on the types of learning experiences that they value. Pajares (1992), explains that teachers’ beliefs play a significant role in the decisions that they make in their classrooms (p. 307). The approaches that these teachers chose to use in their classrooms are justified by their beliefs and the values that they hold about learning.

**Data Analysis**

I employed the interpretative, or hermeneutic approach as the method of data analysis. Hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of texts by trying to gain a collective understanding from the experiences of the individuals in the group (Van Manen, 1997 p. 87). The first thing did was to begin to comb through my data by looking for similar patterns from the three different data collection sources. I use inductive analysis (grounded theory) approach to group the patterns that I found into categories (Creswell, 1998, p. 144).

By ‘reducing’ the data into manageable chunks, I was able to look for common patterns. Initially, my first three categories had to do with what I believe were ‘critical’ information from all three sources. Secondly, I wanted to find out which patterns were overlapping from the categories identified. I decided to combine the categories into: focus group and interviews; focus group and
journals and interviews and journals. I wanted to further ‘isolate’ the common patterns that I noticed were emerging. I repeatedly reviewed my notes and re-watched taped recorded sessions to ensure that the common patterns were consistent with what the teacher participants were saying. Once the patterns were ‘isolated’, it became much easier to look for common threads. I identified the threads that were common to all the categories above. Finally, I began to identify the themes that I believed emerged as a result:

- Teachers need greater autonomy when it comes to choosing their own professional development pathways.
- Critical reflection plays a key role in how teachers define their learning.
- Teachers value professional development opportunities that foster teacher collaboration and an emphasis on sharing of best practices.

**Research Question 1**

What does it mean for middle school teachers to use reflective practice as a tool in learning through sustained social/self-mediated professional development?

Teachers found that participating in the focus group sessions gave them an opportunity to listen to, share best practices and learn with and from other colleagues in the same school. Many of the teachers spoke about teaching being an ‘isolated’ profession and coming together like that gave them the opportunity to share resources and professional knowledge. They were engaged in critical reflection and spoke about ‘seeing’, or examining their practices through the lens of others. Through critical reflection teachers were able to self-evaluate their own teaching practice. By listening to other individuals’ stories, they came to a new understanding of their own learning through the process of re-examining some of their previously held beliefs and assumptions.

**Reflective Practice as a tool to Share Best Practices**
The process of meeting as colleagues to talk and learn about teaching led to discussions about professional development as a learning process. Teachers discussed the need to meet, to reflect and to share personal stories in the classroom and at the same time, deconstructed their own understanding of learning. Simone the grade six math teacher in the community described her feeling about coming together and sharing what she was doing in her classroom with other teachers. “We came together as a group of individual to share, to collaborate to construct knowledge. There is a shared vision, there is a shared goal…. we each had a role to play. Carmen is a grade eight French as a Second Language teacher in the community. In the beginning she was very skeptical about joining the Professional Learning Community. She was also frustrated about the lack of real professional development opportunities for French as a Second Language teachers which was a motivating factor for her when she made the decision to become a part of the Professional Learning Community. In the end she had this to say about the experience.

I really liked the experience and chance to really talk and learn so many things with my colleagues… in the beginning I was not sure about how this would work… because in your classroom you’re left by yourself and you do what you want to do… because I teach French I don’t get the chance to meet with other teachers… the PLC was great because I had the chance to meet and share things and learn from other people… I talk to Nadine but I did not know that she did some really creative things in her classroom… I got to try them in my classroom and they worked. I would definitely do this again.

Charlene teaches in a GLD classroom with grades 6. 7 & 8 students. Besides a Teaching Assistant that works a long side her in the classroom, she rarely gets the opportunity to share in other learning with other teachers. She had this to say about being with her other teaching colleagues:

As a learner it’s is a great eye opener because you get the chance to listen to your colleagues… share their experiences, what have worked in the past and what has not worked.
In that case you are learning as well you are taking some things in and that validate some of the experience you might have. In your classroom you’re all by yourself and you don’t know whether you’re sinking or swimming. To hear your colleagues share their thinking you’re able to learn from them... As a teacher you feel empowered hearing some of the experiences of your colleagues... you feel knowledgeable, you feel you’re up to the task to impact your students in a greater way.

The teachers used the opportunity while meeting in the Professional Learning Community to share some of the things that they were doing in their classrooms that worked and that they believed that others would find beneficial. One area that the teachers identified as an area of need was using technology to support students’ learning. During one of the focus group sessions, Robert shared some of things that he was doing in his grade eight classroom. He explained how teachers could record student work in the classroom and use as an opportunity for inquiry-based learning, or for engaging in reflective practice. The narrative got very interesting as teachers began to discuss how they would individually use technology in their own classrooms to support learning. Charlene, our GLD teacher in the community spoke about using it as tool for assistive technology with her students. Some teachers discussed using this for assessment purposes by using this to establish learning goals and success criteria for students and re-visiting these during the teaching and learning cycles.

**Teachers Use Reflective Practice to Engage in Inquiry-Based Learning**

Coming together in a community allowed teachers to feel more empowered and in charge of their own learning. For many of the teachers, having the opportunity to participate in a professional dialogue was a welcome change from mandated forms of professional development. The process of coming together and reflecting on their practice enabled them to deconstruct their own understanding of learning through questions, reflecting on their own practices and by further challenging some of
their previously held beliefs and practices. In one of the focus group dialogue teachers were engaged in a discussion on what is meant by professional knowledge. Nadine describes her understanding of professional knowledge.

Yes I do believe that it’s important to gain professional knowledge from doing an ongoing course, from a professional development session, from doing your masters but it’s also important to know that a lot of what we do on the job is already professional knowledge so while that is good I believe we need to also gain professional knowledge from our colleagues and they from us...because we are the ones in the field... with the kids every day and it’s important that this informs our practice on a daily basis... so it’s a fine balance... what you learn from working with a student just from interacting... you will not be able to read it in a book.

Carol the grade eight French language teacher was more concerned about differentiating between what she described as ‘personal knowledge’ and ‘professional knowledge’.

I think we need to be more careful of what we describe as professional knowledge because sometimes people can take the personal knowledge and call it professional knowledge.... so I believe you need to go to a conference, a book talk with other teachers where you get to share your personal experience in a professional context...but I think a PLC like this you would be gaining professional knowledge.

Robert is the most experienced teacher in the community and he explained his understanding of professional knowledge.

I think that one thing you need to know is that knowledge itself is subjective and if that’s the case professional knowledge is subjective as well...We have to be careful that we are not trying to come up with something definite to define knowledge as professional knowledge can
come in many forms...not only from a book, or a course... the one thing about any type of professional knowledge if you're unable to apply it, then it’s not knowledge... this is why we need to be careful before we call something professional knowledge... at its best we can say that it’s a combination of skills, values and information built up over the years and applied in a practical sense to improve learning for students.

