Principal’s Instructional Leadership: Leading Capacity for Learning

by

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Abstract

Over the past decades, a body of literature on the instructional role of the school principal has emerged (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). In our times of educational reforms and attempts at closing achievement gaps, the positive influence of the school principal as capacity builder has been gathering much interest (Bredeson, 2003; Davies, 2009; DuFour, 1991; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Leithwood, K., Seashore-Louis, Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K., 2004; Venables, 2011). But if Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that the principal’s influence on student achievement comes second only to the teacher’s influence, much of how such influence is exerted within school communities remains to be uncovered.

The conceptual framework from the study is inspired by Timperley and Alton-Lee’s (2008) iterative cycle model of teacher professional development, where teacher professional development is followed by changing teaching practices which in turn, is informed by student outcomes. The present conceptual framework has adapted the model to include the school principal.
The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the principal’s instructional leadership role as it pertains to the role’s reality as school capacity builder, asking the question: How do school principals influence the professional development of teachers to support teachers’ instructional practices for student learning? The study attempted to answer the following three sub questions: 1) How do principals perceive their role in influencing the professional development of their teachers? 2) What are the strategies employed by principals to support teachers’ professional development? 3) What are the barriers to supporting teachers’ professional learning and growth that school leaders face daily?

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with fourteen principals, 10 elementary and four secondary. All principals were from publicly-funded school boards in the province of Ontario, Canada.

Main impediments to building school capacity include the principals’ continuous struggle between administrative and leadership duties, the lack of autonomy in the planning of professional development, the lack of time for follow ups and the centralized nature of board’s professional development plans. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.
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Chapter 1: 
Introduction

For decades the topic of teacher professional knowledge has been a subject of much interest, not only for the research community but equally for myself. As an educator with almost 30 years of experience in the publicly-funded Ontario system both as a teacher and an administrator, and presently as an education officer with the Ontario Ministry of Education, the challenges of the system’s capacity to respond to the multitude of needs of both students and staff has always been foremost in my mind.

From the 19th century, when teachers’ qualifications consisted mainly of being able to read, write, and have basic knowledge of geography, to now, more than 150 years later, teacher professional growth has been the subject of much research and debate. In 1847, Ryerson’s examination of European school systems led to a radical transformation of schooling in what was then Upper Canada. Ryerson’s report, commissioned by the then Governor General of Upper Canada, made the case not only for an education system that would be publicly funded, but also for a qualified teaching workforce: “In all countries where School Teachers are regularly trained, the profession of teaching holds a high rank in public estimation” (Ryerson, 1847, p.160).

Ryerson, urging for the establishment of Normal Schools to train teachers, offers this comparison: “bad Schoolmaster, like a bad priest, is a scourge to a Commune; and though we are not obliged to be contented with indifferent ones, we must do our best to improve the average quality” (p.157).

What began, in Ryerson’s times, with ensuring minimal basic qualifications for teachers in public education, has evolved over the decades into a true profession demanding university qualifications and the continuous professional growth of teachers. Innovations, such as the establishment of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) in 1996, pushed forward the accreditation of more Additional Qualifications (AQ) courses for teachers. Despite the fact that in the late 1990s AQ courses were used in a political attempt to relicense Ontario teachers (later rescinded), AQ courses have allowed teachers to gain knowledge and skills (as well as recognized credits) in an ever-increasing array of subjects.
Other professional development opportunities such as Masters of Teaching courses, professional learning communities, and action research have been supported through funding and research. Promoting and facilitating teachers’ continuous learning is high on the Ontario Ministry of Education agenda.

The role of the school principal has also considerably evolved and leadership is no longer just about managing schools but also about being accountable for student achievement. (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004) argue that the principal’s influence on student achievement comes second after teachers’ influence. Instructional leadership is complex and understood differently depending on the particular context of a school with factors such as, to name a few, culture, environment, the student body, community, and educators’ qualifications and experience having an impact on student achievement.

One aspect of instructional leadership is capacity building through professional development based on pertinent student data. Although few would deny that an important task of the principal is to facilitate staff development, it is unclear that principals themselves have the capacity, the means, or merely the inclination to do so. Therefore gaining a better understanding of the reality of leading for learning could potentially yield a better understanding of the factors influencing the involvement of principals in staff development in order to maximize student learning. Thus this study has adopted the following definition of capacity building: the support principals provide to the professional development of teachers.

This chapter looks briefly at the history and actual context of teacher professional development in order to set the stage for the purpose and research question of the study, which comes next. This introductory chapter concludes with a brief description of the thesis’ organization.

1.1 Setting the Stage

As early as 1857, Egerton Ryerson—at the time Ontario’s superintendent of education—could see that the great variety of teaching abilities found in the one-room schools throughout the province was, at times, detrimental to the advancement of public education. That year Ryerson created the first Normal School in Toronto. The Normal School wanted to “normalize” instruction by providing training to teachers. The second Normal School opened in Ottawa more than 20 years later in 1875. Normal schools remained the most important teacher training
facilities right up to the 1950s when they became teachers colleges (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 40).

In the 19th century, teaching involved relatively few skills on the part of the teacher whose main task was to assign instructional work to students. The learning at that time was mostly centred around memorization of, too often, meaningless facts. At that time an acute teacher shortage resulted in “less qualified individuals pressed into service” (Kitchen and Petrarca, 2014, p. 59). Despite some efforts to train individuals by hurriedly putting in place a summer training institute for candidates interested in becoming teachers, a good proportion of new teachers had to face classrooms without the “necessary knowledge base and pedagogical skills for the delivery of prescribed curriculum” (Kitchen and Petrarca, 2014, p. 59). At the beginning of the 20th century, recognizing that secondary education required a better qualified teaching workforce, such as a diploma from a collegiate institute or a university degree, the Government of the time focused its effort on improving secondary teachers’ qualifications.

However, with the creation of the Educational Depository by Ryerson in 1851 and the advent of prescribed standardized school texts in the 19th century, not only did the school system begin to group children according to age and organize schooling by subject matters, but also the word “teaching” began to mean much more than merely assigning students facts to memorize.

In 1968, the Ontario Ministry of Education commissioned and published a comprehensive review of the elementary division programs, known as the Hall-Dennis report. The Hall-Dennis report called for a “curriculum more closely related to student’s experiences, a decrease in rote learning and an increase in parental and community involvement” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 43). The Hall-Dennis report looked at many aspects of what was termed the “teaching world” and put forth recommendations that one might argue were, if not revolutionary, certainly avant-garde for the period. The report spoke at length about the teaching profession, addressing issues such as planning and delivery of lessons, teaching resources, and evaluation of students’ progress. Amongst many other aspects, the report underlined the importance of allowing teachers flexibility and autonomy in delivering instruction which was, at the time, a drastic departure from the then highly prescribed curriculum. The authors pointed out the role of teacher inquiry in better responding to students’ needs, a concept that is at the core of present day teachers’ professional development. The innovative spirit of the Hall-Dennis commission did not
stop there as it also spoke of the value of the “co-ordination and co-operation” of education stakeholders, including teachers, principals, supervisors, and consultants, and all those that “form the educational environment” in order to provide quality instruction. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of parents as education stakeholders, the report recommended that “teachers welcome the parent’s natural interest in the welfare, progress, and achievements of their children” (Connexions, 2015, p. 4) through the descriptive communication of their child’s progress as opposed to mere distribution of grades. The Hall-Dennis’ report would revolutionize education in Ontario, spearheading much of the ministerial initiatives to follow in subsequent decades.

Although teachers’ professional development, up to then, had focused mainly on the pre-service of teachers, the Hall-Dennis report of 1968 used the terms “professional development” and “continuing education,” arguing that the learning of teachers never ended. The commission urged schools and faculties of education to work hand-in-hand to ensure the continuous professional growth of teachers, refuelling the debate of skills versus knowledge or theory versus practice. One might argue that, unbeknownst to the Hall-Dennis commission, this was the first glimpse of the principal’s potential influence on teacher professional development, specifically in the development of “a proper climate for continuing development” (Connexions, 2015, p. 7).

Although the report argues for making formal learning opportunities such as in-service training available to teachers, it also acknowledged the “many informal routes by which teachers (SIC) may keep up to date with new knowledge and improve his competence” (Hall-Dennis, 1968, p. 7). It is interesting to note that, in 1968, the Dennis-Hall report suggests relying on research to build teacher knowledge, advocating greater teacher participation in educational research through the use of action research, an opportunity that was not spoken of when I began teaching some 20 years later. The report insisted that teaching was more than the simple transmission of knowledge, stating that “Today’s teacher must be concerned more with the development of the child than with the conveying of information, he must be more concerned with how a pupil learns, thinks, and acts than with the particular facts he has mastered” (Hall-Dennis, 1968, p. 4).

Although many looked forward to the revolutionary changes that the report’s recommendations would bring forth, in the end the general consensus was that the then government never gave the Hall-Dennis report the credit it deserved. Fortunately since then, research in education has
vindicated the recommendations of Hall-Dennis and the directions advocated in 1968 are now reflected in current mainstream educational policies.

