Rethinking Gossip Among Teachers

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Teaching

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Abstract

Wondering what to make of the whispers in the teacher’s lounge? This study explores the topic of gossip among employees in the unique setting of a school environment. More specifically, the study explores how teacher-to-teacher gossip affects teachers’ pedagogical practice, well-being, and interactions with students. Data was obtained by conducting three semi-structured interviews with teachers who share students in common with colleagues in their schools. Some of the notable results surround the use of gossip to accommodate students who struggle, to exchange crucial information efficiently, and to create informal mentoring partnerships between themselves. Gossip also effectively reduces the stress both emotional regulation and social isolation for teachers. While this study uncovers a variety of new information, particularly about the benefits of gossip among teachers, it also points to a number of gaps that still exist on this subject.

Key Words
Gossip, micropolitics, improving pedagogy, teacher burn-out, teacher well-being, emotional regulation, collaboration
Acknowledgements

I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with many dedicated faculty members from OISE throughout during my two years of study in the Master of Teaching program. Thank you to Dr. Arlo Kempf for your guidance in the early, precarious stages of the project. Thank you to Laura Landertinger, for your incredible eye for detail during the later stages of the project. 

Gracias to Dr. Cristina Guerro, for your incredible dedication to my success as a student, as a researcher, and as a teacher.

To my participants, I was truly humbled by your insight, your frankness, and your wisdom during our interviews. I can’t thank you enough for sharing your time and experiences with me. You each took this peculiar topic and explored it in more detail and depth than I had imagined.

Thank you. I could not have accomplished this without all of you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction and Research Context

This study is part of the rapidly growing interest in the topic of gossip in the academic research community, which has been growing since 2005. The decreasing barrier between the personal and professional lives of people caused by the mobile technology boom has spurred researchers to look more closely at casual forms of communication. Gossip specifically “has gained some credibility as a topic of research interest and academic debate in the social science disciplines in general” (Michelson, Van Iterson & Waddington, 2010, p. 385). While it is commonly seen as a social vice, research on the subject of gossip sometimes “[embraces] the possibility that workplace gossip can serve socially-redeeming purposes” and states “that management researchers should pay closer and explicit attention to the topic” (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010, p. 169). While efforts by management to control gossip are found to sometimes be in vain “because it is almost impossible to predict what, if anything, will interest others about you” (Flaherty, 2013, p. 4) “it can, however, be managed to some extent” (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, Labianca & Ellwardt, 2012, p. 53).

While some of the researchers are beginning to embrace the idea of gossip’s positive aspects, a range of positive, neutral, and negative conclusions on the effects of gossips can be found across the literature in the past ten years. Optimistic conclusions point out that gossip “is a tool that is available and functional for groups sharing common fates” (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005, p. 288). As well, “[gossip] appears to be experienced as an integral part of sensemaking and social exchange” (Mills, 2010, p. 213). On a more negative outlook, “gossip has attracted
criticism because of its general capacity […] to generate a range of negative outcomes including disharmony, suspicions, and seeing the worst in other people” (Michelson, 2010, p. 382). On the more neutral side, researchers have found that gossip is primarily used for “getting information, gaining influence, releasing pent-up emotions, providing intellectual stimulation, fostering interpersonal intimacy, and maintaining and enforcing group values and norms” (Grosser, 2012, p. 53).

1.1 Research Problem

While research has been done about the effect of gossip in office environments or among students in schools, only one research study was conducted (Hallett, Harger & Eder, 2009) examining the gossip habits of employees in the unique workplace that is a school. The focus of Hallett’s work was on studying how gossip patterns among teachers changed with the presence of an administrator, and therefore does not answer the same questions as this study, regarding the effects of inter-colleague gossip on teachers and students. This study will therefore provide a unique contribution both to the study of gossip in the workplace, and to the study of professionalism in the field of education.

The research on gossip is usually focused on the speaker, not the listener (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012). In this study, both parties will be considered, as well as the object of gossip. The current research shows that “being the object of negative gossip can cause consequences similar to victimization, such as limiting work-related success and thwarting the fundamental psychological need to belong” (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 1) while “being the object of positive gossip, such as being praised or defended by others, is similar in its consequences to
receiving social support” (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 1). In this study, teachers will report on whether gossip with other teachers has influenced or changed their interactions with their students, and whether being the object of gossip has changed their students’ interactions with them.

1.2 Research Purpose
The purpose of this qualitative study is to learn and understand how teacher-to-teacher gossip, particularly on the subject of students, affects teachers and their students.

1.3 Research Questions
The main question of this study is: How does teacher-to-teacher gossip affect how teachers interact with students?

Other questions to consider include:
1. What impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s practice?
2. What impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s well-being?

1.4 Reflexive Positioning Statement
As a teacher, I am continually faced with the complex ethics surrounding the exchange of information about student. Although I am just at the beginning of my career in education, I have already had the opportunity to work in a teaching role in various learning-based environments. In some environments, there were guidelines that indicated that most information about the students was private. In other environments, there were no clear guidelines. Regardless, I found that there
are many grey areas concerning the exchange of information about students. This brought up the questions of whether teacher-to-teacher gossip helps or hinders the teacher’s ability to create a positive learning environment for their students. I am interested in researching this topic in an effort to gain new knowledge on this topic for my own practice and to share with my colleagues.

1.5 Preview of the Whole

To respond to the research questions I will be conducting a small qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers about their views on the gossip between teachers and the effect it has on them and their students. In chapter two, I will review the literature about gossip in the workplace. Next, in chapter three, I will elaborate on the research design. In chapter four I will report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature. In chapter five, I will identify the implications of the research findings for educational research. I will also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

2.0 Introduction
In this chapter I will start by reviewing definitions of the word gossip and its synonyms. Next, I will review the current research on gossip in the workplace. From there, I will look at the small amount of existing information that addresses gossip between staff in a school setting. Finally, I will relate my findings to the research gap that exists surrounding this study.

It is important to note that the current literature on this topic is mostly found in the field of social sciences rather than education; “gossip has predominantly featured within the organizational and management literature” (Michelson et al, 2010, p. 372). This still-emerging topic in academia has not yet merged with the field of education research, which accounts for the sparse amount of resources available to inform certain sections of this chapter.

2.1 Terminology
In this section, I will explore how the term “gossip” is defined in various contexts, and how alternate wording compares. Since 2005, gossip has been the subject of an increasing number of studies, but rarely have those studies cohesively defined the term. Some of the differences found will be analyzed in this sub-section.

2.1.1 Definitions of “gossip”. The term gossip is at once crucial and problematic in this study. While gossip accurately describes what I wish to research, it also carries a host of negative connotations and associations that could potentially bias the research subjects and readers against it, compromising the objectivity of the study.
A number of studies about gossip fail to define the term altogether. Those studies leave the reader to rely on their own subjective assumptions of what gossip might be. The difficulty in stating a concrete definition is nicely summed up this description of gossip as “a ubiquitous yet seemingly ephemeral type of informal talk” (Michaelson et al., 2010, p. 371). Some studies have researched gossip in narrow, closed social networks of employees. Logically, their definitions are narrow as well. Ellwardt and colleagues’ 2012 study succinctly defines gossip as “informal talking about colleagues” (p. 1). While the definition is well-suited for a study that specifically looks at a singular object of discussion a more general definition of gossip is needed for this study because it examines multiple objects of discussion. Other studies demonstrate a clear bias in their definitions. Anderson’s 1995 article doesn’t outright define gossip, but describes what it is by naming its consequences; stealing time and hurting morale, for instance. For this study, a more neutral definition is preferred.

The longstanding cultural authorities on neutral definitions, dictionaries, have shown some interesting contrasts in how they define gossip. The British Oxford dictionary’s definition, for instance, is simple; gossip is defined as “casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people,” before echoing the aspect of gossip so rarely highlighted by authors; “typically involving details which are not confirmed as true” (2015). The other British dictionary, Collins, takes a similarly simple tone in its primary definition: “casual and idle chat” (2015). However, in contrast, it takes far less neutral approach in its secondary definitions: “a conversation involving malicious chatter or rumours about other people” (Collins Dictionary, 2015). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines gossip as “information about the behavior and personal lives of other people” as well as “information about the lives of famous people” (2015),
a nod to American media and celebrity culture that momentarily takes the focus away from gossip as a function of peer-to-peer interaction. The differences in these three leading dictionaries highlight how difficult it is to precisely define a universally human experience, and reaffirms that the nature of gossip is at once both pervasive and elusive.

The most functional definition of gossip comes from Kniffin and Wilson (2005) whose definition of gossip “include[s] positive and negative talk about commonly associated people. [They] also do not distinguish whether such talk is done covertly or overtly with regards to the gossip's target” (p. 279). This definition is not only the most complete one found in the literature, but also the most well-balanced. This will be the definition of gossip for this study as well.