By engaging in this type of inquiry, teachers were able to gain valuable information from their colleagues through reflecting on their own practices and questioning their own beliefs. Teachers described coming together in this process allowed them to both ‘validate’ and ‘question’ their practice from listening and sharing in the learning experience with other colleagues. In the end, the teachers came to understand “professional knowledge as knowledge that is gained from experience over the years from both direct and indirect learning and applied to the teaching and learning process”. I believe that this is consistent with the ways in which Schon (1987), describes teacher learning. Schon, explains that teachers acquire professional knowledge as they learn on the job, or as they reflect upon their own learning and adjust their actions depending upon the context.

**Research Question 2**

What themes from middle school teachers' responses emerge about how they experience this phenomenon?

The process of meeting as colleagues to talk and learn about teaching led to discussions about professional development as a learning process. While listening to the teacher participants, I was able to identify a few themes that emerged from teachers’ own perceptions of current models of professional development, their beliefs around how they learn and the types of professional learning opportunities that they find useful. Two important themes stood out:
• The need for choice and greater autonomy in selecting professional development opportunities.

• Teachers value professional learning opportunities where they get the chance to dialogue and engage in self-directed learning.

The teacher participants believed that professional knowledge came from a variety of experiences including core values and beliefs, professional judgment, life experiences/stories, knowledge from professional development and professional literature.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Current Professional Development**

Teachers were asked about professional development programs they had participated in and found useful. All nine teachers indicated that they involved professional development activities that they had personally selected. Furthermore, none of the teachers identified ‘work related’ workshops that were pre-planned by others. The teachers all seem to suggest that their participation in professional development programs stems from interests; opportunities for new learning, suggestions from other colleagues and the relevance to their classroom practice. Even though many professional development programs still currently rely on the ‘traditional’ workshop model of delivering professional learning, none of the nine participants mentioned that traditional [professional development programs] contributed to their growth as professionals.

With respect to traditional professional development, many of the teachers voiced their frustrations. Carol is an experienced grade eight French as a Second Language teacher who has been teaching for about eight years. She described her frustrations of the lack of ‘quality’ professional development for French as a Second Language teachers.

*It’s bad enough that there is so much emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy and nothing out there for French teachers. It’s like we are not here. We are always in the classroom.*
Kelly is a grade 7 language arts teacher. She is a fairly new teacher in her third year of teaching and on her fourth long term teaching assignment. Kelly was experiencing some challenges in her classroom getting her male students to read. She decided to join the Professional Learning Community because she saw it as an opportunity to get ideas and learn some things from more experienced teachers on staff. During our focus group sessions she expressed her frustrations participating in the Teaching Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) which included using data from students’ work to inform the instructional cycle. “It's very difficult for me to think about data when I'm having such a challenging time getting my boys interested in reading”.

Karen, the grade eight math teacher in the group spoke about the ‘mandated’ changes and the curriculum and traditional workshops that left many teachers more ‘confused’ at the end of the sessions than at the beginning “Every day they come out with something new. Before it was overall expectations. Now you are told to teach to the 'big ideas', except no one bothers to tell you what these big ideas are”. Many teachers were critical of sessions led by outside ‘experts’. In addition, teachers are often asked to participate in these sessions year after year and with no ‘real’ thought given to teachers’ interests, needs and years of teaching experience.

Robert is a Grade 8 language arts teacher and has the most year of teaching experience out of the group. He has taught at all the grade levels including high school and presently works as an Additional Qualifications Instructor. He criticizes traditional professional development that are offered by ‘so-called experts’. “These PD sessions are a joke. They claim that they are offered by these ‘so-called experts – except that you’re not learning any expert knowledge. It’s the same information that is repackaged over and over again” Carmen talks about ‘devalued’ teachers feel as
professionals when professional development programs are planned with little or no input from them. *I feel like my professionalism is devalued every time I have to sit in one of those sessions… it’s as if to say my years of experience, my professional training don’t count.* Other teachers discussed their frustrations caused from participating in the same professional development program over and over, year after year without gaining any new knowledge. Carol explains how she felt about being asked to do the same workshops year after year without gaining any new learning.

*I don’t need to know anymore content or the technicalities of teaching. I want to know something interesting that someone is doing in their classroom and then I would like to try and see if it works for me.*

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Learning**

The teachers described learning as ongoing, active and interrelated to students’ learning. When asked the question about how their learning characterize their beliefs around student learning, the teachers discussed how the decisions that they made in their classrooms relate to what they value as learners. Nadine talks about how she constantly models for her students what is required of them. She discusses how it is important for her students to see her as a ‘learner’ in the classroom. She believes that her student becomes more motivated to learn when they see her actively participating in the process.

*We are just older than our students, but we are still learning… and as teachers you are constantly modeling… I model when I say to my students we are going to write a ten minutes story, so take out your papers and pencils and I take out mine too… my students see more value in what they are doing when they see I’m doing the same thing too.*

The teachers discussed the need for professional development to focus on the needs of teachers at that particular time. Karen spoke about how her attitudes and beliefs as a teacher and learner impact her students.
Even though you’re not enforcing your rules, your beliefs or philosophies it rubs off on the way you teach and your students. Some of my beliefs impact students and it’s not only your beliefs but also the beliefs and values of your students impact what happens in the classroom. So even though my beliefs and values are important and it rubs off on what happens in the classroom - so are the beliefs and values of my students’ impact what happen in the classroom. Values comes from their perspective what they have to say and where they are coming from.

Learning based on ‘Individual Needs’

Other teachers discuss the need for teacher learning to focus more on individual needs. Carol talks about mandated professional development as focused specifically on outcomes:

I believe than mandated PD focuses on outcomes. I remember the latest ‘Restorative Practice’ workshop that I was asked to attend… I may use restorative practices somewhere down the road but it was not based on my specific needs at this time... I believe that PD should be ‘need-base’... the great thing about the PLC that we had we start with a focus but we did not know where we were going and that’s the beauty about learning.

Charlene describes what she believes is the main difference between mandated professional development and our self-directed professional learning community.

One of the main difference is choice with mandated workshop there is no choice. You are told what to do and to show up and go even if what you’re going to do has no relevance to what you’re doing. In our focus group you have a choice. Those of us who wanted to be there chose to be there. When you go to those workshops the framework is set. Even though sometimes they ask what you’d like to learn in many ways it is a routine for the presenter. But if I remember in the focus group we decided on what we wanted to do or talk about, or learn based on our need at the time and because it’s something we could all benefit from. So the flexibility is something
that you cannot find in the traditional workshop because everything is all planned out and set but in this kind of PD it is based on the need of the participant.