1.2 For the Love of Learning

In 1994, another education commission, The Royal Commission on Learning, mandated by the then Ontario Ministry of Education, delivered its report titled *For the Love of Learning* which reprises much of the same topics of the Hall-Dennis report 25 years prior and was to pave the way for the future of education in Ontario. Basing its recommendations on a vast provincial consultation which sought the expertise and advice of all educational stakeholders as well as on current research in education, the Royal Commission on Learning urged the Ministry and faculties to rethink the training program of teachers, to establish clear standards for the teaching profession, and encourage the continuous growth of education stakeholders. It also spoke at length of accountability and student success. The report devotes an entire chapter on the critical role that continuous teacher learning plays in meeting the multitude of students’ learning needs. Another chapter addressed the role of leadership in schools, arguing that the instructional role the principal plays in the school is just as important as the principal’s managerial role. Despite the many demands put on leadership, the report states that the principal’s main responsibility is to ensure the quality of instruction. Although in-school professional development is recommended for both principals and teachers through the use of “adequate professional development” and “professional renewal” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 29), the Commission, given the vast array of talents, skills, and needs, acknowledged the challenge in defining what such opportunities would be. In providing direct support for staff development, the report does not fully explore the role of the principal and speaks mostly of indirect involvement relating to instructional tasks such the development of a shared vision for student success with properly aligned goals, as well as the importance of sharing the school leadership. As for the direct involvement of the principal in instructional matters, the focus is mainly on teacher performance appraisal. Blase and Blase (1989), however, would later argue that teacher supervision, in far too many cases, has turned out to be more about supervision than support, i.e. teacher professional growth through the use of reflection on their practices.
1.3 Actual Context

The establishment of the Working Table on Teacher Development in 2005 by the Ontario government paved the way for major changes in teachers’ learning and teaching. The Working Table that comprised critical Ontario education stakeholders, such as the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), parent associations, public, Catholic and French board associations, as well as teacher federations, took a critical look at the state of teacher training and professional development. The year before, a discussion paper on the future of education in Ontario had underlined the challenges faced by the teaching profession, notably the strain put on teachers by classroom diversity and the multitude of students’ needs, needs for which the regular classroom teachers, both new and experienced, were unprepared and unequipped for (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

The Working Table on Teacher Development, released in 2007, made important recommendations highlighting the need of continuous professional development in order to improve the quality of education in Ontario classrooms. Following Phase 1 of the table’s deliberations, which dealt mostly with the induction of new teachers into the profession and led to the creation of the New Teacher Induction Program commonly known as NTIP, Phase 2 recommended the overhaul of the teacher performance appraisal process and the continuous professional development of experienced teachers (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007). An important feature of the new appraisal process was the “strengthening of the Annual Learning Plan (ALP) by encouraging teachers to gather parent and student input in its development” (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007, p. 2). The effect of the new ALP on teacher learning and professional growth will be discussed later as part of the findings of this research. However successful or not, the ALP recognized the value of teachers’ assessing and articulating their own professional learning needs and setting their own goals for improvement. One of the final tasks of the table was to “explore opportunities and support for experienced teachers to engage in professional learning and methods of recognizing a range of professional development opportunities” (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007, p. 2). Making good use of the research on effective teacher professional development and the research on adult learning theories, the Working Table recommended that teacher professional development opportunities be: coherent, attentive to adult learning styles, goal-oriented, sustainable, and evidence-informed (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007, p. 3). The importance of
content knowledge and job-embedded learning aligned with the sharing of expertise was also clearly articulated.

In the past few years, the Ontario Ministry of Education has funded and supported numerous initiatives to promote teacher collaborative professional learning including, to name a few, the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Critical Learning and Teaching Pathways (CLTPs), various forms of teacher inquiries into problems of practice, the establishment of networks of teachers and administrators, instructional coaches, the use of action research, and literacy forums and symposiums. Furthermore, numerous resources such as a handbook on job-embedded learning, webcasts, online journals, and research-based monographs were also developed and made available to the teaching community. The team approach to professional learning is a clear departure from the one-size-fits-all in-service model that had been the favoured mode of professional development for decades. Although the implementation of such collaborative practices and the use of those resources have varied greatly across the province, one would hope that those efforts by the province have contributed, along with many other changes, to changing classroom practices for the betterment of student learning.

Interestingly, other than a brief mention of the importance of education leaders—vice-principals, principals, superintendents, and directors of education—to “keep at least as current as their teaching staff in order for them to support good teaching” (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007, p. 7), the Working Table does not appear to consider the role of the principal in staff development. Yet the role of the principal as instructional leader and, more specifically, as a force promoting and sustaining a culture of learning has been widely researched for decades and proven to be closely linked to student achievement (Hallinger, 2005).

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Despite the many changes that have happened in curriculum, teaching, and assessment strategies over the years (including recently), and despite more stringent demands on teachers, 25 years in the public education system have taught me that teachers’ professional growth has, if not reached a plateau, been very slow for many. I would argue that in order to explain that sad reality one has to look closely at the leadership within the school and school boards, and even at the ministry level. With important new ministerial initiatives, particularly regarding effective teaching and
assessment strategies (for example, Ontario’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy), there is widespread agreement that teacher professional development is of utmost importance in order to ensure quality of education in every classroom. However the access to relevant professional development opportunities seems to vary greatly across school boards.

In the past decades, research in education has made great strides. Numerous studies have not only pointed out the importance of lifelong learning for educators but also that the way educators learn best is through a collaborative approach. The sharing of expertise, whether formally (through professional learning communities [PLCs]) or informally, has been proven to play a critical role in student achievement (Hipp & Huffman, 2000; Holt & Murphy, 1993; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz & Louis, 2009; Slater, 2001). Yet despite the literature, it would seem that many schools in our system have failed to establish a “culture of teaching” (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1984, p. 14). Such a culture is one which seeks to prevent the isolation of teachers by promoting continuous collaborative learning and therefore building school capacity, which in turn not only models learning behaviours but also significantly raises student achievement (Lambert, 2002).

The creation of professional learning communities in schools has proven to be an extraordinary professional learning development tool (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008). Furthermore, funding from the Ministry of Education to free teachers during the school day to meet and learn together within a PLC is indicative of the Ministry’s use of research to improve the quality of learning in Ontario classrooms. However, my own experience and numerous discussions with colleagues have made me question whether the money allocated for PLCs was being used effectively. Moreover, a survey of teachers by Ken Leithwood’s research team for the Leading Student Achievement project (Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010) showed that teachers did not find PLCs particularly useful, which appears to contradict other research. Therefore I believe that gaining a better understanding of how PLCs—or any other form of professional development—are being implemented in schools is a necessity.

Hargreaves & Fullan’s most recent work (2012) has them borrowing from the business world the term *capital* when talking about professional development. They remind us that knowledge does not always translate into actual practice. They reiterate that although much learning can be gained from lectures, workshops, or conferences, research has shown that new knowledge was
not often enough being converted into applications for the classroom. The enthusiasm generated by a great speaker can be soon forgotten when facing the reality of the classroom. They argue that education systems have to invest in their “professional capital,” stating that it is “about high quality teachers and teaching” (p. 3) and it “requires teachers to be highly committed, thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, properly paid, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and be able to make effective judgment using all their capabilities and experiences” (p. 3). According to Hargreaves & Fullan, professional capital is not just about human capital, but is equally about social capital and decisional capital. They reason that skilled teachers working in trusting and collaborative relationships will be able to accept collective responsibility and feel empowered to make appropriate decisions to ensure learning for all, thus building their school capacity.

As school leader, it is incumbent to the principal to provide the guidance and support to allow for professional learning to happen, however how principals manage to accomplish that task is far less understood. Parr and Timperley (2010) talk about the idea of “black boxes” to explain the moment or space that translates the elements of successful instructional leadership into a practice positively influencing student learning. This is what Neumerski defines as the answer to the question “How exactly do principals enact instructional leadership in their school?” She argues that “our knowledge of instructional leadership in relation to teaching and learning is in its infancy” (Neumerski, 2013, p. 336). Hallinger, whose work has contributed much to defining the term instructional leadership, reprises the analogy of the “black boxes” and agrees that more work is needed to uncover the content of those “black boxes,” which he sees as containing the “processes through which leadership contributes to the improvement capacity of schools to create a positive impact on student learning” (Hallinger, 2011, p. 298). A review of nearly three decades of doctoral research on instructional leadership led Hallinger to conclude that although the wide use of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), which he pioneered in the 1980s, has demonstrated the reliability of the tool, it has contributed very little in the field of instructional leadership as it relates to school capacity and student learning. As a result, Hallinger argues that future research on the phenomenon should seek to shed more light on instructional leadership in a context less studied, such as secondary schools, which given the number and complexity of subjects have to share instructional leadership among many leaders, i.e. department heads and administration.
Just like a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer appropriate for the classroom today, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot respond to the various needs of the teaching workforce. The critical role that the principal plays in assessing professional capacity and providing human, material and financial means cannot be overlooked. As time (or lack thereof) is of the essence, the principal has to maximize professional development of the staff by ensuring that it is closely tied to student learning.