In the next section, I will analyse the uses and definitions of terms that are closely related to the term “gossip”.

2.1.2 Alternate ways of using the language

In this sub-section, I will explore the potential usefulness of alternative terms to “gossip”: “rumour” and “teacher-to-teacher collaboration”.

The term “rumour” may be seen as a less offensive alternative to gossip, as it cannot characterise the speaker itself; “gossip” can be used as a noun describing a person who gossips often. In the past, “[the] tendency has been to group [the terms] gossip and rumor together” (Mills, 2010, p. 214). Mills (2010) however, distinguishes the terms from each other: “rumor’s content addresses important topics (i.e., events or issues), whereas gossip is more trivial and potentially entertaining” yet it is also “likely to have a higher degree of factuality” (p. 214). However, both of these definitions still raise ethical questions; gossip on its validity, and rumour on its veracity. The conclusion for this study is that the term “rumour” is not sufficiently and
commonly distinguishable from the term “gossip” to justify using it as a replacement.

The second terms to consider are the phrases “teacher-to-teacher collaboration” and “teacher-to-teacher discussions”, which are found educational materials rather than in social science research. The disadvantage of the terms is that they are quite broad. Some forms of teacher-to-teacher collaboration, such as joint lesson planning or team teaching, do not resemble gossip at all. Exchanging gossip is merely one type of collaboration, and one of the types that Hargreaves and Fullan state “can become loose, unfocused, and inward-looking” (2012, p. 311). Still, these terms are useful for certain aspects of study because they are far more palatable than “gossip” and “rumour”.

Perhaps it is because firsthand experience with gossip is so universal, its definition and use in the English language has not been concretely defined. The existing literature includes definitions of gossip that are incomplete or too biased for this study. However, one adequate definition was found. The alternate term “rumour” does not have enough benefits to justify being used as a replacement, and “teacher-to-teacher collaboration” is too broad to use exclusively. In this study, I will continue to use the term “gossip” as defined above by Kniffin and Wilson (2005). However, there will be some flexibility for instances where using the term “gossip” might incur a bias due to its accusatory connotation. In those cases, it will be replaced with the more palatable terms, “teacher-to-teacher collaboration” or “teacher-to-teacher discussion”.

In the next section I will explore what the research has found about the effects of gossip in the workplace in general and on workers in schools.

2.2 Gossip in the Workplace
This section will first focus on the findings about gossip from a management perspective, before looking at the few findings from school environments.

2.2.1 The Management Perspective. The literature from the management perspective recognises both the positive and negative attributes of gossip in the workplace. This sub-section will first address two examples of gossip as an effective tool for managers, followed by two examples of gossip’s risks and disadvantages.

Some findings report that gossip in the workplace is advantageous, such as this one which suggests that gossip can improve social bonds:

Gossip should be viewed as an integral part [...] of organizational life rather than potentially dangerous, inappropriate, or merely compensating for lack of formally provided information. From a relational perspective, the findings suggest that gossip, particularly sensitive and negative gossip, should be viewed as contributing to and providing a measure of relationship quality. (Mills, 2010, p. 235)

What was once seen as a vice now has new merit when it is considered as fostering a sense of belonging in a workplace community. Gossip can also aid managers by decreasing their need to directly intervene in the micropolitics of their work environment:

By engaging in negative gossip about an object, the gossip sender is signaling an understanding of the organizational norms, a willingness to monitor and enforce them, and an understanding that sanctioning is necessary lest the organization’s identity is threatened. (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5)

Gossip therefore acts as a group-wide form of self-regulation, relieving the manager from the task of policing the behaviour of their workers. Gossip is helpful, so long as the manager agrees
with the norms their workers have chosen to enforce. In both of these examples, it is specifically negative gossip that creates the strongest positive effect for workers and the organization. While gossip sometimes includes positive actions such as praise or admiration, negative gossip that uses criticism and disapproval seems to be more effective to modify a worker’s behavior and environment.

The literature is clearly cognizant of the positive aspects of gossip, but it also points out its weaknesses and risks. Kuo, Chang, Quinton, Lu and Lee’s (2015) study strongly implies to managers that certain types of gossip pose serious risks to employees’ workplace satisfaction: “if the gossip is about work performance, capability and other job-related events, it may cause cynicism and hence negative outcome. If the gossip is nothing to do with the job, the chance to cause cynicism is significantly reduced” (p. 2302). Kuo and colleagues’ caution seems to suggest that the more idle forms of gossip are better for worker morale. The ultimate risk of gossip to managers, beyond creating an atmosphere of cynicism in the workplace, is the social ostracism of a worker.

Ostracism becomes feasible when the ostracizing employees represent the majority against a smaller numbers of objects who are left with few or no opportunities to mobilize allies. Continuous negative gossip about colleagues will verify their low social status. (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5)

An employee who is rejected from the workplace by their colleagues is at a risk for social isolation, lower social power, and eventually leaving the workplace. Managers should be aware of this and ensure that gossip does not cost them a valued employee.
2.2.2 The School’s Perspective. Schools are a unique working environment for adults because they generally spend more time with their students than with their colleagues. In this sub-section, I will first look at the research that parallels the narrative of managers and workers: administrators and teachers. I will then examine the research that has been done about gossip between teachers.

The research on gossip between school administrators and teachers has a tone of distrust. Anderson tells administrators to encourage teachers “to air a concern with the top person” (1995, p. 20) as administrators with closed-door policies in schools “[beg] people to be suspicious” (1995, p. 20). The anxiety seems to be that administrators will be unaware of what gossip is spreading among their staff, and therefore be unable to control to it. This is precisely what is described in Hallett and colleagues’ 2007 study of the gossip behaviours among teachers on the subject of the administrators. They found that the teachers in the study “feared [the administrator] but did not respect her, and the gossip affected [the administrator]’s capacity to lead. Burdened with a bad reputation, [the administrator]’s efforts were met with increasing resistance, even in simple matters” (Hallet et al., 2007, p. 608). Concerns about teachers working against the administration are at the root of the administration’s anxiety about gossip among teachers.

No further studies on gossip between teachers were found. The current research fails to bridge the link between an environment that produces unique stressors for teachers, and the consequent reaction of gossip. “Overload, isolation, increasing expectations, contradictory demands, and no real forum for ordinary teachers to make themselves heard— these seem to be the continuing companions of teaching and of the work that teachers do” (Hargreaves and Fullan,
2012, p. 127). Hargreaves and Fullan’s findings are expanded by Grosser and colleagues’ analysis on the relationship between stress and gossip:

Gossiping with another about an especially tense relationship or about an especially difficult person can serve as an emotional outlet for the gossiper. [...] This venting can help to reduce stress and feelings of anxiety. [...] This is especially so when the gossiper cannot directly address the third party that is the target of the gossip. (2012, p. 55)

For teachers, directly addressing the third party about the stress and anxieties caused by them is impossible, because it would involve crossing a professional boundary. This is yet another example of how teachers are faced with a unique situation with regards to gossip in the work environment.

2.2.3 Conclusion. The literature on gossip in the workplace is largely inconsistent. The sub-section on management shows that even negative gossip can be used to create a sense of belonging in the workplace. However, gossip can also create cynicism and encourage ostracism of employees. The sub-section on schools shows that administrators have some anxiety about gossip among their staff. It also shows that teachers face stressors in their work environment that can be relieved by engaging in gossip, but that this is complicated by the professional boundaries they must maintain. In the following section I will conclude the literature review and introduce the next steps of this research paper.

2.3 Next Steps

In this literature review I looked the use of the term “gossip” and similar terms in the relevant literature, as well as what the current literature knows about gossip in the workplace. I
determined that the term “gossip” is adequate to use in study, but in some instances might be replaced by the terms “teacher-to-teacher collaboration” or “teacher-to-teacher discussions” if there are concerns about creating a unwanted bias. I then described positive aspects of gossip, such as creating unity and enforcing social norms, and negative effects of gossip, such as worker cynicism and isolation. While some research was found concerning the effects of gossip among teachers on administrators, there was no research about the effects of teachers’ gossip on themselves, their colleagues, or their students.

The purpose of my research is to learn how gossip between teachers affects them and their interactions with their students. I will do this by conducting a small qualitative study based on interviews with three teachers. In the following chapter, I will explain and illustrate my research methodology for conducting these interviews.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this small qualitative study is to learn and understand how teacher-to-teacher gossip affects teachers and their students. This study is contextually situated in both the domain of education, as well as in the emerging trend of studying gossip in the social sciences and in management studies.