Over the course of the Professional Learning Community some of the teachers decided that as a part of their learning they would like exchange, or observe another colleague’s classroom. Karen also taught math and science to Robert’s all-boys homeroom class. She wanted a chance to observe the strategies that Robert was using to engage his students. She spoke about how that experience helped her in her own classroom after she had the chance to observe the boys interacting in their own classroom. She discussed changing some of the things she was doing in her class to reflect some of the things that she learned while observing Robert.

The teachers discuss the ‘possibilities’ of learning in this forum by creating their own authentic learning experiences. They believed that board-mandated professional development programs did not reflect their creativity, or the need to direct their own learning.

**Learning based on ‘Decision-Making’**

Some teachers believed that as professional they are called to ‘exercise’ professional judgment based on what they believe ‘makes sense’ and what is right for her students. Simone is a grade six math teacher. She believes in building a ‘learning community’ in her classroom and sometimes co-teaches with another colleague. She talks about ‘modeling for her students what she wants them to do’. She wants her students to work together as a ‘team’ so teaching with another partner demonstrates the type of learning that she wants her students to engage in. She believes that when students work together they become ‘decision-makers’ of their own. One day I had a chance to visit her classroom. The students were engaged in the process of using legos to build robots and cars. She talks about her practice and defends the choice she makes in ‘not teaching to a test’. She had this to say when I sat down with her.
Our students are learning real-problem solving skills, they know how to learn, and how to learn with each other, they work as a team, they are communicating, they know how to use technology, they're engaged, they are resilient and I've done all this without teaching to a specific test. There is no EQAO question that I would ever give my students to do and they would not be able to solve it.

Charlene, the GLD teacher in the community discussed the need for her students to take more ‘initiative’ and become more ‘independent’ in directing their own learning. She talks about how her practice over the years have evolved to more of a ‘coach’/facilitator as she encourages her students to become autonomous learners.

My philosophies and beliefs have remained the same but my practice has changed. I see my instructional practice as more student focused. I see myself as a coach, facilitator and sometimes as a learner because sometimes as a teacher it’s important to step back and have students take the lead... And it’s still changing over time because I reflect a lot and I see myself as a reflective practitioner so my reflections have really enabled me to grow and have shaped my practice...it has become more student-focus, a facilitator, flexible and impacting my students to become global citizens.

These teachers value coming together as decision-makers in the learning process. They recognize the importance of having their students ‘voices’, ‘ideas’, as well as ‘values’ represented in the learning process. They do not believe in top-down authority and it is evident that they value the themes around citizenship and creating democratic values in their classrooms. I believe that these findings are also important to the values teachers placed on their own learning. Examining teachers’ beliefs around learning, as well as the practices that they engage in while in their own classrooms, can reveal a lot about how they learn.

**Teacher learning as ‘Reflective’ Process**
During the process of getting together and sharing best practices through conversations, observations and demonstrations teachers were able to collectively construct knowledge through by using this reflective practice approach. As a community they were able to construct knowledge through careful evaluation and reflecting on prior experiences and by sharing their knowledge and skills with each other over a period of time. In this example, Charlene described how as a ‘community’, they came to ‘define’ ‘teacher knowledge.

*I think during our discussion we realize that even though everyone came from different backgrounds we came to agree that teacher knowledge was as a reflection of teacher mastery of curriculum, teacher’s mastery of their policies, mastery of their practice of their instruction. Teacher knowledge is always changing so it’s ongoing – you need to update your instructional knowledge, practice, policies. So it’s not a static thing. It’s a dynamic experience it describes your wealth of experience and how it impact your daily teaching and learning. It based on so many things- strategies you use, the students you have in your class, the environment of your school.*

This type of experiential learning shows that teachers are able to be in charge of their own learning through the ability to reflect and make changes to their own teaching practice.

The process of meeting as a community resulted in teachers listening to each other and in the process engaging each other in critical thinking. The teachers talk about self-evaluating their own practices through the ‘lens’ of their colleagues. Carol describes her feelings in the focus group sessions.

*Sometimes you are in your classroom and you feel that you are doing the right thing because it’s your belief and you have been doing this for many years…. I felt like when we met in our PLC… I wanted to share what I was doing, but I also wanted that opportunity to reflect and question my own thinking... And Teacher X, he always had this thing where he would*
challenge you and I like that because he always had me thinking and questioning some of the things that I was doing in my own classroom.

The teachers expressed their feelings about coming together the need to feel validated by sharing their ideas about classroom practices and reflecting on the practices that they believe are supporting students’ learning. Nadine describes her feeling.

I really like the idea of coming together like this ... because we don’t usually have opportunities like this to share the things we are doing in our classrooms... we are by ourselves so coming together means we not only get the chance to see what other people are doing but we are able to validate what we are also doing... so it’s like a confirmation as well as learning from others.

The practice of engaging in the reflective process enabled teachers to reflect on and consolidate their own understanding of learning.

Research Question 3

What conditions and structures need to be in place in order to support teacher reflective practice?

Environment and context are important in determining the level of trust that is developed and that is important in establishing and sustaining a professional learning environment. They identified two main factors that are important in building and sustaining a teacher learning environment. (1) Teachers discussed the need to feel safe and build trusting relationships in order to support learning. (2) They believed that time is always a challenge, however, it is essential in sustaining learning. While some teachers identified having a ‘shared goal’, or focus’, other teachers did not believe it was as important. Researchers like (Hord 1997), discusses the need for shared vision and goals within a community. However, this was an area that most of the teachers could not make up their mind. Many
of the teachers believed that there was a difference between ‘sharing’ of best practices and ‘shared vision’. They reasoned that since learning is ‘individual’, you can hardly expect the same outcomes.

Teachers ‘define climate for learning in their classroom’, as a learning environment that is ‘safe, secure, positive and one that encourages collaboration’. They discussed the need to feel safe in any learning environment and to share their learning in a ‘space’ where they do not feel like they are being ‘judged’, or evaluated. During the interview Carol describes her feelings.

*Once we had our PLC in the staff room... I didn’t feel so comfortable there because anyone could have just walked in ...and I did not want what I had to say being construed. When we were in the classroom in a small setting, I felt more safe because we all wanted to be there and I did not feel like I was judged or I had to prove myself.*

**Trust**

The teachers in the study talked about the need to develop a trusting relationship and that it was important in establishing that they are comfortable to open up and share their learning, concerns and challenges without feeling inadequate. They also discussed the ‘lack’ of trust among teachers in the profession and why many feel the need to ‘close’ their classroom doors and do things on their own. Another concern that was mentioned had to do with how the teachers viewed their interactions with administration. The teachers felt that the presence of administration in their classroom means that they are being constantly evaluated. They discussed how their needs at times ‘clashed’, or ‘interfered’ with the needs of the school, or ‘administrative’ needs. One teacher explained that it is not uncommon for many teachers to experience what he described as ‘career suicide’. Other terms that were used by teachers to describe this type of relationship were ‘them and us’ and ‘top-down authority’.