This study hopes to provide a better understanding of principals’ reality in building the capacity of schools to continuously improve student learning.

1.5 Research Question

A principal’s leadership matters for student achievement and, as discussed earlier, teacher learning and development, can be highly influenced by the principal. However, promoting quality instruction requires time and commitment and the principal’s duties are numerous. A vast body of work over decades of research has helped define instructional leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996) and eventually informed the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education and Leadership, 2013), commonly used in Ontario public schools. I would argue, however, that principals are still provided with a broad definition of their instructional leadership role that may leave much to interpretation. Therefore it is still relevant to gain an understanding of such interpretations, perhaps in contexts less studied as argued by Neumerski (2013) and Hallinger (2011), e.g. secondary schools and schools already performing adequately but not moving ahead, as opposed to outlier schools performing either highly or poorly (Sharrat & Fullan, 2009). In other words, although defining the school mission and setting strategic goals comes up time and time again in the literature as a mainstay of any efficient instructional leader, it is still unclear as to how principals go about fulfilling such important tasks in their particular context. This is a point clearly made by Neumerski (2013) in her recent analysis of the literature on instructional leadership. Therefore there remains a need, if not to define the term, to gain a better understanding on how principals perceive and enact the role of instructional leader.

Neumerski (2013), among others, argues that the principal’s role is no longer about managing schools but rather about leading with a definite purpose of improving student learning, and personal characteristics or traits do not suffice to explain successful instructional leaders.
Principals, these days, are being asked to do much more than conduct fire drills, prepare timetables and yard supervision schedules, or ensure that the leaky roof is fixed.

Given the proven importance of building the capacity of schools, one of the many roles of a school principal is, therefore, to make supporting top-quality teaching and learning a priority. Although, as mentioned above, the study of high-performing schools and systems has extracted important factors pertaining to the role of the principal in supporting instruction, there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding the reality of other settings. Furthermore, it would appear that a principal’s influence on student achievement is mostly of an indirect nature and that instructional leadership should be rethought as “organizational management for instructional improvement rather than day to day teaching and learning” (Horng & Loeb, 2010, p. 66). An important aspect of any sound organizational management is the continuous building of its workforce capacity. Given the role that principals could play in the professional development and continuous professional growth of the teaching staff, it is critical to better understand the phenomenon of instructional leadership as it relates to capacity building and, more specifically, to the support principals provide to the professional development of teachers. The purpose of this study is to examine in depth one major aspect of the principal’s instructional role: that of their influence on teaching practices through the means by which they support teacher professional development.

This research will attempt to answer the following research question:

**How do school principals influence the professional development of teachers to support teachers’ instructional practices for student learning?**

The study will attempt to answer the following three sub-questions:
1) How do principals perceive their role in influencing the professional development of their teachers?
2) What are the strategies employed by principals to support teachers’ professional development?
3) What are the barriers to supporting teachers’ professional learning and growth school leaders face daily?

This study hopes to shed some light on ways to support instructional leadership as it pertains to supporting staff professional growth in the school context.
1.6 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic of teacher professional development with a brief overview of the history of the teaching profession that led to the current context and the renewed focus on teacher continuous learning. The chapter subsequently recognizes the challenges faced by educational leaders in building school capacity for student learning, which brings the reader to the purpose of the study and the research question. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on current research linked to the conceptual framework and underlines the role of the principal as capacity builder.

Chapter 3, the methodology, details the conceptual framework of the study, the qualitative design used and gives a brief description of participants along with the sampling and data analysis method. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study following a thematic analysis.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, discusses the results in light of the research question, the conceptual framework, and the literature. It concludes with a section on implications for future research and recommendations for policy and practices.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Among the many facets of an effective school principal, numerous studies have pointed out that the role of instructional leader was pivotal (Blase & Blase, 1999; Fidler, 1997; Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1992; Leithwood & Montgomery 1986).

Since the early 1980s, researchers have attempted to observe instructional leadership in schools and to identify certain behaviours associated with that role. My own experiences from 25 years in education as a teacher, researcher, and administrator have convinced me that being an instructional leader conveys different meanings to different people.

According to Krug (1992), the term “instructional leader” is ill-defined. In 1992, Krug stated that there was a need to shed more light on how instructional leadership was experienced in schools. I would argue that, over 20 years later, the need still remains. Nevertheless, we do have a clearer idea of behaviours associated with instructional leadership. The extensive work of Blase and Blase (1998) has given us the Handbook on Instructional Leadership, which was the result of an extensive study involving more than 800 elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers from various parts of the United States in both rural and urban settings. According to these authors, staff supervision, albeit an important duty of the principal, should not be the sole purpose of a good instructional leader. Blase and Blase (1998) and Fullan (2010) argue that teacher supervision should not be about filling out performance appraisal forms or assigning punishment, but rather about building school capacity as a whole. In other words, principals’ supervision of teachers should be about supporting teachers’ professional learning to improve their practices in order to increase student achievement.

Possibly one of the most challenging tasks for principals is to continuously build the capacity of their school while maintaining a strong focus on student achievement. This chapter examines some of the research around school capacity as it relates to professional learning and development of teachers and the importance of the principal’s role. It begins by establishing a link between school leadership and student achievement and goes on to distinguish between the direct and indirect influence of a principal’s instructional activities. The sections that follow describe some of the research on effective and less effective professional development for
educators and the influence that a principal can exert on teacher learning. The literature reviewed has a particular focus on collaborative professional development and some of the different forms of collaborative learning that have been researched in the past few years, notably professional learning communities, coaching, and reflective practice. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

2.1 Principal’s Instructional Leadership and Student Achievement

In the past decades, a body of research on instructional leadership has pointed out the importance of the principal’s role as an instructional leader (Blase & Blase, 1998; Gupton, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Moreover, the link between principal’s leadership and student learning is now being established as one of the key findings to emanate from Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd’s 2009 literature review on the link between leadership and student achievement. Robinson et al. found that “the closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students.” (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009, p. 47). More specifically, their meta-analysis of 134 quantitative and qualitative studies yielded eight dimensions of leadership practices and activities of high-performing schools. Five of those dimensions were directly related to the principal’s instructional or pedagogical (as termed by the authors) leadership. The five dimensions are, by order of significance, teacher learning and development (ESO. 84), planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (ESO. 42), establishing goals and expectations (ESO. 35), strategic resourcing (ESO. 34), and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (ESO. 27) (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009, pp. 39-40).

Similar themes emerged from the research of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005). These authors conducted a meta-analysis of decades of studies examining the effect of principal leadership on student achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests. Following their extensive review of the literature, the authors suggested 21 responsibilities of the principal having a positive impact on student learning. These are, in alphabetical order: affirmation, change agent, contingent rewards, communication, culture, discipline, flexibility, focus, ideas/beliefs, input, intellectual stimulation, involvement in curriculum instruction and assessment, knowledge of curriculum instruction and assessment, monitoring, evaluating,
optimizer, order, outreach, relationships, resources, situational awareness, and visibility. Although correlation coefficients varied for each responsibility, it is worth noting that the following responsibilities were shown to have the highest correlation: situational awareness (.33), described as the principal being aware of the details and the undercurrents in the running of the school and using this information to address current and potential problems; flexibility (.28), defined as the principal adapting his or her leadership behaviours to the needs of the current situation and being comfortable with dissent; monitoring and evaluating (.27), the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning; outreach (.27), being an advocate and a spokesperson for the school to all its stakeholders; and discipline (.27), defined as protecting teachers from issues and influences that would distract from their teaching time and focus (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, pp. 42-43). The authors point out that none of this is news, as those responsibilities have been the object of numerous previous studies. However, what is relatively new is the quantitative evidence of the links between those principal functions, albeit indirectly, to student achievement.

The Learning from Leadership Project led by Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) is one of the largest in scale ever conducted, studying instructional leadership in several American schools, school districts, and states. The study examined the link between instructional leadership practices, shared leadership practices, and trust in the principal on student outcomes. Using a mixed method design, data were collected from a large sample of teachers and school administrators. Participants were surveyed and teachers and administrators were also interviewed at the district and state levels. Furthermore, classrooms were observed. Student achievement was measured using literacy and numeracy state test scores at both elementary and secondary levels. Over a six-year period, data were collected from numerous schools located in different states. Within school factors, this study concluded that classroom instructional practice was the most important factor influencing student achievement; but the second most important factor influencing achievement was school leadership. In the authors’ words, “While leadership explains only three to five percent of the variation in student learning across schools this is actually about one quarter of the total variation (10 to 20 percent) explained by all school-level variables” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 21). Although the results showed that instructional leadership and shared leadership as well as trust in the principal are associated with positive student outcomes, the effect is rather more of an indirect nature and all three could be
seen as being somewhat complementary. This would appear to be quite logical as both the shared and instructional leadership models require a hefty dose of trust in the principal and amongst stakeholders. Trust is an essential element enabling stakeholders to establish positive and supportive work relationships. Positive relationships are, in turn, inherently linked to efficient collaborative work, which is at the heart of sharing leadership and transforming practices (Lambert, 2002).