In this chapter I will describe the research methodology. I will begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I will explain the data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. I will identify some methodological limitations, and I will also speak to the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a brief summary of the key methodological decisions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study will be conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

One of the strongest values of qualitative research is the direct communication between the researcher and the subject, reducing reliance on technical terminology, charts, figures, and lengthy technical explanations extrapolating those numbers. The target readers for this study are teachers. By using a prose and interview style of the findings, I hope to reduce “teachers' skepticism about educational research [by reducing] the use of a specialized language among
academics which makes sense only to members of particular sub communities of academic researchers” (Zeichner, 2006, p. 155). Qualitative research recognises the teacher’s ability to draw their own meaningful conclusions based on the experiences of others, rather than their ability to follow a string of academic jargon. Teachers may also feel the most comfortable with qualitative research because it uses the same skills they use in the classroom, such as “observing, interviewing, writing field notes, and managing and analyzing data” (Zeichner, 2006, p. 155).

This is also a suitable approach for my given research area because incidentally, the research methodology and the study’s topic are related. Conversational interactions between teachers are at the center of every aspect of this study. Converting the findings to quantified data is not logical, because the topic being studied does not typically present itself in a quantifiable way. The goal of data collection for this study is to explore a topic, rather than measure an outcome.

In the next section, I will expand further on the instrument of data collection that I will use in order to conduct my qualitative study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

My instrument of data collection will be my semi-structured interview protocol. A semi-structured interview is a formal interview using a guide developed by the interviewer, which is followed but does allow the participants to “follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when [they] feel this is appropriate” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The goal is “to provide a structure that is flexible enough for [participants] to be able to raise questions and concerns in their own words” (Brinkmann, 2014). By contrast, structured
interviews use a “predetermined list of questions that are covered in the same order for each person” (Fyland, 2005, pp. 65-66) and unstructured interviews have “no assumed order to the questions, and very little predetermined boundaries as to the topics that should be covered” (Fyland, 2005, pp. 65-66).

As the researcher, my objective is to guide the participant towards a discussion surrounding the subject being explored, and also to allow them the freedom to express original ideas that I may not have anticipated. “By changing the questions and the areas discussed during the interview, we can address aspects that are important to individual participants” (Fyland, 2005, p. 66). Because my research advances social theories on gossip into a new area, education, a method of data collection that allows for the unexpected is ideal. In my interviews I will be relying on the participants’ knowledge of a theme to guide the discussion. Therefore, a semi-structured interview is the ideal instrument of data collection for this study.

In the next section, I will elaborate on the participants’ selection criteria, recruitment, and biographies.

3.3 Participants

In the following sub-sections I will review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment, and I will review a range of possible avenues for teacher recruitment. I will also include a section wherein I will introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria. In this sub-section I will identify the criteria that I will be applying for the participants in my study.

First, I will be interviewing teachers who speak with other teachers about various areas of
school life. My findings depend on teacher-to-teacher interactions, in order to determine if and how it affects both teachers and students. Teachers who are socially isolated from their peers for any reason may not be able to contribute to the area that I am analyzing for findings because they may lack enough interaction with other teachers to be able to answer the questions.

Second, I will be interviewing teachers who have students in common with the other teachers they interact with. This can mean that they have both taught the student, or that they have both interacted with the student in a broader professional capacity (ie: coached that student’s sports team). In order to achieve the best results for my key questions, it would be ideal for my participants to have exchanged information with one or more peer teacher(s) about a student that they are both familiar with.

**3.3.2 Sampling procedures.** In this sub-section I will explore, identify and justify the sampling procedures for my study.

The literature in the area of qualitative research methodology differentiates between several forms of sampling. Purposeful sampling is a technique whereby the “researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question. This […] will be based on the researcher's practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature and evidence from the study itself” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). This form of sampling can be laborious for researchers with limited resources, as the most productive sample could be difficult to find, contact, and access. In the case of this particular study, the information being examined is both universal enough that many teachers could be used as a productive sample, and also unique to the point where it is difficult to pinpoint specific experts on gossip in education.

A less common form of sampling in qualitative research is theoretical sampling, which
“refers to a sampling decision made on analytic grounds developed in the course of a study” (Coyne, 1997, p. 628). Theoretical sampling is impractical for a small-scale study such as this one, as it involves additional interviews that would be difficult to merge into the planned format and timeline.

The final form of sampling, convenience sampling, involves “the selection of the most accessible subjects” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). This not only reduces the researcher’s time and effort in recruiting participate, but it also gives a voice to the opinions typical teachers’ rather than selected experts.

Because of the small-scale nature of this study and the methodological parameters I am working within, convenience sampling will be my primary sampling procedure. As a teacher candidate, I am currently immersed in a community of teacher colleagues and mentor teachers. I will rely primarily on my existing contacts and networks to recruit participants. Should this approach be insufficient, my secondary method of recruitment will be to contact teacher associations, school boards, or principals and provide them with an overview of my research study and the participant criteria. I will then ask these individuals or organizations to distribute my information to teachers they believe may fulfill the criteria. I will provide my information rather than ask these individuals or organizations to provide me with the names and contact information of people they think would be suitable. This will help to ensure that teachers are volunteering to participate rather than responding to pressure or an obligation to participate.

3.3.3 Participant Biographies. All three participants in this study have been assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms. Throughout the study, they will be referred to using gender-neutral pronouns, such as the singular “they”, to further preserve their anonymity. The first participant,
Morgan Addison, is a teacher with over five years of teaching experience. The second participant, Devin Brown, is an occasional teacher with less than five years of teaching experience. The third participant, Jamie Callaghan, is a teacher with over ten years of teaching experience. All three of these teachers have a number of students in common with other teachers at their school.

3.4 Data Analysis

After conducting the three interviews, I completed two transcriptions of each of my three interviews; one verbatim, and one corrected for spelling. I used thematic coding as well as descriptive coding to organise the data from the three interviews. I then grouped my codes into categories, which became my three themes.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

There are several significant aspects to consider when reviewing ethical procedures, primarily surrounding the social and ethical roles of researchers, which “require that we recognize the autonomy of our experimental subjects” (Comstock, 2013, p. 176). Protecting the rights and well-being of the individuals involved in the study is a primary concern. Ethical considerations have been made for areas where the research might conflict with a person’s right to privacy, safety, dignity, or freedom. These considerations will be shared and re-iterated with each participant in this study in order to obtain their informed consent, which “is only present when subjects have been fully informed about the purpose of the study […] Subjects […] must be entirely free in their decisions to participate” (Comstock, 2013, p. 170).
The following list outlines some of the ethical considerations involved in this study related to consent, the right to withdraw, the potential risks of participation, member checks, and data storage:

1. All participants, as well as all colleagues or students they might mention as part of their interview, will be assigned a pseudonym (first name and last name).

2. All participants will be notified of their right to withdraw from participation in the study at any stage of the research study.

3. Participants’ identities will remain confidential and any identifying markers related to their schools, school boards, or students will be excluded.

4. There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. Given the research topic, it is possible that a particular question may trigger an emotional response from a participant, thus making them feel vulnerable. I will minimize this risk by re-assuring before the interview and in the consent letter that they have the right to refrain from answering any question that they do not feel comfortable with.

5. All data (ie: audio recordings) will be stored on my password protected electronic device(s) and will be destroyed after 5 years.

6. Participants will be asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A or B) giving their consent to be interviewed as well as audio-recorded. This consent letter provides an overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specifies expectations of participation.

In the next section, I will address the methodological limitations and strengths of this study.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

So far I have described the research, sampling, and ethical procedures of this study. This section will discuss some of the study’s methodological limitations and strengths.

One of the key limitations of this study is related to the scope of the research. Given the ethical parameters that I have approval for, this study can only involve interviews with a small number of teachers. It is also not possible to interview students or parents, or to conduct surveys or classroom observations. However, the research questions were designed with this limitation in mind. The goal of this study is to explore the topic, and to provide findings that do not yet exist in a rapidly growing field. Researching the effects on students, parents, etc. could be a next step once there is more research information to depart from, and I hope to provide some of that information by interviewing a small sample of teachers. While the findings will inform the topic at hand, they cannot be used to make broad generalizations about the experience of all teachers.