**Time**
Time as an issue came up repeatedly in the various discussions and seems to be a consistent area of concern for the teacher participants. The teachers believed that time was a factor because it was sometimes difficult getting teachers together at mutually convenient times. They agreed that scheduling time between marking and grading assignments, supervision and different schedules did not afford them enough flexibility, or opportunity to come together to discuss or share ideas about their practices or what was happening in their classrooms. Many of the teachers use their lunch time and spare time to conduct extra-curricular activities and to organize clubs with students. The teachers mentioned that time is something that is usually ‘scarce’, and that they valued the opportunity once every six weeks to meet in the focus group after the instructional school day. Lohman (2000), suggests that lack of time is reported to be one of the main factors impeding teacher learning in the school setting (p.144). While a few teachers mentioned availability and accessibility to resources and materials like technology important, they did not reveal any real concerns around lack, or availability of resources as something that impeded their learning.

**Research question 4**

What role does community play in supporting reflective practice?

Researchers concerned with the debate on the types of professional development programs to provide for teachers have offered different arguments on what these should like in practice. Some researchers argue that current models of PLC’s does not go deep enough any fail to off-set any ‘real’ and consistent change in the classroom (Servage, 2008; Ofer, & Pedder, 2011). The real issue centres on the notion that teacher learning is ‘messy work’ and requires much more than a ‘quick fix’ approach to the problems associated with teaching and learning. Educational literature in support of ‘authentic’ professional development highlight the need for teacher learning communities where teachers are able to dialogue and reflect on their individual practices with other colleagues. As teachers grow to trust each other they begin to establish relationships and forms ties
that are able to sustain these structures over-time (Kooy, 2006; Gregson & Sturko, 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009).

**Building Collaborative Learning Partnerships through Reflective Practice**

Initially, even though the nine teachers volunteered to participate in the study, most of them were still a little sceptic about the outcomes. Some were highly suspicious and wanted to ensure that it was a PLC by teachers and for teachers and that they did not want any interference from administration further down the road. Others were concerned about trust and wanting to ensure that whatever was said and done stayed within the context of the group. One teacher who was very sceptic in the beginning had this to say at the end:

*I really like the experience and chance to really talk and learn so many things with my colleagues... in the beginning I was not sure about how this would work... because in your classroom you’re left by yourself and you do what you do... I don’t get the chance to meet with the other teachers and Teacher X had so many great ideas that I have tried in my classroom... now I’m motivated to do something like this again.*

Becoming a community enabled the teachers to develop relationships and learning partnerships established through co-teaching, observing each other in their classrooms and through sharing of best practices. Many of the teachers discussed the need to network and establish relationships with other teachers that share similar interests after the study. Except for the two grade eight math teachers, none of the other teachers had the chance of meeting or participating in any on-site professional development sessions as most of these sessions involved grade-level numeracy and literacy teachers. This excluded the three French teachers and one ISSP teacher who was a part of the study. Nadine one of the French teachers in the group talk about her interest in social justice and how she was using the theme to build ‘community’ and at the same time, motivate her students to become
more engaged in learning French. She was able to connect with Carol another French as a Second Language teacher who was experiencing difficulties in getting her grade seven students motivated to learn the language. Nadine was able to share some of the instructional approaches, like ‘role-play’, and games to discuss critical issues in French. Carol decided to use some of these practices in her classroom, in conjunction to the class text. Kelly, a grade seven Grade 7 language teacher who described how she ‘adopted’ the idea of 'circle time' to build community in her classroom. In the beginning, she experienced real challenges motivating her male students to read. She was really excited about joining the Professional Learning Community to share and receive ideas from other teachers. She discussed her success using ‘circle time’ to build community in her classroom. Other teachers listened and decided it was a great strategy that they would like to incorporate at the beginning of the school year.

_Students sit on mats in a corner of the classroom. They get a sticky note and each write one thing that they are thankful for, one thing they wish for. Then they have the choice of sharing what they have written during this circle time. At the end they post their notes on a chart paper in the classroom._

Teachers are able to build collaborative learning partnerships when they get together in communities of learning. By coming together in this process, teachers that otherwise barely interacted with each other were able to establish a professional learning community that fosters teacher collaboration, build relationships while engaging in learning.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings from this Chapter yielded some important information about teacher learning which will be discussed in more details in Chapter 5. Careful evaluation of the data revealed that teachers value (1) collaboration over isolation; (2) autonomy and choice over mandated forms of
professional development and (3) and opportunities for critical reflection and engagement over
subject-specific, or content- knowledge driven learning.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Reflections

Introduction

In this study, I set out to examine teacher learning through teachers’ own perceptions about how they experience learning. According to Pajares (1992), teachers’ perceptions strongly influence their thinking and actions in the classroom (p. 307). Instead of directly asking teachers how they learn, I thought the study would be more grounded by uncovering how teachers themselves experience the phenomenon. (Schon 1987), explains that teachers constantly use reflection as a tool to support learning both inside and outside of the classroom (p. 26). Since reflective-practice is widely used by all teachers, it would have been a suitable forum to further explore the complex topic of teaching and learning. It was hoped that the findings from this study would contribute to the professional literature on providing suitable professional development programs for teachers.

The study set out three main goals: (1) it sets out to understand the beliefs and perceptions of teachers as learners by looking at how teachers use reflective practice as a tool in teacher learning. By asking the question of what role does reflective practice plays in teacher learning, the study hopes to: (2) uncover themes that underlies teacher learning. Phenomenological themes are understood as the structures of experiences (Van Manen, 1997 p. 87). By analyzing teachers' collective learning we will be able to 'understand' the essence of teacher learning through various themes. (3) To contribute to the literature on providing professional development programs in social contexts that support teacher, as well as student learning. After examining the data through teachers’ collective experience I noticed that three main themes emerged from my interpretation of the findings:
• Teachers need greater autonomy when it comes to choosing their own professional development pathways.

• Critical reflection plays a key role in how teachers define their learning.

• Teachers value professional development opportunities that foster teacher collaboration and an emphasis on sharing of best practices.

The Teacher as a [Adult] Learner

In attempting to understand the teachers’ need for ‘greater autonomy’ as it relates to choosing the types of professional development that best suits their needs it is important to examine the role of the teacher as an adult learner.

The teacher as adult learner needs to be fully understood within a context of providing meaningful and effective professional development for teachers. In retrospect, it is safe to say that as adult ‘learners’, teachers have diverse needs and learning styles that are unique to them and professional development programs that do not take into consideration the individual needs of teachers are pointless to say the least. Gregson & Sturko, (2007), summarize Knowles’ description of the adult learner as independent, possess a concept of self, comes with many experiences and will only learn what they need to know (p. 3). Furthermore, (Borko, et. al., 2000; Garet et. al., 2001), imply that effective professional development programs focus on content, as well as context, what teachers already know and the needs of the organization.