The fact that leadership matters and plays a critical role in student achievement is also reinforced by the findings of Hallinger and Heck (2011a) who suggested that to better understand the phenomenon of the impact of leadership on learning, it would be important to consider the complementary and reciprocal nature of the multitude of functions involved in school leadership (p. 166). Hallinger and Heck (2011a) report results that “reinforce the long standing empirical findings that leadership acts as a catalyst for school improvement both by initiating change and shaping a coherent focus on learning in schools” (p.22).

The principal is a determinant factor in achieving collective responsibility and accountability for the success of all children, whether they are directly involved in instructional matters—such as when they perform teacher performance appraisals, visit classrooms, or hold instructional conferences with teachers—or they are involved indirectly—as when they perform responsibilities such as setting directions for the school or put in place structures allowing for teachers’ collaboration. While taking into consideration other important factors previously mentioned in Marzano, Waters & McNulty’s study (2005), the principal’s most important responsibility is to maximize the potential of every student by optimizing learning conditions. We know that teaching has an impact on student learning, therefore a proper and continuous assessment of the impact of teaching practices on student learning would be a logical first step. In other words, based on pertinent student data—achievement and other data—the principal has to demonstrate the flexibility to alter, modify, or adapt the school course of action in order to sustain high student achievement. Maintaining a strong and clear focus on student achievement is therefore a key element. In Hattie’s words, “Teachers, schools and systems need to be consistently aware, and have dependable evidence of the effects that all are having on their students and from this evidence make the decision about how they teach and what they teach” (Hattie, 2012, p. 149).
It is interesting to note that much of the research on direct versus indirect instructional leadership has demonstrated that direct leadership did not appear to greatly influence student achievement. According to Leithwood (2006), there exists little evidence of direct instructional leadership having any effect on student learning. Leithwood states that “mostly leaders contribute to student learning indirectly through their influence on other people or features of their organizations” (p. 182). He identifies four “core practices” having an indirect but significant impact on student learning, particularly in low-performing schools. The practices are creating stability, clarifying the academic mission, building commitment and capacity, and sustaining an “upward trajectory” (Leithwood, 2006, pp. 195-196). These findings on the indirect involvement of principals are emphasized by Fullan (2005) in an article where he laments the short-lived success of turnaround schools as measured by standardized tests in the province of Ontario. Fullan cautions that in order to sustain student achievement and maintain improvement, the school’s focus has to be on building capacity by use of pertinent staff development and not merely basing the school’s success on ephemeral test results.

Leithwood’s work (2010) proposes a new model, the Four Paths, in order to explain variation in student achievement and choices in leadership approach and process. The Rational Path is comprised of academic pressure and a disciplinary climate; the Emotional Path refers to collective efficacy and trust among stakeholders; the Organizational Path looks at time management and structures to promote collaborative work such as professional learning communities (PLCs); and the Family Path explores the involvement of families in the educational journey. Asserting that the impact of leadership on student learning is largely indirect, Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010), in order to test Leithwood’s (2010) model, used a quantitative research design. They surveyed teachers and principals over a five-year period and determined their schools’ achievement by looking at results of provincial tests. The results showed that the combined effects on student achievement of the Rational, Emotional, and Family Paths were quite significant. Surprisingly the path on which the school principal has the most direct influence, the Organizational Path, was the one that showed the least effect on student achievement. However it is important to note that leadership in this particular study was not defined solely as principal leadership but rather as shared leadership, which might perhaps explain the findings. At the same time the fact that the managerial aspect of the school principal’s role has less impact on student achievement should not come as a surprise since we
have understood for quite some time now the distinction between managing and leading schools. That is not to deny the importance of putting in place the structures which will facilitate the setting of the other paths.

The implications for school principals are serious, as not only do principals have to be adept at timetabling and providing material, financial, and human resources, but even more importantly principals have to be skilful at strategically aligning all aspects of schooling to promote and sustain maximal student achievement. Specifically, Leithwood’s (2010) model implies that principals have to have: a thorough understanding of their school community; expertise at properly assessing needs; a sound knowledge of effective pedagogy and practices, as well as teacher professional development; great ability to form and maintain positive relationships with all stakeholders; and financial and political acumen.

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) attempted to clarify specific behaviours of instructional leaders. They administered a questionnaire called the “Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale” to teachers, principals, and district supervisors in 10 elementary suburban schools. The participants were asked to assess the principal’s work over the previous year on a multitude of items. While acknowledging the reliability limitations of their relatively small sample, the authors nevertheless were able to extricate from their analysis a number of important elements.

Hallinger & Murphy’s results (1985) led them to conclude that it was a number of functions of principals that made them successful instructional leaders and less the extent to which they directly supervise instruction; along with monitoring instruction, defining the school mission and promoting a positive learning climate appeared to also have had a significant impact. Perhaps unsurprisingly, principals who scored high on one function scored high on most other functions. Furthermore it is worth noting that the results were consistent among all participants, i.e. between teachers, principals, and senior administrators. The work of Blase and Blase (1998), described earlier on, led to similar conclusions. It is however interesting to note that, in the Blase and Blase study, teachers (and only teachers) were asked about good principal instructional leadership practices. The perspective of principals was not sought.

In fact, other than Leithwood’s work (2010), there appears to have been little consultation with principals on the matter despite the near unanimity in the literature regarding the value of the principal’s instructional leadership role. Notwithstanding Leithwood’s argument that teachers’
ratings of principals’ activity produce more reliable data than asking principals to self-report, the perspective of principals cannot be overlooked. There seems to be a gap in the literature that does not adequately address the principal’s perspective on the principal specific role of instructional leader.

2.2 Principal’s Direct and Indirect Activity

Given the intent of this study to examine all perceptions of the role, albeit direct or indirect, and as there does not appear to be a universal definition of instructional leadership, the present study has adopted Daresch and Playko’s definition of the term. “Instructional leadership consists of direct or indirect behaviours that significantly affect teacher instruction and, as a result, student learning” (Daresch & Playko, 1995, in Gupton, 2003, p. 32). These authors’ understanding of instructional leadership sums up the emphasis on instruction (hence the name) and its link to student learning.

In fact for many researchers, as previously stated, instructional leadership should be first and foremost about building the capacity of schools in order to better support and maximize student achievement. Building capacity can be achieved through very different means. Although the literature seems to point to a more indirect influence, both direct and indirect principal activities have proven to be valuable in increasing student learning (Hallinger, 2005).

As previously stated, a number of behaviours or functions have been associated with effective instructional leaders. In her book, The Instructional Leadership Toolbox, Gupton (2003) underlines several actions of principals who have demonstrated efficient instructional leadership, notably the ability to articulate and maintain a collective vision, to empower others, to promote shared decision-making, and to support and closely monitor classroom instruction. Blase and Blase (1999) suggest that for far too long, instructional leadership has solely meant teacher supervision, which for many decades translated into criticism about one’s practice, leading when expectations were not met, and admonishment or possibly dismissal in a worst-case scenario. Interviews with teachers have led Blase and Blase (1999) to conclude that what teachers need from their instructional leader—i.e. principal—is support and opportunity for professional growth. Blase and Blase’s findings are consistent with more recent findings about the role of the principal as a capacity builder (Fullan, 2010).
Blase and Blase (1998) emphasize the importance of allowing teachers to grow by giving them opportunities to learn from each other. Although supervision remains key, it should no longer be about control but rather about support and collaboration. The authors suggest promoting a democratic culture that emphasizes lifelong learning through collegiality, collaboration, peer coaching, classroom observations, teacher empowerment, and reflection. DuFour, DuFour and Eaker’s use of the literature on professional learning communities (2008), and their work within school settings, has led them to posit that when principals promoted a culture of learning for all school stakeholders it resulted in greater student achievement.

In 2005, Hallinger reviewed the last 30 years of literature on instructional leadership. He concluded that we have come a long way from defining instructional leadership as a principal sitting on a carpet to work with students, a rather poetic, utopian, and unrealistic notion. The extensive body of evidence on instructional leadership over the past decades continue to show the complexity of the role and continues to point to the powerful, albeit mainly indirect, nature of the role.

Hattie (2009) posits that any interventions, whether direct or indirect, will have some impact on learning, both for student and teacher. Such impacts could be small or large, negative or positive, and it is not so much the directness of the activity that will improve capacity but rather the degree to which any principal’s initiatives was successful. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge that how people define direct involvement as opposed to indirect can vary greatly depending on individual perceptions. For example, one principal may perceive direct involvement as visiting classrooms and debriefing with teachers or sitting in on professional learning communities, learning alongside teachers. Another principal may perceive setting goals and establishing a vision as a direct intervention, because that will have a direct impact on learning. This illustrates the importance of looking at both types of involvement. The following sections review some of the literature that explored both concepts and specifically provided the definition of both direct and indirect principal’s involvement for the purpose of this study.
2.3 Principal’s Direct Activity Related to Teacher’s Professional Learning and Development

Numerous empirical studies (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009) and popular literature (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Venables, 2011) would seem to give weight to a more direct involvement of the principal in instructional matters. While mixed method analyses have empirically quantified the link between the principals’ involvement in instructional matters and student achievement, the works of other authors have produced literature such as Gupton’s handbook *The Instructional Leadership Toolbox* (2003), which, notwithstanding the fact that they may not be based on empirical evidence, have been widely adopted by school systems and have served as the basis for numerous board professional development initiatives. Although such work might be construed as an oversimplification of professional development, one could argue that it is not an understatement to say that popular literature has shaped the professional development of many school jurisdictions.