The most significant strength of a small qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews is the depth of information that can be gained from a single participant. In comparison, surveys eliminate “meanings and interpretive frames that go beyond [their] predetermined structure” (Brinkmann, 2014). In other words, the conversation surrounding a response can be as or even more insightful to the researcher than the response itself. By conducting a semi-structured interview, I will “allow research participants to be interested, active, disobedient, [and] fully involved in what is said about themselves by others” (Brinkmann, 2014). My findings will be a highlight of what matters the most to my participants. By using the described methodology, this study places the strongest emphasis on the participating teachers’ wealth of knowledge and experience.
3.7 Conclusion

This qualitative research study will be conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol in order to explore the subject of teacher-to-teacher interactions, or “gossip”. The most notable strength of the chosen research method is that it allows for the unexpected, and for the range of information that can be gained from a single participant. Convenience sampling will be used in this study. Ethical considerations pertaining to the study were created to provide each participant with the opportunity for informed consent. The participants have been chosen according to the criteria that will allow them to fully contribute to the main research questions. The three participants chosen have all been assigned pseudonyms and gender-neutral pronouns to protect their anonymity. The data analysis was done by completing transcriptions of the three interviews and grouping the data from those transcripts into themes. Next, in chapter 4, I will report the research findings.
Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to provide a context for evaluating the effects of teacher-to-teacher interactions (or, gossip) on teachers and students. Kniffin and Wilson (2005) define gossip as both “positive and negative [informal] talk about commonly associated people.” (p. 279).

Three qualitative interviews with teachers were used to obtain data. The conversational style of these interviews helped to provide an in-depth look at this unique and overlooked topic. Descriptive and values coding were used to analyse the data, whereby the interview results were grouped into the themes and sub-themes described below. The participants included in this study, indicated by their pseudonyms, are Morgan Addison, Devin Brown, and Jamie Callaghan. These participants were recruited through my existing professional network using convenience sampling. All of the participants share the common trait of having one or more students in common with at least one colleague in their school.

The main research question is: what are the effects of teacher-to-teacher gossip on teachers and students? The interview findings are organised into three major categories that directly relate to sub-questions derived from the main research question. The first category relates to the question: what impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s practice? The second category relates to the question: what impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s well-being? Finally, the third category explores data that was found outside of the research questions.
4.1 Findings

The analysis of these findings provides a context for future research surrounding how gossip affects education professionals and students. These findings could help us better understand the ways in which gossip can improve teaching practices, student success, and school environments.

4.1.1 Improving pedagogy. The teachers interviewed reported that they used information obtained through gossip to improve their pedagogy, which is defined as the “method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept” (Oxford University Press, 2017). Teachers autonomously chose to collaborate on improving their teaching strategies through their discussions with other teachers. Gossip also facilitates the teachers’ ability to discover solutions for students who experience challenges. As well, some teachers used gossip to develop informal mentoring relationships.

4.1.1.1 Sharing strategies to benefit students. The most commonly reoccurring function of gossip throughout the interviews is the use of informal talk as a pedagogical tool. The participants indicated that they shared their students’ difficulties, successes, and anecdotes of interest with other members of the teaching faculty. Their goal in some cases was to receive concrete support to provide better assistance to those students, such as novel teaching strategies or relevant information on a student’s background. They would then use this information to shape their practice.

For instance, Devin Brown recalled an example where information relayed through informal talk about their student’s socioeconomic status shaped how they scheduled their summative assessments. Concerned that their student was not eating breakfast, assessments were scheduled later in the school day after Devin could ensure that the student had eaten. Morgan
Addison pointed to a multitude of ways in which they differentiated their teaching for a student who struggled with academics and behaviour:

[He] has very low self-esteem, I know that from a teacher who had him previously. I made sure that he could shine in [my] class. I made sure to take his ideas when doing brainstorming on the board, so he was validated. I knew he didn’t think that he could read or write well so I would make sure to make tasks that he could succeed in so that he felt good when he came to [my class]. I probably wouldn’t have given that same attention had I not known that he had behaviour issues that were stemming from a lot of things including this low self-esteem.

In both of these cases, the teacher’s goal of improving their teaching practice through sharing information about students was involved students who struggled academically, economically, and behaviourally.

This is likely a reflection of one of the functions of gossip described in management studies. Teachers may be exchanging information among themselves to compensate for a “lack of formally provided information” (Mills, 2010, p. 235). A possible conclusion based on the analysis of the evidence so far is that the existing student documents provided by Ontario schools, such as previous progress reports and Independent Education Plans, do not provide the depth or range of information on a student’s behaviour, background, and learning preferences that teachers require to adequately improve their practice. As well, formal documents are comparatively difficult to update to reflect current or acute changes in the student, as most are designed to reflect trends over a previous period of time. Teachers may be engaging each other in informal discussions about best practices in order to address current and novel issues that the
formal channels do not adequately address.

4.1.1.2 Problem-solving with greater efficacy. The same two teachers also indicated that efficiency is one of the benefits of discussing students with their colleagues. Neither expressed concerns about their ability to problem-solve or gather information about their students through firsthand measures. However, they remarked that discussing students with their colleagues reduces the amount of time it takes for them to choose and implement effective pedagogical adaptations.

As a long-term occasional teacher, it was particularly imperative for Devin Brown to gain information efficiently. They indicated that gaining historical information about the students’ families and background through other teachers helped them situate themselves in a new school environment. Morgan Addison also points out the benefit that direct communication has on reducing the amount of challenges a student must endure before a solution is found: “I think [my student’s low self-esteem] is something I would have discovered in the end, but it would have probably taken a little bit of time and it would probably have been a harder road.” Compared with formal strategies, the immediacy of a teacher-to-teacher discussion helps the teacher to avoid delays in adapting their teaching strategies. This in turn, allows the student to benefit from more immediate differentiation.

This benefit is not previously mentioned in the literature. In this case, the tools teachers require, such as their own observation and problem-solving abilities, are not necessarily unavailable. Teachers who engage in informal pedagogical discussions may be logically seeking to circumvent the laborious effort required to solve a problem that already has a solution.

4.1.1.3 Informal mentoring opportunities. The two youngest teachers interviewed were
both in a position where they lacked a formal mentoring support system. Yet they were also in a position to benefit from some degree of guidance. Through their informal discussions with their colleagues, they both were able to build social bonds with more experienced colleagues, that resulted in informal mentoring relationships.

Morgan Addison’s ten years of experience as a teacher disqualified them from the formal mentoring process in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). However, they were able to build a positive mentoring connection with a more experienced teacher: “I rely a lot on her expertise. She’s been [teaching this position] for a lot longer than me. She’s sort of been my mentor throughout all of this, not officially.” Devin Brown’s position as an occasional teacher also disqualified them from formal mentoring through their schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). However, they describe the opportunity to work alongside a more experienced co-teacher during a placement as one of their best teaching experiences to date, citing the support and camaraderie the co-teacher provided.

Mills’ (2010) study suggests that gossip, particularly sensitive gossip, should be viewed as contributing to and providing a measure of a relationship’s quality (p. 235). Informal discussions between colleagues are therefore likely contributing to the creation of a close social bond, which allows teachers voice vulnerability and a need for assistance. The overall impact is that teachers who stand to benefit from a mentor are able to circumvent the lack of formal channels by forming these relationships autonomously and organically, so long as the opportunity for informal talk with a receptive colleague remains open.

4.1.2 Impact on Teachers’ Well-being. The positive effects of gossip between teachers extend beyond the benefits to their pedagogical practice listed in section 4.1.1. Teachers also
indicated that exchanging gossip with their colleagues fulfills a variety of needs relating to their social and emotional well-being. More specifically, they pointed to an emotional need to express their feelings and frustrations, to combat social isolation that is not alleviated by interacting with their students, and to relieve anxiety through establishing a shared consensus with their colleagues.

4.1.2.1 Emotional regulation and expression. A high level of professionalism is required of teachers, who work closely with vulnerable individuals and are often directly confronted with emotional challenges, such as responding to a student’s behavioural outburst. Therefore, teachers must expend a considerable amount of energy on their own emotional regulation. Grosser and colleagues (2012) note that the higher the discrepancy between what an individual is feeling and the emotion they display, the higher the amount of emotional regulation required (p. 55). In order to avoid or alleviate the burden and fatigue caused by emotional regulation, teachers may choose to seek an opportunity to express their emotions in a more appropriate but still accessible setting, such as through discussions with their colleagues.

Morgan Addison mentions a time where they felt the need to express their bewilderment regarding an incident of student violence that they witnessed. They specifically indicated that their primary goal in relaying the incident to their colleagues was to have an opportunity to express their feelings in an open manner, rather than to seek advice or pedagogical input. Jamie Callaghan reports on how emotional expression also facilitates coping with issues teachers face outside of student interactions. They describe the need to discuss frustrations that arise from having to conform to educational policies against their professional judgement:

We tend to talk more about policies and whether or not we’re fulfilling our policies,
whether or not policies are hindering us. In the [board] we have [a policy document] and that’s just a constant prompt for discussion in our department […] we don’t like it because it doesn’t address the needs of [our learners] […] so we tend to vent about it.

Jamie’s use of the inclusive pronoun “we” in describing their experience further suggests that they not only appreciate the opportunity to express themselves, but also the opportunity to listen to and exchange thoughts with their colleagues.