If teachers play such an important role in defining student learning, then teachers’ perceptions about their own learning should become a major focus of research and in delivering professional development programs. Gregson & Sturko, (2007), suggest that if teachers are required to make any real change in their practice, they need opportunities to learn with and from other professionals within their profession (p. 2).
The teachers described taking ownership and the need to initiate their own learning experiences. “Adult learners tend to resist learning that is in conflict with the direction they believe their learning should go” (Beavers, 2009 p. 27). Many of the teachers in this study spoke about teaching being an ‘isolated’ profession and not having the opportunity to share in learning with other teachers. The teachers believed that as professionals they are called upon every day to be decision-makers in their classrooms. They discussed the need for greater autonomy and choice in professional development programs based on needs and on what they believe would best impact their teaching practice. If teachers do not see the value in what they are doing, then there is a great chance that they will not see how it would help their students. Conversely, if teachers see the value in something then this will transfer into their teaching practice. Researchers like (Kooy, & Colaruso, 2012), emphasize the need to situate teacher learning within the context of student learning. If teachers are given greater flexibility in choice, if what they are doing is meaningful and has value to them, then they are going to transfer these practices in their classrooms (119).

The teachers describe the value of negotiating their own learning through own stories, attitudes and beliefs and the ways in which they construct knowledge. They described the need to define their own learning in relationship to their students’ learning yet they all agreed that their needs vary based on contexts and the complexities of their classroom experiences. While some may argue that professional development opportunities coalesce around students’ needs, it can be argued that teacher needs also imply students’ needs. If a teacher has a particular need and lacks teacher confidence, this may reflect in his/her teaching practice and students’ work. If teachers, are only going to ‘learn what they need to know’, then it makes more sense to give teachers more freedom to participate in professional learning opportunities of their choice. A professional development learning opportunity for a teacher of twenty years in the profession, may mean different learning goals and outcomes than a fairly novice teacher. A new teacher may be taken up with learning the classroom dynamics of managing his/her students and find it an uphill task to engage in learning that
has to do with highly differentiated instructional strategies in the classroom. This is not to say that a fairly novice teacher should not be engaged in learning ‘high-yield’ strategies in the classroom; however, at that particular time, the teacher may need more support in planning engaging learner-centered lessons that can motivate his/her students.

As professionals, teachers need to be given the choice to engage in professional learning opportunities that best define their needs and help them to become better practitioners in the classroom. Some may say it is a rather difficult task to provide teachers with individuals choices albeit the ‘vision’ of the school and making improvements. Teachers are an intricate part of the school and should factor within the ‘big picture’, or when making plans for school improvement. This means that teachers should be encouraged to become more involved in the decision-making processes especially around professional development that are meaningful and the strategies that they believe work best in their classrooms. If teachers are given the freedom to choose their own professional development based on needs, then they will feel less pressure to perform and begin to develop more confidence as they learn and practice new skills.

As adult learners, teachers are independent learners and therefore approach learning from different viewpoints, life experiences and interests. Beavers, (2009), cites one of the main failures of professional development programs is too much reliance on the ‘expert’, or outside source and not enough attention given to teacher ‘practical’ knowledge (p.26). To rely solely on ‘expert’ advice would be to deny that knowledge is not only made up of content, or pedagogical knowledge but it is also the sum of those individuals, their life experiences and how they interact with each other in their environment. If teachers are given the opportunity to actively engage in their own learning; then they may also see the need, or be more inclined to create learner-centered classrooms that support students’ learning.
Teachers spend most of their adult lives working by themselves and unless they are in a situation where they might have a support staff, a teaching assistant, or the opportunity to co-teach with another partner, they are in isolation. Many fairly new teachers, for example, struggle in their first few years of teaching without any supportive structures like mentors. Teachers crave professional development opportunities because they feel a need to be around other teachers to share ideas and to validate what they are doing in their classrooms. Schon, (1987), describes teachers by ‘nature’ are reflective-practitioners (p. 26). Teachers learn when they are share and constantly reflect on what they are doing with other colleagues. Before this type of learning can take place teachers need to be able to establish trust and develop collegial relationships that allows for inquiry and critical reflection. It means that collaborative learning framework that are formed and sustained in communities when teachers learn together (Lave & Wenger 1991; Kooy 2006; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Gregson & Sturko, 2007).

Schools will begin to experience more real changes when teachers are encouraged to learn in environments that builds trust among their teaching counterparts. In the study, the teachers benefitted from building trust and relationships and were able to share their individual knowledge within supportive learning structures. Instead of relying on ‘expert’ knowledge they became their own experts through sharing of practices while building relationships. This type of learning builds capacity among teachers and leads to improved teacher performance in the classrooms.

**Role of School Culture in fostering Community**

The role of the school [culture] is important in shaping the dynamics and structures that influence the contexts of teaching and learning. Without a supportive learning environment it would be difficult to build and foster the types of relationships that sustain teacher learning. The teachers discussed the need to develop a safe and trusting relationship in their own classrooms where students feel free to take the risks that are associated with learning. They talked about how overtime, they
were able to open up and share teachers their learning, concerns and challenges without feeling ‘inadequate’. This school as a ‘community’ would also eliminate some of the barriers that result in ‘mistrust’, for example between some administrators and teachers. It would challenge some of the inherent beliefs around ‘top-down’ authority and ‘them and us’ as described by some of the teachers in the study.

In order to provide the type of environment that fosters learning, the role of school culture needs to also be examined and understood within a larger framework of things. The ‘functionalists’ aspect of school has defined school as ‘learning institutions’ under the assumption that learning institutions ‘works’ because there are some who have ‘access’ and ‘privilege’ to knowledge and others do not. To provide the kind environment and types of structures that best suit teacher as well as student learning, long held beliefs and assumptions about schools as learning institutions needs to be first examined. It is also crucial that we begin to formulate a new epistemology around teaching and learning that is centered on learning partnerships and collaborative learning structures that fosters relationship building.

The functionalist approach to schools centers on the notion that schools ‘function’ to serve a larger purpose. From a definition standpoint, ‘culture’ is understood to be a common base of knowledge values and norms that people grow into and begin to perceive as the ‘natural’ way of life (Sparkes, 1991 p.8). For this purpose, I will refer to school culture as norms, beliefs and values inherent the school system and exist to uphold the institutionalized aspect of learning.