For the purpose of this study, direct involvement is defined as “the immediate interactions of principals with teachers and others about the classroom, teaching, student performance and curricula” (Kleine-Kracht, 1993, p.188).

In Ontario publicly-funded schools, the direct involvement of principals in school capacity building has been traditionally limited to the teacher performance appraisal process. Teachers’ Performance Appraisals (TPAs) use a set of prescribed directives comprised of a specific number of classroom observations, preceded by one meeting and followed by another. These are aptly called pre- and post-observation conferences, with the goal of filling out the specified forms, thus complying with minimal requirements. The whole exercise is then forgotten until the next appraisal. That is not to say that there is not any value to be gained by appraising teacher’s performances and that monitoring instruction is a waste of time. The clinical model of supervision has its proponents. When teachers are genuinely involved in the process and a spirit of collaboration emanates from the proceedings, professional growth can result. Holifield and Cline (1997) studied the implementation of the clinical supervision model in a secondary school and concluded that one aspect of the model valued by both principals and teachers was “collaboration in setting for observations and in analysing data in a post observation conference” (p. 110). In other words, collaboration and feedback appear to be very significant as opposed to a
prescriptive approach in assessing performance. This is also reiterated by McGreal (in Stanley & Popham, 1988) when he points out that pertinent and constructive feedback on performance should be at the forefront in any performance assessment process. McGreal suggests that evaluators should study and practice “how to best open and close a conference, how to handle negative feedback, where and when to conduct conferences and understand teacher’s different stages of development” (p. 23).

In low-performing schools however, where significant “turn around” happened, it was observed by Hallinger (2005) that the principal exerted a direct influence on results by not only setting clear goals focused on the student, but also by working side-by-side with teachers and students planning lessons and implementing curricula and new directions. Hallinger (2005) calls those principals “heroic” and cautions that they are few and far between and cannot last. More importantly, as observed by Fullan (2005), such a pace cannot realistically be maintained and, following the departures of heroic principals, results are not sustained.

For some time now, genuine efforts have been made to turn teacher performance appraisal into a positive and constructive process, as opposed to a judgmental and sometimes punitive one. However the time devoted by the principal to properly assess teachers’ instructional practices has remained too short to make the process efficient and effective in transforming practices when needed. Fortunately, research in instructional leadership has resulted in other worthwhile options that have proven to have a significant influence on student learning by developing school capacity. Although the principal still plays a predominant role, the indirect involvement of the school principal in building school capacity is proving to be even more significant than direct teacher supervision.

2.4 Principal’s Indirect Activity Related to Teachers’ Professional Learning and Development

The indirect nature of the principal’s instructional leadership role has long been acknowledged. Empirical evidence has long demonstrated the link between the principal’s role in putting in place the organizational structures that will facilitate or enhance teachers’ practices and benefit student learning (Hallinger, 2005). Brent Davies, editor of The Essentials of School Leadership (2009), presents a collection of work that encompasses the multiple facets of the role.
Contributors such as Novak (2009, in Davies, 2011) argue the importance of empowering teachers by inviting leadership. Others such as Southworth (2009, in Davies, 2011) make the case for the principal’s role in the alignment of systems, structures, and professional development, whereas Lebovic (in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010) argues for the critical instructional role of properly managing school resources, and Middlewood (in Bush Bell & Middlewood, 2010) highlights the principal’s responsibility for the hiring of highly-competent teaching staff.

Granted that indirect and direct involvement may be perceived differently by principals, and that immediate interactions (Kleine-Kracht, 1993, p.188) between the principal and instructional matters can be defined to varying degrees, the present study situates indirect involvement. This is, as previously stated in the words of Kleine-Kracht (1993): “Indirect instructional leadership activities are behaviours that deal with the school’s internal and external environment, the physical and cultural context surrounding the classroom, teaching, and curricula, and the meanings that principal’s actions have for teachers” (p. 189).

Decades of research of work on instructional leadership have led Hallinger (2005) to conclude that “the preponderance of evidence indicates that school principals contribute to school’s effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions they take to influence school and classroom conditions” (p. 229). According to Hallinger and McCary (1990), such leadership requires a good dose of “situational leadership,” i.e. decision making applied to a specific context or a particular school environment. In order to solve problems according to needs associated to a specific situation, principals have to demonstrate strategic thinking if the right decision is to be made. Such strategic thinking should include consideration of the school culture which, due to its importance in establishing a climate of learning, albeit indirectly, the following section addresses in more detail.

2.5 The Establishment of a School Learning Culture

Arguably the culture of any work environment carries decisive influence on many aspects of the work environment and productivity. Because culture often blends very different people’s upbringings, expertise, beliefs, and traditions, it stands to reason that moving schools forward involves a considerable effort on the principal’s part to understand and consider the many
individuals in charge of maximizing the potential of students. Walker, in Bush, Bell and Middlewood, (2010, p. 179) argues: “One of the main reasons why schools have not been as successful as hoped is because cultural, contextual, and pedagogical aspects are out of alignment.”

The importance of culture cannot be overemphasized as it is our values and beliefs that drive everything we do. For far too long, schools have been seen as places of teaching as opposed to places of learning. Imparting knowledge is undeniably an aspect of the teacher’s role, but actively engaging students in their learning remains key for sustained student learning. As teachers have become quite proficient at covering curricular expectations and have developed expertise in their field, pursuing professional development may appear a waste of time; this would seem to be especially true for secondary teachers (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). Reiterating that teachers have the greatest impact on student learning, Timperley et al. (2007), argue that it is not so much the fact that teachers have “existing theories of practice” (p. 196) that can be problematic, but rather the fact that far too often professional development is unable to engage teachers in a careful examination of their theory when student achievement is questioned. The first task of the instructional leader is to set a clear focus on learning and learning for all. Learning has to become the norm, the value shared by all stakeholders. This is achieved through the development of shared norms and values which relentlessly focus on improving student achievement, the establishment of trusting relationships, and the sustaining of collective curiosity.

In order to create a driving force, defining the mission and setting a vision with clear objectives and goals has to involve all stakeholders. Hallinger and Heck (1996) reviewed all of the available research conducted between 1980 and 1995 on the role of the principal and school effectiveness. They concluded that “when the studies that report positive findings are reviewed, only one mediating variable shows up with consistency as a significant factor interacting with the principal’s leadership: school goals” (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, p. 38). Whether that variable is measured as consensus building, organization, academic focus, vision, or the ability to communicate goals, set directions, or drive decision making, having clear school goals focused on student learning is a consistent element of successful schools. Over a decade later, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) conducted another literature review on successful school leadership
and drew a similar conclusion to Hallinger and Heck (1996). Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) remark on the principal’s ability to set goals and directions as “one of the basic leadership practices” (p. 29). They define successful leadership as having a positive impact “on school organization and pupil learning” (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008, p. 29). The findings of Blase and Blase (1998), as well as Gupton (2003), reiterate that shared norms and values around a clear mission focused on student achievement is at the core of efficient instructional leadership. According to Day, Leithwood, and Sammons (2008), it also seems to be a major first step in transforming school culture and building capacity when they talk about the importance of aligning “structures and cultures with vision and direction” (p. 84). In fact, such an alignment is perceived by the authors as being a key strategy for not only growing capacity but also sustaining the growth over time, providing of course that the vision remains focused on teaching and student’s learning. Leithwood’s work (2010) on successful leadership suggests that the vision, norms, and values of the school have to be built around high expectations for all students regardless of circumstances. This is what he refers to as academic press and school discipline of the Rational Path of his latest leadership model.

Principals also need to champion the notion of collaborative teaching and learning as an accepted norm by all school stakeholders. According to Cousins and Leithwood:

> Schools and school districts are envisaged as inherently social systems and knowledge is socially constructed. In our study the impact of interactive process was found to be both discernable (sic) and relatively potent. Such processes included the social processing of information with colleagues and peers, involvement in the design and delivery of interventions, engagement in implementation and follow up activities and ongoing contact with those able to provide in-person assistance. (1993, p. 328)

For decades the teaching profession has been a lonely journey and teachers have worked mostly in isolation. Yet we know that social interactions are necessary for proper human development. We also understand the potentially potent effect of group work. Furthermore, educational research has produced evidence that the use of authentic learning in the classroom is enhanced by authentic work involving a high degree of cooperative work and learning (Chiang, Yang & Hwang, 2014; Seashore-Louis & Marks, 1998). It is somewhat ironic that the same collaboration, being one of the essential 21st-century skills promoted in the classroom, still
presents a challenge in many school faculties. In schools where a top-down, prescriptive, autocratic leadership is exercised, teachers may be prevented from asking the right questions, taking risks, and being innovative in practice for fear of consequences. This could mean that the tremendous internal knowledge, skills, and expertise found in schools remains not only untapped but also, in some cases, largely ignored. Collaboration is the motto of the day on everyone’s lips and research and collaboration is essential if the expertise within every school, needed to grow capacity, is not shared. What is required of the principal is the establishment of formal and informal structures that will allow for the effective dissemination of information and knowledge pertaining to evidence-based teaching practices.