Morgan and Jamie’s reports are consistent with Grosser and colleagues’ (2012) work, which suggests that gossiping about especially tense relationships or especially difficult people serves as an especially effective emotional outlet (p. 55). Further, being able to express oneself freely “can help to reduce stress and feelings of anxiety. […] This is especially so when the gossiper cannot directly address the third party that is the target of the gossip” (Grosser et al, p. 55). Evidently, teachers rarely have the opportunity to directly address policymakers, and freely addressing their students is barred on a professional and ethical basis. Therefore, the only recourse teachers are left with in the interest of decreasing their stress, anxiety, emotional labour, and emotional fatigue, is to discuss their feelings through gossip with each other. These small, informal discussions with trusted colleagues offer teachers the opportunity to express themselves without creating a large gap between their feelings and their outward emotions.

4.1.2.2 Avoiding social isolation of teachers in schools. The previous sub-section, teachers relied on their colleagues to provide an appropriate and accessible context to express themselves throughout the workday. However, they spend the majority of their workday with their students, and so they can risk finding themselves in situations where they lack the opportunity to interact socially with their colleagues. Social isolation from other teachers poses a
risk to teachers who wish to engage in gossip to alleviate the stress and anxiety produced by emotional regulation.

Jamie Callaghan expressed a particular concern that social isolation may contribute to teachers leaving the profession prematurely due to the unresolved emotional exhaustion (popularly characterised as “burnout”) this isolation can cause. Indeed, “[c]ollegiality is recognized in the professional literature as one of the important variables in the successful first-year [teaching] experience. Collegial isolation relates to burnout” (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merblerk, 2005, p. 36). Jamie explains how their teacher training and experiences informed their philosophy on social isolation:

When I went to teacher’s college, one of the things we were warned about was teacher burnout. Within the first three years, we expect a lot of new teachers to burn out. And that’s because we tend to be silent or isolated. One of the things that I want to make sure that I do is not getting into that silo effect. I want to make sure that any teacher who works with me doesn’t get into that silo effect. I need to talk to other teachers.

Their remarks regarding making efforts to engage with various teachers in order to ensure that they do not succumb to the detriments associated with social isolation, suggests for the first time that teachers might be engaging each other in gossip due to both self-preservation and compassion. Perhaps like the experienced teachers who assist their colleagues through informal mentoring, some teachers feel a sense of responsibility towards ensuring that their colleagues’ emotional needs are met.

While workers who gossip often can be viewed as negative in the work environment (Kuo et al., 2005, p. 2302) they may be doing so out of concern for their colleagues’ well-being.
While this idea is not found in the existing literature, it is indirectly related to the notion mentioned by Mills (2010) that gossip helps to establish and improve social bonds (p. 235). If made aware of the positive impact gossip has on their colleagues’ well-being, teachers would likely have a more positive perception by their seemingly innocuous but possibly crucial informal conversations.

**4.1.2.3 Reducing anxiety through a shared consensus.** The teachers interviewed showed a fixation on using gossip to achieve a sense of consensus with their colleagues. This consensus was found in the context of seeking validation for their individual ideas, opinions, and feelings surrounding various aspects of their experiences as teachers.

Jamie Callaghan and Devin Brown both evoked this idea when, unprompted, they expressed a desire to have their colleagues share their perspectives. Jamie explains how sharing thoughts and experiences humanises teachers in an otherwise rigidly professional environment:

I don’t want to work with robots as colleagues, so it’s nice to see the human side of people, and it’s nice to see that the experiences that I’m going through are shared by my colleagues. It’s also nice to know that […] they have the same experiences that you have.

Devin expands on this idea by describing the emotional impact of receiving validation through a shared consensus with a colleague: “you feel that you know that person better, that you’ve accomplished something with them.” Both of the teachers interviewed make their positive feelings about achieving a consensus with the colleagues quite clear.

What is also clear is that dissonance in the workplace and an individual’s personal anxiety levels have been found to positively correlate with their participation in gossip (Michelson et al, 2010, p. 383). It can therefore be theorised that participating in gossip that
creates a unified consensus is an effective way to soothe anxieties teachers may experience. What remains unclear is whether teachers deliberately seek situations that could provide them with a sense of consensus, or whether their ideas organically became consistent with their colleagues’ through the act of gossiping. This also raises questions about the possibility that teachers who gossip are susceptible to confirmation bias.

4.1.3 Negative Impacts. The discussion so far has focused on what teachers can gain through informal teacher-to-teacher interactions. However, the interviewed teachers also pointed to areas of concern surrounding these types of discussions. They displayed a sense of unease in regards to admitting to engaging in certain types of gossip. They also expressed concerns over gossip’s impact on the faculty’s morale. Surprisingly however, the negative impacts of gossip on their relationships with their students were not reported.

4.1.3.1 Teachers’ anxieties surrounding how gossip is perceived. One of the interesting trends in the interviews was the teachers’ tendency to focus on how gossip affects their own emotions. During the interview process, two of the teachers became markedly uneasy about admitting to engaging in some forms of gossip outside of the purposes of gaining pedagogical input. These admissions were sometimes accompanied by a nervous gesture, such as laugh, and were followed by returning to the topic of using gossip for professional growth, or by expressing uneasiness over the lack of formal guidelines surrounding this behaviour. These indicators could be pointing to the idea that some forms of gossip are more acceptable among teachers than others, and that teachers hold a fear of judgement for engaging in forms of gossip that are seen as less acceptable.

Devin Brown described their reluctance to engage in any forms of gossip that could
potentially disrupt their relationships with their colleagues. Morgan Addison displayed considerable ease in describing several topics of gossip they discuss with their colleagues, until their final remark:

I think if you were to ask me what I talk most about with [my teacher friends], at school it’s probably more student talk and then out of school it’s probably more fun, personal, social stuff. [...] Oh yes absolutely, we talk about other colleagues, for sure. [Nervous laugh]. Anonymity is guaranteed, right?

Morgan’s reaction suggests that their personal ethics, school climate, or both, accept gossip topics that surround teachers’ personal lives and students more readily than they accept gossip that surrounds the school’s faculty and administration.

Michelson and colleagues (2010) explain some of the criticisms of gossip in the workplace. The negative perception of gossip is largely attributed to its ability “to generate a range of negative outcomes including disharmony, suspicions, and seeing the worst in other people” (Michelson et al, 2010, p. 382). This is consistent with the interview contributions above. Morgan’s discomfort arose when they brought up a gossip topic which specifically misaligned with collegial unity and trust; gossiping about coworkers. Likewise, Devin expressed concern that engaging in certain forms of gossip could impact their harmonious relationships with their colleagues. This suggests that teachers are impacted by how their gossip habits are perceived by their colleagues. Teachers may therefore selectively limit or censor dialogues that suggest disharmony with the faculty and administration in order to avoid creating a negative relationship with their colleagues. This practice can limit their ability to freely express their emotions, which has positive impacts on teacher well-being.
4.1.3.2 Teachers’ anxieties surrounding the frequency of gossip. The teachers interviewed feared that engaging in negative gossip too often could cause them and their colleagues’ undue emotional strain and reduce the faculty’s general morale. However, they could not reliably explain what distinguished overwhelmingly negative gossip from productively negative gossip, outside of a general sense of “too much” negativity, and their personal perceptions of that negative impact on their personal and professional lives.

Jamie Callaghan described the changes they observed in their colleagues as the topics of discussion among them became progressively more negative. They noticed that as the school year progressed, the focus of teachers’ discussions would change from positive, casual inquiries about their practice to more serious inquiries about professional difficulties they faced. Devin Brown describes their fear that even passive participation in negative work environments could be professionally damaging:

I’m very wary of [the staff room], because it can be a bit of a festering pot of negativity.

[…] I think you have to be very, very careful in situations like that because it can come back to bite you.

Devin further explained that their fear of experiencing consequences for being a bystander in a negative environment was informed by prior professional experience.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) sympathize with the reasons teachers may fall into patterns of repeated negative discussions with their colleagues, to the point of affecting the morale of their own working environment. They cite isolation, increasing expectations, contradictory demands, a lack of agency, and a lack of meaningful validation as the constant companions of teachers (p. 127). When the teacher’s work itself becomes a cycle of negative experiences, it
seems logical that the teachers themselves emulate that cycle through their words and actions. The dissonance between this finding and the previous section on gossip’s pedagogical benefits seems to reflect the idea that while some negative gossip is useful and tolerated by teachers, they are also attuned to the possible oversaturation of negativity in the work environment. Unfortunately, neither the interviewed teachers nor the literature were able to point to a specified and consistent ideal limit. One reason for this could be that individuals hold different and fluid thresholds for negative discussions, and it can be nearly impossible to identify those limits for oneself and for one’s colleagues.