The term ‘climate’ is sometimes used to describe the broader context as it relates to the overall school environment. While this may be a ‘fancy’ term it hardly captures some of the more critical issues of power and privilege inherent in school culture. Wren, (1999), proposes that educators and administrators alike need to look at the entire picture of the school environment in order to get a full understanding of the interactions at play within [culture]; such as the norms,
attitudes and behavior that influence the interactions of individuals within the organization and [climate]; the perceptions of students and staff (p.1). Other research like Lumby (2012), argues that ‘school leaders must engage with culture as a key mediator of power within organizations (p. 577). Teacher learning does not take place in ‘isolation’, rather research shows that it requires establishing relationships built from strong supportive network sustained overtime. Providing the type of professional learning opportunities that improve teaching need to first be examined within the context of school culture. What aspect/s of school culture supports/impedes teacher learning? What impact does ‘culture’ have on learning? In order for this to happen, there needs to first be a shift in behaviour and attitudes from those involved and the ways in which schools are perceived. Kotter & Cohen (2002), for example, suggests that the guiding principle behind changing ‘culture’, is changing people’s ‘behaviour’ (p. 2). While this may be true, it is also important that the perceptions that influence these attitudes also be changed.

Researchers like Eaker & Keating (2008), call for the ‘transformation’ of schools to function as ‘professional learning community’ (p.14). While this sounds great, the ‘function’ of schools as ‘professional learning communities’ does address the larger structures of power and privilege inherent in the system that serves to influence the types of relationship and interactions between teachers and administrators; teachers and teachers; students and teacher and teachers and parents. The findings revealed in this study suggest that providing the professional learning opportunities to support students’ learning will need collaborative approach that supports teacher learning. This will take a changed mindset and the re-conceptualization of schools as learning communities.

The school as a ‘learning community’, is a concept that is slowly emerging within a climate of major school reforms and restructuring. Proponents of school improvement reforms, (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink 2003), suggest the need for a ‘cultural’ shift from an individual mindset to a collective process of decision-making and sharing of authority for all the stakeholders involved in learning. Such practice, though, will also need to include deconstructing the structures, or cultural
hegemony of ‘knowledge’, ‘power’, ‘language’ and other mechanisms that seem to hold the existing structure in place. For example, critical questions such as - “Who have access to knowledge? Whose knowledge is celebrated? Whose voices are heard? - should not be overlooked. In the study, the French language teachers in the group spoke about being ‘overlooked’ when it came to school-based professional development opportunities as oppose to their math and language arts teacher counterparts. In their work, Voulala & Sharpe, (2005); describe the definition of the ‘school as a community’ to imply:

A learning organization is one which as a corporate entity constantly learns from its past and present experiences and its contemplation of the future, and consciously uses these learnings to continuously change and adapt in such a way as to maximize its outcomes in terms of its purpose in its constantly changing environment (pg. 10).

The school as a community would mean a significant change in the types of relationships and interactions between teachers and students, teachers and administrators and between teachers. It means that as teachers begin to envision the possibilities of ‘community’, they begin to create classrooms where teachers and students are engaged symbiotically and are working collaboratively to find creative solutions to problems (Hill & Sewell, 2010 p. 32). Critical learning theorists (Servage, 2008; Mezirow 2000), maintain that change is not possible ‘without some kind of dissent’. Professional learning of this nature and within the confines of a community would encourage teacher engagement and the opportunity to discuss some of the more challenging issues. The school as a community would call for more collaborative decision-making processes between teachers and administrators and teachers and parents. Teachers and administrators may need to find creative ways to share the vision of the school with parents and to help parents find supportive goals to enhance their child’s learning.

**Reflective Practice as a tool in Teacher Engagement**
Reflective practice is a powerful tool that can be utilized to support teachers’ learning. However, I am very surprised how under-utilized this approach is in supporting teacher learning. Through critical reflection the teacher participants were able to self-evaluate their teaching practice through listening to others, sharing and or validating their experiences and also re-examining some of their previously held beliefs. Through the process of coming together and sharing their thoughts the teachers were able to reconstruct their own understanding of learning.

Reflective practice encourages teacher engagement and collaboration and needs to be further examined within the scope of providing professional development for teachers. When teachers becomes part of the dialogue and the decision-making processes around professional learning they are more inclined to change their practice. It very important that structure are put in place to encourage teachers to critically examine their own practices and make individual changes in order to improve student learning.

Where do I Stand?

I place myself within this study as a researcher, but more importantly as a teacher researcher. I set out to uncover teachers’ perceptions around learning. My hypothesis was that if teachers come together in a community and engage in reflective practice then this would reveal important things about their learning. It was very challenging as a researcher to be a part of the community, however, taking on a very limited role. I wondered what it looks like if teachers were given the opportunity to chart their own learning journey. What would it reveal about how they learn new knowledge and skills? It was interesting the ways in which teachers took charge and begin to establish the conditions that support a climate for learning. I was not surprised when the teachers discussed the need for ‘trust’. I was more surprised when most of the teachers expressed a lack of ‘trust’ between them and administration and the words they used to describe that relationship. I did not share this perception as the other teachers in the community. Over the years and in my many role
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as a ‘teacher leader’, in my various schools, I had to develop a trusting relationship with the administrators that I worked with in the building. I believe that it would be worthwhile further examining the relationship between administrators and teachers and building relationships that support teacher, as well as student learning.

The teachers also spoke a lot about being ‘judged’, and the feeling that they have of constantly trying to prove themselves. What is the motivating factor behind this feeling? Why did the teachers believe that they had to constantly ‘prove’ that they were professionals? Would this have anything to do with how confident they are as teachers and as learners? I often attribute my confidence in the classroom with a willingness to take ‘risks’. I also try to instill in my students that ‘we are all learning together’ and that means that all ‘ideas are valid’. In my classroom and teaching practice, I believe that all learning is grounded in some kind of inquiry. With this in mind, it is easier for me to see teaching and learning as a journey. I am more interested in the journey instead of the outcomes and I encourage my students to think likewise. My ‘confidence’ as an educator constantly develops as I work and learn with my students. However, I believe that the issues around feelings of ‘constantly being judged’ are important questions that also need to be explored within the contexts of teaching and learning.

Contributions to Research

I set out to understand how teachers experience learning and I wanted to use a tool that I believed would reveal a lot about how teachers learn. Reflective practice is a ‘tool’ that teachers use when they get together with other colleagues. I believed that teachers would reveal important information about how they learn when they come together in a community. While many professional development programs seek to find the best models that ‘work’, many seem to overlook something important - teachers’ own perceptions about what best motivate their learning.
I do not believe that the findings in this study are conclusive. That was not my intention. However, I believe that by gaining a collective understanding of teachers’ perceptions, I was able to uncover some important themes around teacher learning. These findings are important because they contribute to the existing literature around teacher learning. School administrators and those who are responsible for providing professional development programs for teachers need to take these findings into consideration when planning professional learning opportunities.