For school leaders, establishing trusting relationships with and between teachers is essential to promote collaboration (Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010). In his review of the literature on learning culture, Walker (in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010) cites the 2008 work of Walker and Quong where eight important conditions for “framing learning cultures are witnessing learning, staying fresh, becoming resilient, framing scaffolding, catching learning, finding voice, trusting intuition and remaining” (p. 181). Without the knowledge and understanding that they can trust their colleagues and leaders, it becomes extremely difficult, if not simply impossible, for teachers to show vulnerability by admitting to having problems of practice or for teachers to be innovative in changing practices to improve student achievement. Without trust, classroom doors are closed, preventing professional growth opportunities such as teacher moderation, a process where teachers collaboratively assess student work and plan next steps for instructional practice (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007), or peer observations. In Walker’s words:

If teachers are unsure how they are judged, or if they do not feel valued, suspicion rather than trust will reign. This suspicion can be accompanied by high levels of cynicism that distort the aims of professional practice and damage confidence. (Walker, in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010, p. 184).

While it can be argued that the trust factor is important for any professional environment that employs more than one person, establishing trusting relationships within schools is at the heart of responding to the multitude of learning needs of both teachers and students alike. Not a single individual possesses the knowledge, skills, wisdom, or simply the will to accomplish such a feat on his or her own. When maximizing the potential of every student, the expertise of an entire
school community is needed and such expertise can only be shared if professionals trust one another. As the official leader of the community, the principal sets the tone and one could easily argue that the school principal will ultimately make or break the climate of the school.

2.5.1 Principal’s Modelling of a Learning Stance

The establishment and maintenance of a learning culture may prove challenging to accomplish unless school stakeholders adopt a learning stance, beginning with the school principal. According to Lieberman (1995): “Learning theorists and organizational theorists are teaching us that people learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned” (p. 2). The idea of active learning is not new. For a number of years, educators have been decrying the excessive use of teacher in-service as the sole, if not only, means of professional development. In other words, the best knowledge had to be delivered by so-called outside experts in a presentation where teachers sat passively in what could be appropriately called a lecture on a topic that may or may not be foreign to their classroom reality. Despite the fact that we have known for decades that this is not the way humans learn, such forms of in-service have remained by far the most prevalent form of teacher professional development to date. In the words of Cole (2004), “it appears that most ‘PD’ focuses on the why and what to change and not on participants learning how to implement improvements” (p. 3). It is undeniable that understanding changes and the reasoning behind those changes has value, however, as Cole argues, far too often the learning stops there and results in very little changes in teacher practices. In other words, the argument brought forth by Cole (2004) that “much of what is termed professional development develops no one” (p. 3) is gaining traction. In fact, Cole (2004) makes a very important distinction between professional development and professional learning arguing that the focus should be on the learning hence the importance of developing a culture of learning within schools. Cole, like many of his contemporaries (Coburn, 2001; Grim, Kaufman & Doty, 2014; Mitchell & Cuby, 2003; Murray, 2013), posits that teacher professional learning must happen within the classroom, be largely collaborative in nature, and be job-embedded, which is defined as being closely linked to teachers’ classroom reality. Furthermore, professional learning has to be carefully planned and begin with clear, specific, well-articulated, and measurable intentions.
As a capacity builder, the principal has to determine the professional needs of the staff and provide the support needed to ensure continuous implementation of best classroom practices while always keeping student achievement as a clear focus. Cole (2004), along with many others (Fisher, 2001; Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010; Timperley & Robinson, 2001), contends that the principal has the responsibility to build such a culture by establishing a climate of collaboration based on trust and setting high expectations for teacher learning. This argument is echoed by Hinds and Berger (2010), who examined the literature on teacher professional development as it relates to literacy and concluded that “the school administrator’s role in the design and implementation of professional development may be understood as helping to change the culture of the school by building relationships (Barth, 1990), by building school capacity (Lambert, 2003)” (Hinds & Berger 2010, p. 83). However, despite the vast quantity of research on capacity building, “the literature and research is surprisingly thin on what it is that principals should actually do to support such development” (Holland, 2009, p. 16), or as Timperley and Robinson state, “little has been written about the micro-processes involved in changing the basic assumptions that underpin a particular culture” (Timperley & Robinson, 2001, p. 281).

Arguably, the capacity to build upon already acquired knowledge or consider new theories and concepts may be perceived as a critical skill for school principals and educators in general if efficient and useful knowledge relating to improvement of school practices is to be constructed. Lambert (2009) defines constructive leadership as “evoking what we know, believe and have experienced; inquiring into new ideas and questions; making sense of these tensions and discrepancies; and rethinking our actions and behaviours” (Lambert in Davies, 2009, p. 116). In other words, our own personal history, education, upbringing, and background in general have resulted in the creation of what Timperley and Robinson (2001) call schemas. They argue that by challenging teacher’s schemas, real professional learning and growth occur. I would add that this may very well be where the indirect influence of principal leadership can be best evidenced. Principals by the very nature of the position they occupy as school leaders, which allows them to bear a critical eye on existing teacher practices, can question teaching and assessment strategies, hopefully triggering dialogues, conversations, and discussions around best pedagogical practices to improve student achievement. According to Timperley and Robinson (2001), the principal has to establish three critical conditions in order to successfully challenge teachers’ schemas to promote the adoption of needed teaching practices: the salience of discrepant data, the presence
of an external agent to assist with the interpretation of those data, and the availability of
information on alternative practices (Timperley & Robinson, 2001, p. 281).

For many years, the collection of data has been routine practice in all publicly-funded Ontario
schools. Since the introduction of the provincial accountability assessments and the Ontario
support for the use of best-evidenced practices, improvement in standardized test scores have
been noted. However, the impact on teaching practices, specifically on the adoption of best
practices in the classroom, and on efficient instructional planning remains unclear. A lack of
pertinent data, as well as the inability to meaningfully interpret data or the inability to select
appropriate next steps, could potentially hinder student learning. Regardless of educators’ ease in
working with data, practitioners’ inability to translate much of the research into better classroom
practices is also a factor to be considered. Whether directly, as the leader of training sessions on
the use of data, or indirectly, as the facilitator of those sessions, the principal plays a critical role
in aligning the three conditions suggested by Timperley and Robinson (2001).

The ideas of “engaging teachers’ existing theories” (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007, p.
197) also features prominently in Timperley et al.’s synthesis of best practices in educator
professional development. Timperley et al. (2007) argue that teachers’ existing theories on
teaching practices and learning are often at the heart of the challenges posed by the continuous
professional learning. The evidence is clear that “the challenge is to mediate competing theories
at the interface between the change messages (coming from the professional development
providers) and the myriad agendas that teachers must cope with in their practice situations”
(Timperley et al., 2007, p. 199). According to these authors, in order to sustain the adoption of
best practices teachers need to have a clear understanding of their theories of practice and be
supported through the uncomfortable phase where “competing theories” (p.198) emerge and
have to be reconciled in order to best respond to the needs of their students. Timperley and her
colleagues make the case for the involvement of the school principal in managing not only the
“process” (p. 195), but also the content and the infrastructures needed for sustainable changes.
The ease with which a school principal can interpret data, find resources or simply ask the right
questions at the right moment are important skills in the principal’s arsenal, but just as important
is the principal’s ability to admit not having all the answers and his or her willingness to learn
alongside staff. The following section looks at the collaborative aspect of professional learning and growth in schools.

2.6 Collaborative Practices for Teachers’ Professional Learning and Development

As previously discussed, collaborative learning, defined for the purpose of this study as the formal and informal sharing of expertise, is at the heart of establishing and maintaining a strong learning culture in schools. This section looks at different collaborative professional development and learning opportunities, which have been chosen for two specific reasons: their suggested positive influence on teaching practices as linked to improved student achievement and the role, whether direct or indirect, played by school principals in the success or failure of such initiatives. The collaborative practices discussed further are: Professional Learning Communities, Coaching, Team Teaching, Reflective Discussion on Classroom Practices, and Classroom Observations.

2.6.1 Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Learning as an active process, as opposed to a passive process, has proven to engage the learner, ensuring better understanding and retention. We preach it for the classroom, favouring a child-centred, as opposed to teacher-centred, approach. Yet teacher learning is often confined to power point learning where content is taught often in terms of principles and rarely with practices in mind. Why is it that we fail to see the pertinence of “active learning” for adults as well?