4.1.3.3 No reports of gossip’s negative impact on students. An anticipated result for this study was a discussion surrounding the ways in which gossip could have an indirectly negative impact on students. For instance, it was thought that the teachers interviewed might relay anecdotes surrounding how information they received from another teacher inadvertently prejudiced them against a student.

Morgan Addison was remarkably positive about their colleagues’ ability to accurately relay information on students in a way that would not damage or falsify their perception:

I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a situation where I thought, “that teacher is out to lunch and knows nothing about that student.” Maybe I thought that he or she didn’t help that student enough, but they were never off about what they told me.

On the other hand, Jamie Callaghan was less optimistic about their colleagues’ ability to provide fair and objective assessments of their students. In particular, they suspected that when teachers experience emotional fatigue, they are more likely to misjudge their students. While this mistrust is likely founded on experience, they did not provide a concrete example.
The anticipation of a more balanced view of gossip’s effect on students was in keeping with Kuo and colleagues’ (2015) findings, which show that gossip in the workplace that revolves around job-related topics increases the levels of worker cynicism and negative outcomes. Since teachers frequently engaged in dialogue about pedagogical practices, some degree of cynicism experienced and reflected in their interactions with students could logically be anticipated. The above interviews diverge by either refuting this through personal experience, or anticipating this cynicism without providing any concrete examples.

4.2 Conclusion

The findings through both the interview process and the literature review proved to be useful in describing a basic context for which gossip among teachers can be further researched in the future. A variety of expected and unexpected areas of interest were analysed in this chapter to help better understand the ways in which gossip can be utilised to improve teaching practice and school environments.

The first category examined the impact of gossip on teachers’ pedagogical practice. Teachers were found to collaborate on solutions and strategies for students who experienced challenges in the classroom. For instance, a teacher used information about a student’s socioeconomic background to equitably schedule their assessments. This is a possible response to the lack or inaccessibility of formal student documentation that supplies teachers with the specific type of information they require to inform their practice. Secondly, teachers pointed to various advantages surrounding the efficiency of informal discussion. A teacher who is employed for occasional work used gossip as a means to quickly gather the information they
needed to situate themselves in a new school community. Teachers may also be using informal pedagogical discussions to bypass the time and effort required to solve problems their colleagues have already solved. Finally, teachers described the creation of informal mentoring partnerships that improved their practice. This was particularly useful to teachers who were either new to the profession, or who had a more experienced colleague in the same teaching position. These teachers are able to create particularly solid social bonds that were used to improve the quality of their teaching.

The second category examined the impact of gossip on a teacher’s well-being. Teachers were found to require a high degree of emotional regulation in their work, which in turn creates high levels of stress. They described a need to express their feelings and frustrations freely. It was suggested that teachers naturally gravitate to other teachers to fulfill this need, given the relative accessibility and suitability of their colleagues. This use for gossip was linked with fears about social isolation in schools, which causes excessive emotional fatigue. While this suggests that socialisation is an act of self-preservation, one teacher reported that they specifically endeavoured to ensure that none of their colleagues suffered from isolation as well. This adds an unexpected element of compassion to the act of gossiping. Finally, another unexpected finding was explored: the teachers’ noticeable desire for consensus with their colleagues. Teachers repeatedly reported a sense of relief when they found that their colleagues shared their thoughts and experiences. While this likely helps to reduce teacher anxiety, it also evokes concerns surrounding the possibility of confirmation bias. This will be further addressed in chapter 5, in the section on areas for future study.

Finally, the third category explored some issues surrounding negative impacts of gossip
for teachers. Teachers expressed occasional discomfort when discussing their gossip habits. For instance, one teacher’s mood shifted when they admitted to gossiping about their colleagues. It was hypothesised that teachers are particularly uncomfortable with gossip that shows disharmony and distrust in their collegial environment. Secondly, the effects of repeated negativity in the work environment over time were analysed. It was found that while teachers tolerated some forms and amounts of negative discussion, they also reported that they disliked instances and spaces where the discussion was overwhelmingly negative. However, both the interviews and the literature were unable to determine a predictable maximum threshold for negative discussion. Finally, the unexpected absence of teachers reporting the negative impacts of gossip on their students was examined. Their responses varied between a solid affirmation that gossip has not negatively impacted their view of students, and the concession that this is a possibility. More research is needed to determine the cause of this unexpected gap.

In chapter 5, I will conclude the study with a synthesis of the data, as well as a discussion on areas warranting further exploration in future studies. These areas will be based on the gaps found throughout this analysis. The data analysed in this chapter points to many unresolved areas of study, as well as hypotheses that require further exploration to form more definite conclusions. For instance, I will suggest that future studies could explore the reasons why teachers did not indicate any negative effects gossip has on their students, or the possible dangers of confirmation bias among teachers seeking consensus to reduce anxiety.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This research sought to provide a context to examine the effects of gossip between teachers. The key findings from three semi-structured interviews revolved around the following questions:

1. What are the impacts of teacher-to-teacher gossip on a teacher’s practice?
2. What is the impact of teacher-to-teacher gossip on a teacher’s well-being?

The findings were useful in providing a general context for how gossip is used in a teacher’s professional, personal, and social roles. While existing literature indicates that gossip in the workplace may contribute to employee cynicism and feelings of being ostracized (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5; Kuo et al, 2015, p. 2302) the three interviews conducted for this study reframe gossip as a positive practice.

I will begin this chapter by first reviewing the key findings from the analysis of my interview data. I will then discuss the implications of these findings for the educational community and for my professional identity and practice. Then, I will make some recommendations based on those discussions. Finally, I will point to some potential new areas for further research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The data analysed in the previous chapter yielded compelling information regarding the role of gossip through two particular themes; teachers’ pedagogical practice and well-being. These themes reframed gossip as a positive tool for teachers.
The three teachers interviewed, Morgan Addison, Devin Brown, and Jamie Callaghan, readily described the positive benefits of gossip in their pedagogical practice. One way in which they used gossip was to collaborate with other teachers on solutions and strategies for students who experienced challenges in the classroom. This finding shows gossip provides teachers with an alternative to formal collaboration channels that are created to support students, such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or Student Support Team (SST) meetings. While formal channels have many advantages for teachers, gossip has the potential to be more immediate and to contain more emotional cues.

In the first group of findings, experienced teacher Morgan and occasional teacher Devin both described the creation of informal mentoring partnerships through informal talk. The current formal mentorship program in Ontario only supports teachers “who have been hired into permanent positions [...] to begin teaching for the first time in Ontario” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). Gossip thus helps to fulfill the need for a wider breadth of mentorship opportunities that is not supported by the current policies, particularly to include occasional teachers, teachers in new roles, and teachers who wish to choose mentoring as a way of improving their practice.

The second group of themes demonstrates that gossip is also advantageous for teachers seeking relief from the high degree of emotional regulation required in their work. Jamie Callaghan presented it as a solution for social isolation in schools, which they report to cause excessive emotional fatigue. This finding shows that the role of gossip between teachers goes beyond the informal transmission of information directly related to their practice. Teachers who participate in an exchange of gossip receive social-emotional benefits as well, and teachers who
engage others in gossip may be motivated by the desire to help their colleagues receive these benefits. These findings also demonstrate that teachers’ perceptions of gossip is contingent on whether they received training that presented gossip as a positive behaviour.

The third group of themes describes the negative impacts of gossip. The literature indicated that gossip between teachers could have a variety of negative impacts on their practice and well-being, for instance poorer relationships with the administration, feelings of ostracism, and poorer workplace satisfaction (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5; Hallett et al, 2007, p. 608; Kuo et al, 2015, p. 2302). However none of the teachers interviewed concretely described negative impacts for themselves or for their students. This unexpected finding leads to questions surrounding the reasons for its conspicuous absence in the data. Morgan and Devin also expressed occasional discomfort when discussing their gossip habits. The participants’ discomfort suggests that despite their positive report on the effects of gossip, it is still stigmatised.

5.2 Implications
In this section I will detail the implications of the findings described above for the educational community, such as administrators, teacher trainers, and students. I will also describe the implications for my professional identity and practice.

5.2.1 The educational community. In this section I will discuss the implications of the findings for school-systems and administrators, teacher trainers, and students.

5.2.1.1 School-systems and administrators. Teachers use gossip to fulfill multiple needs at once that may be inefficient or impossible to fulfill through formal channels. For instance,
Morgan described gossip as being effective for gathering information, maintaining emotional regulation, and creating social bonds. Because of this, the goal for administrators should not be to discourage gossip, and they should be cautious not to over-regulate it.