**Study Limitations**

There were some limitations to this study. One major limitation was that teachers’ perceptions and attitudes about learning were taken from nine middle school teacher. While this may have been a very good representation to formulate a collective interpretation of teachers’ learning experiences – experiences can also differ from one context to another. During the process and at the end of the study I find myself reflecting on whether the findings would be the same with teachers at the primary junior, or high school levels.

These experiences were also with teachers from one particular middle school. Even though some of these teachers had limited interactions when it came to professional learning opportunities, they already knew each other because they all worked in the same school. In addition, except for the French as a Second Language Teachers, many of the other teachers had participated in the same pre-planned professional development programs and had similar reactions regarding how they felt about these sessions.

The study also lasted a little longer than I had anticipated and as a result, three of the teachers that participated in the focus group sessions (PLC), were unable to participate in the semi-structured interview process. One of the teacher went on to another Long Term teaching assignment to another school and was unable to do a follow-up session. Two of the other participants were very busy and found it very difficult arranging a suitable time. As the researcher, I wonder how much the absence
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of their ‘voices’, have affected the collective experience of the group and essentially the findings that emerged.

Conclusions and Next Steps in the Research

During the process of the study, one thing that came up time and time again was how teachers were able to use voice to negotiate a space for themselves within the Professional Learning Community. I observed that some teachers spoke more than others during the study and I wondered why was that possible. I became very intrigued with this entire process and now wondered what it would mean if teachers were to tell their individual stories about how they were able to ‘find/locate’ their voice within this community. My over-arching question would center on the role of voice in creating communities. One of the question that I would like to investigate is:

• What role does voice play in creating learning communities?

I believe that telling stories can also be used as a reflective tool to capture the collective experiences of teacher learning through dialogue. In order to create lasting change in the classrooms and to improve outcomes for our students, this dialogue needs to continue. As educators, we owe it to ourselves and the lives that we strive to change on a daily basis. It is important that we begin to tell our stories and begin to ask more questions. It’s a ‘risk’ worth taking.
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Protocol

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Toronto, ON M5S 1V

1. What does a Professional Learning Community mean to you?

   a. How have your involvement in this PLC inform your role as a teacher/learner?

   b. What conditions and structures need to be in place to sustain teacher learning?

2. How do you think how you learn characterize your beliefs and values around student learning?

3. Teachers are often asked to be decision-makers. Describe a classroom experience in which your beliefs influenced a decision that you made around students’ learning.

4. How did we come to understand ‘teacher knowledge’?

5. How do you think teachers acquire professional knowledge?

6. How have your experiences in this Professional Learning Community similar to, or different from your participation/involvement in mandated workshops, or traditional professional development programs?

7. How would you characterize your teaching over the course of your career? Do you believe that teacher preparation programs and other in-service programs adequately prepare teachers for a career in teaching?

8. As you look back, describe an ‘aha’ moment in your career. What made you characterize this as an ‘aha’ moment? How has this moment changed your perceptions about teaching?

9. Looking back, what has helped you the most in defining yourself as a teacher?

10. Describe a professional development experience that you have engaged in, in the past. What did you enjoyed most about this learning experience and why?
Appendix B: Letter to Principal

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252 Bloor Street W.
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Dear Principal,

I am presenting undertaking a research study on how teachers use reflective practice as a tool in teaching and learning. I believe that teacher’s perceptions influence their beliefs around student learning. By gaining a deeper understanding into how and what influence teacher learning will also yield valuable information around how teacher learning impact classroom practice.

This letter is in regards to a request for permission to undertake a Professional Learning Community (PLC) on-site. The PLC would take place after school outside of the instructional day. Teachers will be invited to participate in four sixty minutes focus group sessions followed by two semi-structured group interviews. This will take place between November of 2011 and with a completion date of March 2013.

This study is for sole purpose of completing my thesis and data collected will be used solely for this purpose. Teacher participation will be entirely voluntarily. Teachers will be meeting after the instructional day and at their convenience. Participation in Professional Learning Community will contribute to teachers’ professional knowledge and in turn impact student achievement.

Teacher consent will be sort prior to beginning data collections. Teachers will be told prior to participating that this is totally voluntary and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The data collected will be confidential. No participant or school will be identified and the data will be used exclusively for research only. Pseudonyms will be used to disguise the identity of persons, units, and institutions and in any publication of research results. The only people with access to the data will be my supervising professor and myself.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to teacher and student learning.

Sincerely,

Andrea Carnegie
Appendix C: Informed Consent

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Uncovering Middle School's Teachers' Perceptions about Learning: A Reflective Practice Approach

Dear Participant,

I am currently conducting research for my thesis as a graduate student at the University of Toronto (OISE). I am the principal researcher and am presently conducting a study on teacher learning. The following information is provided to enable you to make an informed decision as to whether you would like to participate in my research.

The purpose of this study is to uncover teachers' beliefs about using reflective practice as a tool in teacher learning. The study hopes to reveal new ways of teacher learning which can be used to contribute to the literature on providing effective professional development programs for teachers.

I understand that:

- The sole purpose of this study is for research purposes which serve as partial fulfillment of the degree of Masters of Arts at the University of Toronto.
- All information collected will be treated with confidentiality and that names will not be used in interview transcript, nor in the report of findings.
- This is solely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from this process at any time.
- Data will be kept and stored by the principal researcher and will be destroyed one year following the study.
- The research study is approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto.

Data will be collected at three points in the study over a period of six months: Semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the study which will last for approximately one hour, followed by four on-line journal from prompts. The study will end with a taped focus group dialogue lasting between one to one hour and a half.

Please do not hesitate to ask me any questions about the study, either prior, during, or post participation.

If you choose to participate in this study, please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the research. A copy of this consent form will be given to you for your personal keeping.

Signature of Participant: __________________________
Appendix D: Informed Consent

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Teacher Learning Community

Questionnaire

1. What does a Teacher Learning Community mean to you?

2. List three to four PD activities that you have engaged in, the past?

3. Which of the above you really enjoyed, and why?

4. What are some practices that you have used in the past to facilitate a learning environment?

5. Which practice do you find successful and why?

6. How do you define a climate for learning in your classroom?

7. How do you create an atmosphere that fosters learning in your class?

8. What is professional knowledge?

9. What professional knowledge do you have now?

10. How do you use professional knowledge in the classroom?
Appendix E: Reflective Notes

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Reflective Notes 1:

Recorded after our first initial meeting on Oct. 6th

I was quite amazed at the response and that these teachers were more than willing to give up their time after school. I’m overwhelmed. There is always a challenge when people are volunteering as in any organization. The thing about challenges in any study I believe is the opportunity to document this. The teachers are very committed to the PLC - the challenge though is finding suitable time when we can all meet. The group decided to meet once every month. In our next meeting on Oct. 14. We have decided we will set the dates for our monthly meetings. Teachers are very busy people and finding the time after school to do this is already a huge commitment. It just shows what a lot of other people refuse to recognize - teachers as professionals and the fact that they want that opportunity to show their professionalism.