Borrowing from a vast literature on organized learning and school improvement, the work of DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008, p. 68-69), while failing to provide hard data on the successful implementation of PLCs, has nevertheless assembled evidenced-based research on the power of collective, organized learning in schools. Their work led them to conclude that one of the best tools to build school capacity, and hence improve results, is by creating a true culture of collaboration in schools. Some of the research cited by DuFour et al. emanates from the findings of Seashore-Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996), who examined PLCs at work over a three-year period. Using a mixed method design and a moderately large sample of elementary, middle, and high schools, they surveyed, interviewed, and observed close to a thousand teachers in schools selected on the basis of their substantial success in restructuring for learning. Seashore-Louis,
Marks, and Kruse (1996) looked specifically at instructional practices, governance, leadership and management, as well as teacher and student experiences. They observed that “regardless of size and division, professional learning communities contributed strongly to responsibility for student learning” (p. 780). Although the existence of well-functioning PLCs varied greatly from school to school, the implementation of collaborative work seemed more a function of manipulating the right variables, such as common planning time, rather than a function of school size or grade level. Pursuing their work on school restructuring, Seashore-Louis and Marks (1998), looked at the link between PLCs and student achievement. They observed a reciprocal relationship between professional learning and student learning when PLCs’ work revolved around authentic learning for students (defined here as the development of higher critical thinking skills). Seashore-Louis and Marks (1998) concluded that:

Professional community among teachers proved to be associated with both authentic pedagogy and social support for achievement among students. In schools with professional communities, students achieved at high levels. Social support for achievement in the classroom also boasted school authentic achievement levels. (p. 558)

They also noted the remarkable reciprocal effect of the process on learning for both teachers and students: “As teachers developed authentic pedagogy in practice, their effort furthered mutual reflection and collaboration around practice, thus sustaining and strengthening professional community” (Seashore-Louis & Marks, 1998, p. 560).

Schools have to become PLCs where the focus is on continuous learning in order to improve practices by sharing expertise, formally or informally, and finding solutions as a collective. The advantages of PLCs, when effectively implemented in schools, are numerous as cited by DuFour et al. (2008, pp. 70-71):

- reduction of isolation of teachers;
- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students’ success;
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners;
• increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles that they play in helping students achieve expectations; and
• significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and that changes for learners are made more quickly than in traditional schools.

Furthermore, DuFour et al. (2008) also note a decrease in teacher absenteeism and higher teacher morale (pp. 70-71). Numerous positive results are also noted for students, mainly “larger academic gains” and smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 71). Also, PLCs may aim at involving all stakeholders in the education process, including parents and external agencies, thus promoting strong partnerships within the school community.

More importantly PLCs allow for job embedded, active, and practical learning where participants with differing expertise can sit around the table and, in the best cases, engage in mutual observation and collegial feedback and discussion. In such a setting, they can actively seek solutions to remediate learning difficulties in a classroom using actual data from different types of student assessments, formative as well as summative. The importance of learning while doing is also reiterated in the findings of the Working Table on Professional Development (2007) established by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Furthermore, Bredeson (2003) states that “Research on successful professional development practices provides evidence that the most powerful learning opportunities for teachers and principals are ones embedded in their daily work and linked to the context and priorities of local school improvement efforts” (p. 59). In his book titled Designs for Learning, Bredeson (2003) urges educators to reconsider professional development as, in, and at work, insisting that we are long past the idea of teachers learning that is not directly focused on their classroom practices and context.

Yet despite the literature and findings that PLCs can have a positive impact on student learning (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Guskey, 2014; Murray, 2013; Seashore-Louis and Marks, 1998; Seashore-Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996; Venables, 2011), and although I have seen them implemented in many schools, most of these schools have failed to maintain PLCs. Such failure has been both acknowledged by Mitchell and Sackney (2011) and Seashore-Louis (2008).
Seashore-Louis examined common implementation mistakes that could explain the fact that PLCs have not gained favour in many schools. First, Seashore-Louis has observed, as have I, that PLCs are often mistaken for “another program” (Seashore-Louis, 2008, p. 4). PLCs are not a one-off innovative program that one implements and then abandons if rapid results are not obtained. PLCs are a set of ideas for a building of a collaborative learning culture that must permeate all aspects of a school.

Equally, PLCs should not be understood as an instrument for accountability. They are not about analyzing standardized test score data to try and increase a school’s average test results. PLCs, ideally, use all forms of data pertaining to student learning in order to determine actual needs. From there, discussions about strategies to answer particular needs are elaborated, implemented, and assessed. PLCs ought to inform and improve practices in the classroom, not just raise test scores. In too many schools, as Seashore-Louis (2008) points out, PLCs have meant “job enlargement” (pp. 4-5). That is inundating the best teachers with new reforms or initiatives and putting them in charge of implementing them. Rather, PLCs should exist to stress the importance of collective responsibility for success and failure. PLCs should not ignore individual needs of teachers, which can be very different, and benefit only group needs. In fact Seashore-Louis (2008) cautions that “although ultimately it is the individual reflection that will bring about changes, the art is to create a culture of trust between stakeholders, so that they can work problems and find solutions together” (p. 8).

The difficulty of implementing and sustaining a PLC and making it an embedded part of the school culture relies precisely in managing its dichotomy. According to Seashore-Louis (2008), PLCs have to have both depth and breadth, have to work with stability and changes, diversity and focus, and also be both about integration and networking (p. 11). Whether the principal is directly involved in PLCs or not, as an instructional leader her or his establishing the structures and her or his monitoring and support of the PLC work are instrumental in ensuring the success of the team.

Another form of professional learning community is called the Teaching and Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP). Adapted from the Critical Learning Instructional Path (CLIP) put forward by Crevola, Hill, and Fullan (2006), TLCPs use students’ achievement data to target specific problems of practice and use a collaborative approach to determine, implement and reassess next
steps. They are however specific and time constrained and they use a specific formula. They also can be highly effective precisely because they focus on one specific problem of learning at a time. The model of TLCP suggested by the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in its Capacity Building Series (June, 2008) is presented as a tool to organize action. The Secretariat describes its responsibilities as the following:

- to gather evidence;
- to determine areas of greatest needs;
- to build clusters of expectations related to the area of needs;
- to review current practice;
- to design classroom assessment;
- to plan a six-week teaching block focusing on expectations and specific teaching strategies; and,
- to reassess and share evidence of student learning (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008, p. 3).

The major advantage of the TLCP is that it is focused and has a powerful impact over a short six-week time span. Furthermore, results can be achieved in a relatively low number of meetings. In fact, as few as two teachers with a common need or problem can work together and quickly determine the best course of action or find winning teaching strategies to reduce learning gaps in their respective classrooms. In theory, more than one TLCP can be run at the same time involving different teachers or topics. As teachers need to be freed during instructional time, supply teacher funding must be available. For schools with limited financial means, an assessment of needs has to be done and money allocated in respect of teachers with students experiencing the most difficulties in their learning. Teachers can make great strides in as little as three or four meetings in the six-week period so total expenditures need not be exorbitant. However, if the TLCP, like the CLIP, borrows evidence-based practices such as the use of data through the development of pertinent assessments and the use of collaborative expertise to plan next steps, the literature provides little in terms of evidence linking the process itself to the establishment of effective teaching practices leading to increased student achievement.
Again just like any other forms of collaborative work, the principal plays a critical role in setting up the stage for successful TLCPs, whether by finding common planning time for teachers, allocating funds to free teachers, locating needed expertise, or simply asking thought-provoking questions on the goals, strategies, and data used by the group members (Crevola, Hill & Fullan, 2006). However, it must be cautioned that the TLCP process has to be carefully explained to teachers in order for them to see the process not as an additional task but rather as part of their regular planning, teaching, and assessing.

The “de-privatization of practice,” as Louis and Marks (1998) call it, is not an easy task. Furthermore, as previously discussed in the learning culture section, it requires a strong dose of professional humility and an ever-stronger dose of what is unfortunately lacking in many school environments: trust. “In professional learning communities, teachers move behind the classroom door of their colleagues to share and trade off the roles of mentor, advisor, or specialist” (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 760). This can hardly be achieved without one important “core resource” as noted by Bryk and Schneider: “Social trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders improves much of the routine work of schools and is a key resource for reform” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41).

If we are to ask teachers to share their expertise, to seek advice by frankly discussing educational concerns, issues, and problems, to be innovative and experiment with teaching practices, school principals need first and foremost to develop a school culture of learning based on respect, transparency, and a personal regard for people they work with (Bryk and Schneider, 2003). The benefits of trust are invaluable, because trust is at the basis of any honest and genuine conversations between professionals. The element of trust also figures prominently in the work of Taschannen-Moran (2010) on evocative coaching, where it is argued that trustworthy relationships are the basis of any efficient coaching conversations. Trust is a must for the deprivatizing of teaching practices and for the successful building of school capacity. Building a culture of trust implies, among other things, that principals themselves can “walk the talk,” demonstrating humility and empathy; be open, transparent, and able to ask the right questions not only of others but of themselves; and encourage innovation and risk taking by being innovators and risk takers themselves.
2.6.2 Coaching

Too often, pertinent and useful knowledge gleaned at an in-service, workshop, or conference is not put into use in the classroom. This is because of a lack of guidance when faced with the reality of having to manage instruction daily while trying to learn how to incorporate different teaching methods into the ongoing teaching and learning process. Furthermore, the fear of failure when venturing into unknown terrain is also a potent factor preventing many teachers from being innovative. Indeed, going from theory to practice is challenging for many. Often all that is needed is another professional to share the burden of implementation, the frustration brought about by trials and errors. Studies on peer coaching revealed that both members of the coaching team exhibited “greater long term retention of new strategies and more appropriate use of new teaching models over time” (Baker & Showers, in Showers & Joyce, 1996, p. 14). Furthermore the reciprocity of learning was enhanced as both teachers took turns being coach and coached. More recently, Fullan and Knight (2011) argue that “If teachers are the most significant factor in student success, and principals are second, then coaches are third” (p. 53). These authors go even further by saying that, next to the principal, coaches are the greatest change agent. Fullan and Knight do caution, however, that from a strictly managerial stance, coaching may not always work if the principal is not a strong instructional leader. This is because the principal plays a critical role in coordinating the program and setting in place appropriate structures to support the coaching experience and norms for collegial observation and feedback.