Despite the benefits, some teachers may choose not to engage in gossip. Administrators or policymakers should ensure that those teachers still have access to alternative solutions for the stressors that gossip alleviates. For instance, they can consider advocating for an extension of the mentorship program, or creating their own formal program in-house. Currently, the mentorship program in Ontario only includes first-year teachers in permanent positions, long-term occasional teachers who teach for more than 97 consecutive school days, and teachers who did not successfully complete their prior mentorship (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). This current policy excludes experienced teachers who wish to improve their practice, experienced teachers in new roles or in new schools, and short-term occasional teachers.

While the literature demonstrated both the positive and negative attributes of gossip, the three teachers interviewed strongly favoured the positive attributes of gossip. Administrators who wish to encourage and benefit from the positive effects of gossip should be mindful of how they approach the subject through their language, actions, and policies. Administrators who help to re-frame gossip as a positive habit would be helping their teachers also view gossip as a necessary part of the social growing and well-being of the school.

5.2.1.2 Teacher Trainers. Morgan and Devin, the two newer teachers interviewed, expressed anxiety surrounding gossip, particularly regarding its relationship to professionalism. They also noted that informal interactions among teachers were never addressed in their initial teacher training, while Jamie, the more experienced teacher, noted that they were. Morgan and
Devin expressed a desire for more formal information during their teacher training surrounding this topic. Their hope was this formally provided information would reduce their anxieties. Jamie’s confidence with regards to their ideas about gossip further suggests a possible correlation between teacher training about gossip and anxiety surrounding gossip in the workplace.

5.2.1.3 Students. Despite probing questions intended to lead to a discussion about negative impacts on students, the teachers interviewed did not share any such information. It is still difficult to report the effect on students because of the unexpectedly missing information about the possible negative impacts on them. For now, the findings point to a cautious optimism. The implication is that teachers appear to have the students’ best interests at heart when engaging in gossip about them, and have actively implemented constructive recommendations for student success received through gossip.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice. With the new knowledge I have surrounding gossip, I have changed some of my actions in my current practice. Since conducting my interviews, I have been more proactive in my interactions with the teachers in my practice community. I have gone out of my way to deliver support to other teachers by offering my time or some kind words. I have also been more open to discussing issues that arise in my practice during unstructured social time, thereby inviting collaborative problem-solving to better tailor my teaching to the students I work with. Knowing that teachers welcome informal communications has reduced the social barriers and stigma that I previously perceived. I intend to share my knowledge through formal and informal channels in my future practice. My intention is to use gossip as optimally as possible for the benefit of my students, my colleagues,
and myself.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section I will make recommendations and professional suggestions for school-systems and administrators, teacher trainers, and teachers based on the implications described in the previous section.

5.3.1 Recommendations for school-systems and administrators. Given that the topic of gossip in the field of education and social sciences is still new, administrators are encouraged to seek partnerships with researchers in order to contribute to the knowledge they have from their managerial standpoint. They should become aware of the current gaps in the research, particularly any new findings that emerge surrounding the negative impacts of gossip.

Administrators should also ensure that their words and actions do not contribute to the stigma associated with gossip. This creates a counter-productive barrier to accessing the associated benefits, as well as a barrier to open and honest reflection about gossip’s impact. As previously mentioned, administrators are also cautioned against actively discouraging gossip between teachers. According to the literature and the interviews, gossip efficiently fulfills a number of needs relating to good practice and teacher well-being, including emotional regulation and strengthening social bonds (Grosser et al, 2012, p. 55; Mills 2010 p. 235). It therefore brings positive benefits to the school community. Administrators should work to ensure that all teachers have access to unregulated social time with other teachers during their workday. They should show particular consideration for teachers who are overscheduled or isolated from other teachers, which limits access to social time with their colleagues. This can include new teachers, teachers
in small departments, and teachers who participate in many extra-curricular activities. Social time between teachers must be valued as an important part of the workday, and not as time to be filled with more demands on the teacher’s workload.

However, administrators could also consider reforming formal channels of information exchange. Not all teachers choose to engage in gossip, and those who do may not engage in it consistently. Devin Brown noted that they sometimes feel compelled to avoid the gossip in the staff room. Administrators should consider implementing alternative formal pathways to accessing the benefits gained through gossip. These alternatives should not be viewed as a deterrent to gossip, which has multiple advantages beyond “merely compensating for lack of formally provided information” (Mills, 2010, p.235). They should however, be provided as an option. For instance, the lack of a formal mentorship program available to occasional and experienced teachers could be resolved by advocating for an extension to the current program or by creating a formal in-house program. However, it should be kept in mind that some teachers may still prefer to self-select informal mentors and mentoring structures.

**5.3.2 Recommendations for teacher trainers.** Morgan and Devin, who were not provided with any information relating to gossip or informal teacher-to-teacher interactions during their teacher training, both expressed that they would have appreciated and benefited from this guidance. Jamie, who did receive this training, expressed less anxiety about gossip. It is therefore suggested that teacher trainers re-implement these types of discussions in their curriculums. All teacher candidates will be exposed to unstructured social time and gossip during their practicums, as will teachers during their practice. A degree of discussion and reflexivity on the nature and usefulness of gossip would not only be beneficial to ease anxieties during those
situations, but also to help frame this behavior for their long-term careers.

The resulting dialogue between teachers and teacher trainers would likely help to fill in the considerable number of gaps in this field of study. Teacher trainers are encouraged to contribute to the emerging research. They can be particularly helpful as their position allows them to observe the responses of a range of teachers and teacher candidates, which might fill in existing research gaps or point to new ones.

Teacher trainers who are considering what to include with regards to gossip might consider two things in particular. The first is the observation made in section 5.2.2, where I remarked that simply knowing information about gossip helped to encourage positive behavior. Simply sharing research information about gossip with teacher candidates would likely have a similar effect. The second idea is to encourage teachers to ask for consent before engaging in informal discussions, and to politely give or decline consent. Investigating the reasons, benefits, and drawbacks of this practice could be a strong asset to teacher trainers who wish to include a proactive solution.

5.3.3 Recommendations for teachers. Teachers are encouraged to read and contribute to the current research in this field. Knowing the various benefits of gossip can help to highlight the various ways in which it can be used for the benefit of a teacher’s practice and well-being. In some cases, these benefits might be novel solutions to obstacles that teachers are facing. In other cases, the research can serve to validate or challenge the teacher’s current practices surrounding gossip, contributing to their overall growth and understanding. Indirectly, this has a positive impact on students as well. Better-informed and happier teachers who have solid and productive social bonds with their colleagues are better able to perform their teaching duties.
However, teachers should also remain cautious of possible negative impacts of gossip. Kuo (2015) and Ellwardt (2012), among other researchers, evoked themes of discomfort and disharmony that were also briefly observed in the three interviews. When contributing to future research, teachers are encouraged to be forthright and specific when describing the negative repercussions of gossip. In particular, they should remain cautious and attuned to the possible disadvantages for their students.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

In this section I will suggest some possible academic extensions of this study, as well as how they could be conducted, and the potential value of those extensions.

5.4.1 Possible impacts. A valuable extension of this study would be to further examine the extent to which teacher-to-teacher gossip impacts teacher pedagogy, teacher well-being, and students. While some negative impacts were described in the literature, such as cynicism, ostracism and mistrust (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5; Hallet et al, 2007, p. 608; Kuo et al, 2015, p. 2302), more research is still needed, particularly in the educational setting. To further explore this area, studies focused on exploring the potential risks of gossip should be conducted, involving further qualitative interviews with teachers as well as students. Examining climate survey reports from both students and teachers would also be a valuable asset to those studies.

These future studies on the potential negative impacts of gossip would provide insight on whether any behaviours related to gossip should be avoided, changed, or approached with caution. Teaching may present a unique situation in which the participants and subject of gossip experience no negative impacts. This would be a notable divergence from the current research.
The social sciences have been increasingly optimistic about gossip in the workplace, noting that it is useful in “contributing to and providing a measure of relationship quality” (Mills, 2010, p. 235) and “signaling an understanding of the organizational norms” (Ellwardt et al, 2012, p. 5). However, some of the negative repercussions have yet to be addressed in the educational setting, particularly on the object of gossip. Ellwardt and colleagues (2012) note that continuous negative gossip will confirm the low social status of the object (p. 5). As well, Hallet and colleagues (2007) find that the object of gossip can experience resistance from their colleagues when performing their professional tasks (p. 608).

5.4.2 Confirmation bias. Another extension of this study would be to examine the effect of the desire for consensus among teachers more closely. All three teachers interviewed described using gossip to have their feelings and opinions validated by their colleagues, as a means of relieving the stress and anxiety they experience in the workplace. Because a high degree of consensus in the workplace can lend itself to a culture of confirmation bias, it would be worthwhile to assess teachers’ susceptibility to this effect. This study could be conducted using a longitudinal series of surveys, measuring the attitudes and practices of teachers in a new school environment to see whether they change over time, and to what degree.