Finding the time to meet is always a challenge. I know certainly the French teachers especially appreciates between apart of this group because they feel very much left out of the discussions and decisions most times.
Appendix F: Reflective Notes

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Reflective Notes 2:

Recorded after focus group dialogue on Oct. 14th

Our TLC met for the second time— but for our first official discussion session on Friday, Oct. 14. We decided to meet at lunch because many people did not have a duty supervision for that day. We met at 12:08 –12:48 for 40 mins. There were 5 group members present. 2 teachers were away from school and another two had to run a club. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how we should move forward, what professional learning we believe were relevant to us. Some of the things that we believe we could do together to support each other in our goals.

Three key terms came out of our discussion in terms of what our PLC should look like:

- sharing
- supportive
- confidential

The teachers believe that there should be an opportunity to discuss issues that directly affected and concerned them as teachers, and in the classroom.

- We discussed opportunities to share relevant practices. One LA teacher is having a difficult time in engaging her boys in LA & History. So we spoke about opportunities to co-plan and co-teach especially on the days when I have release times.

- We also spoke about how often we should meet. The teachers believed that at least once a month is important. Preferably on a Wednesday or Thursday afternoon for at least an hour.

- We also spoke about a forum where we should meet in the meanwhile to discuss our ideas.

One teacher mentioned some online forum other than work email.
Appendix G: Reflective Notes

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Reflective Notes 3:
"When teachers work together to create a 'community of learning' amazing things happen."

Our Teacher Learning Community will meet once per month. In November, our meeting date is this Friday 10:45 - 11:45. Right after we finish our reporting to parents - isn't it amazing that teachers decide to meet on their own time after report cards? Teachers are coming up to me with professional articles, topics they would like to discuss, issues in the classrooms that they would like to address. It's amazing. Teachers have now began using the 'community theme' to build real learning communities in their classrooms.
Reflective Notes 4:

Recorded after our March 28th session

Can teachers in a school establish a 'Teacher-Learning Community'? Are there hopes and are there possibilities that these once 'battered down' professionals can take charge of their own learning? Well teachers at one particular middle school have taken the lead in telling their stories/charting their own courses. The teachers met today March 28th- their 5th meeting so far. Seven teachers were present today as two teachers could not make it. The meeting began at 2:45 and ended at 3:45. The teachers were in a good mood. One teacher in the group volunteered to record the session. Some teachers were a little bit hesitant about being recorded. Once they heard that the tape would not be used without their permission and would only be used for the group's purposes they relaxed. One teacher declined being in the taping because of personal reasons. The taping of the session was also used as a PD opportunity.

The teachers were given a PD tutorial on how to tape/record teaching sessions/conferences in their classrooms. The narrative got very interesting as teachers were engaged in learning. The argument quickly turned to how they could use this in the classroom. The special education teacher in the group discussed how she would use this as a tool for assistive technology. Some teachers talked about using it for assessment for learning purposes by establishing learning goals/objectives and re-visiting them throughout the unit/topic. This was a new PD idea and teachers were willing to try this in their classrooms. Teachers discuss the possibilities of
learning in this forum- and the opportunity to create their own authentic learning experiences.

Teachers believe that board - mandated PD's does not reflect their creativity, individuality of themselves or their students. There is hope for this type of learning - however, not without mistrust of 'authority' - it is the hope that this type of learning offers a site for collegial spaces of interaction- the themes that reverberated were 'top-down authority', so-called expert voice, mandatory PD, them and us. It's obvious that there is great 'mistrust' of administration by teachers.

On Wednesday, March 21st I had a conversation with my principal about recognizing this group as an authentic Teacher Learning Community. He was very excited and wanted to support the possibilities of creating/expanding this learning. He invited himself to our meeting session on March 28th and also extended the invitation to the group to share our journey at the last staff meeting. The teachers declined. Some teachers had a cynical view of 'top-down authority' and viewed this as an ‘intrusion’. Many teachers believed that any interaction with 'admin' is evaluative and as a result was not comfortable with the visit at the time. There are many questions/ challenges surrounding teacher learning experiences and its impact on student learning. Can TLC's be seen as sites to develop collegial spaces of interaction? What impact does this have on classroom teaching and learning?

The session ended with the teachers making plans to visit and exchange each other's classrooms on April 10th. So French teacher exchanged with GLD ISSP teacher. Language and math teacher exchange. Next tentative meeting planned for April 25th. Teachers were given an article to read. Also, teacher visits/exchanges will be discussed.
Reflective Journal 5:
Recorded on November 15th

"When teachers work together to create a 'community of learning' amazing things happen."

Our Teacher Learning Community will meet once per month. Teachers are coming up to me with professional articles, topics they would like to discuss and issues in the classrooms that they would like to address. It's amazing! Teachers have now began using the 'community theme' to build real learning communities in their classrooms. I was amazed after my visit to observe one Grade 7 language teacher’s class. She is now using the idea of 'circle time'. She pushes the chairs back and students sit on mats in a corner of the classroom. Students get a sticky note and each write one thing that they are thankful for, one thing they wish for. The students choose to share what they have written during this circle time. At the end they post their notes on a chart paper in the classroom. The students really seem to enjoy this experience, they have responded to this very positively and it's creating a rich character and community building activity in the classroom.

Other teachers like this idea and now this is an activity we will do on Friday. As one teacher tells me, "Whatever we want our students to do, we have to model it ourselves first". I'm really excited to see the great promise and professional learning that is experienced after a group of teachers teaching different grade levels and subject areas, different interests and abilities decided to be in charge of their own PD for a year. Another teacher in our community is using 'lego building' to teach her students problem solving skills, perseverance, resilience, character
and team building - creating a real community of learners. She works with another colleague and they teach their entire math and science curriculum through this forum. I've had a chance to observe their students and the classrooms are a buzz. These students are building a 'robot' that can do different tasks.

When I sat down to speak to this teacher, this was what she had to say: "Our students are learning real-problem solving skills, they know how to learn, and how to learn with each other. They work as a team, they are communicating, they know how to use technology, they're engaged, they are resilient and I've done all this without teaching to a specific test. There is no EQAO question that I would ever give my students to do and they would not be able to solve it". This is the sort of learning that creates a ripple effect. Last Friday, I took a group of my grade 8 students up to work with grade 6 students on this task. We will begin to take pictures and document some of our experiences. I will not be able to show them though, until Mary works out some ethics related issues.
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