This study would provide insight on the relationship between stress and social acceptance in the teachers’ unique working environment. It may uncover new information for social scientists regarding the challenges teachers face. It would also be of interest to educators, as it could help to illuminate the degree to which a teacher’s practice is influenced by their working environment as opposed to more external factors, such as theory or policy.

5.4.3 Variance among teachers. A third possible extension of this study would be to
further examine whether the effects of gossip between teachers varies according to the variance among them. For instance, differences might be found between teachers of different ages, years of service, gender identity, and personality. The differences represented by some of these groups have been looked at by social scientists in the general population. If they are found in teachers as well, this could lead to a more complete understanding of gossip in the field of education.

This study would be conducted by expanding the model used for this research to include more semi-structured interviews, with participants selected to represent various categories. This could be accomplished as part of one large study, or a series of smaller interlinked studies. Those studies would help to expand on some of the findings outlined in this study, particularly where differences in experience and opinions between the participants were found. A broader-scale study which examines commonalities and differences among specific groups of teachers could help to illustrate possible reasons for differences between groups, and whether those differences are advantageous or disadvantageous, and mutable or immutable.

5.5 Concluding Comments

In the first section, I summarized the findings from my analysis and their impact on the study. I found that teachers use gossip to improve their teaching practice. Teachers not only collaboratively problem-solve through their informal discussions, but they also create social bonds that resemble mentoring partnerships. I then found that teachers also use gossip to improve their overall well-being. Gossip provides relief from the stress caused by the high degree of emotional regulation needed by teachers during the majority of their workday. I was also surprised to find that teachers did not report any negative impacts of gossip on their
students. However, they did at times express various levels of discomfort when discussing gossip, suggesting that they are aware of some broader negative impacts associated with gossip.

I then outlined implications and recommendations for school-systems and administrators, teacher trainers, and teachers. Because gossip was found to have multiple advantages for teacher practice and well-being, I cautioned school-systems and administrators against actively seeking to diminish this practice. I also suggested ways in which some of the needs fulfilled by gossip could be alternatively fulfilled through re-examining and re-shaping current policies and programs, such as the mentoring program. I then suggested that teacher trainers include information about gossip and unstructured social time between teachers in their training sessions. This was informed by both a noted desire for guidelines from teachers. Then, I recommended that teachers, while remaining cautiously optimistic about the effects of gossip between teachers, remain attuned to any negative impacts they observe in their students, their colleagues, and themselves. All three of these groups in education are strongly encouraged to assist with future research efforts.

Finally, I made three recommendations for future research and development in relation to the findings in my study. I suggested that the negative impacts of gossip on both educators and students be looked at with more depth, honesty, and clarity. I then suggested that the tendency for educators to seek consensus among their colleagues be examined more closely, lest this lead to the effect of confirmation bias, which would negatively impact their practice. I also suggested a study or a group of studies that examined the commonalities regarding gossip among different sub-groups of teachers. This study could help to illustrate external factors that influence gossip, such as age, years of service, or gender identity, that are not yet apparent.
In the field of social sciences, the study of gossip, an almost paradoxically intangible and familiar experience, is still evolving. Because the field of education is both highly unique and universal, it cannot be overlooked as the research continues.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview (English)

Date: Friday, April 8th, 2016

Dear _______________________________,

My Name is Sarah Isles and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teacher-to-teacher interactions outside of the classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who speak on a social level with their colleagues about pedagogical topics. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication.

You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only other people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructors. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sarah Isles
MT Research Coordinator: Angela MacDonald

Contact Info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sarah Isles and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________________________________

Name: (printed) ____________________________________________________________

Date: _____________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview (French)

Date : Le vendredi 8 avril 2016

Cher/Chère _______________________________,

Je m’appelle Sarah Isles et je suis une étudiante à l’Ontario Institute for Studies in Education à l’Université de Toronto (OISE/UT) dans le programme Master of Teaching (Maitrise de l’enseignement). Un aspect requis de mon diplôme est de diriger une courte étude de recherche qualitative. Ma recherche se concentrera sur les interactions entre les professeurs à l’extérieur de la salle de classe. Je cherche à faire des entrevues avec des professeurs qui discutent divers sujets pédagogiques sur un niveau social avec leurs collègues. Je pense que vos connaissances et votre expérience fournira des informations liées à ce sujet.

Votre participation sera composée d’une entrevue de 45-60 minutes, qui sera enregistrée et transcrite. Je vous serais reconnaissante si vous me permettrez de faire l’entrevue où cela vous conviendrait le plus, à l’extérieur des heures scolaires. Le contenu de cette entrevue sera utilisé pour mon projet de recherche, qui va inclure une dissertation finale, ainsi qu’une présentation informelle pour mes collègues de classe. Il est possible que je présente aussi ma recherche aux conférences et en publication.

Vous serez assigné un pseudonyme pour maintenir votre anonymat et je n’utiliserais pas votre nom ni aucun autre contenu qui pourra vous identifier dans mes travaux écrits, mes présentations orales, ou mes publications. Cette information demeura confidentielle. Toutes informations qui identifient votre école ou vos étudiants seront exclues. Les données de l’entrevue seront enregistrées sur mon ordinateur avec un mot de passe, et les seules autres personnes qui auront accès aux données de recherche seront mes professeurs pour mon cours de recherche. Vous avez la liberté de changer d’avis au sujet de votre participation à n’importe quel point, et de vous retirer même après avoir accepté de participer. Vous avez aussi la liberté de décliner de répondre à une ou plusieurs questions durant l’entrevue. Je vais détruire l’enregistrement audio après que la thèse sera présentée et/ou publiée, ce qui se fera à un maximum de cinq années après que les données sont enregistrées. Il n’y a aucun risque associé avec la participation.

S’il vous plaît signer la lettre de consentement, si vous acceptez de participer à l’entrevue. Une copie sera faite pour vos dossiers. Je vous suis très reconnaissante pour votre participation.

Sincèrement,
Sarah Isles
Coordonnatrice de recherche : Angela MacDonald

Information de contacte : angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

**Lettre de consentement**

Je reconnais que le sujet de cette entrevue m’a été expliqué et que les questions que j’ai posées ont été répondues à ma satisfaction. Je comprends que je peux arrêter ma participation dans cette étude de recherche à n’importe quel moment, sans pénalités.

J’ai lu la lettre fournie par Sarah Isles et j’accepte de participer à l’entrevue pour les objectifs décrits.
J’accepte que l’entrevue soit enregistrée.

Signature : ______________________________________________________

Nom : (lettres détachés) ____________________________________________

Date : ___________________________________________________________
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

The interview will be between 35 and 45 minutes long, but may take up to 60 minutes. The questions have been separated into four categories. During the interview, the word “gossip” will not be used in order to prevent interviewee bias.

The study’s main research questions [will not be asked directly]:
1. How does teacher-to-teacher gossip affect how teachers interact with students?
2. What impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s practice?
3. What impact does teacher-to-teacher gossip have on a teacher’s well-being?

General Protocol:
1. Welcome the participant and, if necessary, introduce yourself.
2. Re-iterate the contents of the consent letter, including the participant’s right to withdraw.
3. Ask if there are any questions before we begin.

Section 1: Background Information
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been at your current school?
3. What do you teach currently and what have you taught in the past?

Section 2: Teacher’s Practices
1. How often do you speak to other teachers throughout the workday/week?
2. How would you describe your colleagues as far as what? Need to be more specific here.
   Probing questions/suggestions: Co-workers, friends, close friends, spouse, etc.
3. Between you and your colleagues, what kinds of topics come up most frequently?
4. In discussions between you and your colleagues, what kind of information about students is usually exchanged?
   Probing questions/suggestions: Grades, behavior, life story, changes seen, etc.

Section 3: Teacher’s Beliefs and Values
1. What do you believe teachers can gain from teacher-to-teacher discussions?
   Probing questions/suggestions: On a social level? On a professional level?
2. Do you exercise any particular cautions when discussing students with your colleagues?
3. *Probing questions/suggestions*: What are they?

**Section 4: Teacher’s Influence and Influences**

1. Has anything you’ve heard about a student from a colleague affected the way you viewed that student?
   *Probing questions/suggestions*: How did you observe the change?
2. Has anything you’ve heard about a student from a colleague affected the way you interacted with that student?
   *Probing questions/suggestions*: How did you observe the change?
3. Do you believe that anything you’ve heard about a student from a colleague affected the way a student interacted with you?
   *Probing questions/suggestions*: How did you observe the change?

**Section 5: What next?**

1. Is there anything else you’d like to share, ask, or elaborate on?

**Thank the participant**