Implementing a thorough coaching model is not as simple as it may appear. As early as 1984, Showers was cautioning that, given the isolation in which most teachers find themselves, the challenge to shift from operating behind a closed door to allowing colleagues to be part of one’s classroom required a cultural shift where collegiality and collaborative problem solving would become the norm. Showers (1984) adds that “principals are in a unique position to influence building norms, they are also perfectly situated to facilitate the implementation of peer-coaching systems through collaborative problem-solving with their teachers” (p. 256). Undeniably, having the expertise of a skilled and knowledgeable professional has its value but also its cost, as it often affects school staffing. However logical and popular the choice of a coach to aid teachers with the mobilization of knowledge may be, and notwithstanding the cost, there would appear to be limited data correlating the coaching of teachers and student achievement. Perhaps even more significant is the gap in the literature showing empirical evidence that through following
coaching sessions improved teaching practices, if any, are sustained in the long run. In other words, asserting the importance of having coaches in the classroom appears to be somewhat premature, if such an investment remains punctual in nature, as opposed to long standing, and if longitudinal studies are not conducted in order to assess the potential effect of truly, genuinely changing teaching practices or better developing teachers’ growth mindset in order to maximize student achievement.

2.6.3 Team Teaching

Co-teaching has been widely used in the United States for a number of years as a means to promote inclusion of exceptional children in the regular classroom (Beamish, Bryer & Davies, 2006). In the American model, the homeroom teacher and the special education teacher partner to plan, teach, and assess together. While is it important to acknowledge the specific use of team teaching for special education and homeroom teachers in the above mentioned study, other studies have demonstrated that co-teaching has a positive impact, not only on student learning but equally on the professional development of teachers (Hang and Rabren, 2009; Mastropiani, Thomas, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi & McDuff, 2005). According to Kohler-Evans (2006), team teaching means “working in partnership with another teacher, bouncing ideas off one another, planning and orchestrating the perfect lesson, having two pairs of eyes and four hands, creating something that is better than that which each partner brings” (p. 260). For the purpose of this study, a better definition could hardly be found as the bouncing off of ideas between professionals reinforces the notion that learning is socially constructed.

A recent study by Cramer, Liston, Nevin, and Thousand (2010) goes as far as suggesting that co-teaching should be considered as a method to properly train beginning teachers “for the classroom of today and tomorrow” (p. 59). Although studies such as Kohler-Evans’ (2006) did not demonstrate a clear link between student achievement and co-teaching, it clearly showed the impact it had on teachers. Indeed, the impact was such that, despite the fact that many of the teachers chosen to participate in the study were reluctant to co-teach at first, they were overwhelmingly in favour of repeating the experience at the end of the study. Another prior study by Murphy, Beggs, and Carlisle (2003) had already established the positive effect of pairing science specialist student teachers with elementary homeroom teachers. After barely six
months of co-teaching, students’ perceptions of science lessons was noticeably more positive and the student teachers were reporting feeling a lot more confident in their ability to teach.

I have observed the effects of co-teaching first-hand. As part of a collaborative inquiry project in the teaching of Grade 3 mathematics, principals, numeracy leaders, and Grade 3 teachers of three elementary schools met one day a month over four months. The day was split into three important components: planning a lesson on problem solving; co-teaching the lesson in a regular Grade 3 class; and, following the lesson, debriefing as a team on the lesson and learning itself—i.e. effects on both the students’ and the co-teachers’ learning. The debriefing proved to be very informative. The experience was beneficial for all members of the inquiry project, and, according to the teachers involved, made a difference in their classroom practices. A lot of the learning was reinvested subsequently in their respective schools. The experience allowed for much-needed courageous conversations around effective strategies for improving student learning.

In an interesting article describing her experience as a co-teacher, beginning high school teacher Emily Sims made worthwhile recommendations for successful implementation of this professional development model. According to Sims (2008), teacher participants have to be fully trained in co-teaching. Co-teaching is a full equal partnership, not an assistance program for the homeroom teacher. Ample planning has to be provided for both teachers to plan and debrief together. The choice of partners is crucial as they will work closely to develop a solid partnership based on continuous, open and honest communication. Sims (2008) also mentions the importance of both partners taking responsibility to take responsibility for the success or failure of all children. Partners have to allow time to spend together and be patient when getting to know each other. Both teachers have to constantly remind themselves that, in the classroom, they act as models for the students. Both teachers have to become thoroughly familiar with curriculum content and teaching methods (Sims, 2008, p. 62-63). Although Sims’ experience was between a homeroom and a special education teacher and lasted several months, I would argue that the same recommendations are equally valid and important for any teachers, any subject, and any length of time, as demonstrated by the previously mentioned collaborative inquiry pilot project run by my school board.

However, Murawski and Hughes (2009) state that not every class, subject, or teacher will need co-teaching. When there is an identified need for co-teaching, they suggest looking at different
ways to schedule teaching periods, such as ensuring that preparation time of one teacher coincides with a teaching block of the other. Murawski and Hughes (2009) note that “when conducted properly, co-teaching results in many benefits for students and teachers. Teachers are able to engage in more active instruction, learn different strategies from one another, and are more easily able to differentiate in the classroom” (p. 270).

However powerful team teaching may be, it is challenging to implement because it exposes teachers as vulnerable professionals, and unless the culture established by the principal is a culture of trust that keeps the focus on student achievement and puts a strong emphasis on being non-judgmental of each others’ practices, teachers will not risk co-planning, co-teaching, and more importantly co-assessing the lesson, much less being observed by colleagues while teaching. Moreover, important organizational factors such as scheduling and costs have to be taken into consideration if team teaching is to be efficiently implemented.

2.6.4 Reflective Discussion on Classroom Practices

According to Fullan (1991), “Irrespective of policy change and structural innovation, educational reform will never amount to anything until teachers simultaneously and seamlessly [are] oriented, skilled, reflective, and collaborative professional[s]” (as cited in Ryan, 2005, p. 193). Ryan (2005) adds that reflection should be encouraged and supported both individually and collectively. At the very core of any professional development in any organization, reflecting on practice should be at the heart of any program. Schon says it better when he states “skilled practitioners are reflective practitioners” (Schon, in Osterman, 1990, p. 133). The ability to self-assess one’s strengths and weaknesses and determine a proper course of action for remediation is one of the most important factors in future success according to Hattie (2009). Once again, one cannot fail to notice the irony in preaching self-regulation for students while, often, some teachers are unable to properly assess their own needs and set goals for their own learning.

Osterman (1990) defines reflective practice as “a professional development method which enables individual practitioners to become more skilled and more effective” (p. 134). She also goes on to say that more effective individuals will, in turn, affect the effectiveness of the whole organization. Osterman suggests that effective reflection should begin by examining our intentions versus our actual practice as the two are not always synonymous. She also remarks on
the necessity and the difficulty for practitioners to articulate that reflection and articulate knowledge (p. 138). The abilities to reflect and to talk about practice become powerful skills when working collaboratively. According to Osterman (1990), “Real communication, a sharing of experiences and the resulting empathy and understanding cannot take place without the self-awareness which comes from reflection” (p. 139). However, Osterman laments the fact that in most schools the structures and organization are not conducive to much reflecting. In Osterman’s words, “There is little time or support for reflective practice on the part of individual teachers and administrators, and the environment of the work place is typically not structured to support reflective practice on a school wide or district wide basis” (p. 146).

In his recent book Visible Learning for Teachers, Hattie (2012) also observed that teachers and school leaders are not modeling the same reflective practice that they should encourage and promote for student learning. Yet reflective practice is not a new concept. It has long been considered at the very core of any problem-solving process and has long been associated with truly effective models of professional development. Indeed whether a school adopts professional learning communities, critical learning pathways, peer coaching, team teaching, or even the clinical model of teacher supervision, professional growth will be genuine only if critical reflection on practices is encouraged. As an effective tool to promote reflective practice for both teachers and principals, Blase and Blase (1998) suggest the use of instructional conferences. Blase and Blase define the teacher/principal conference as “the heart of instructional supervision” (Blase & Blase, 1998, p. 19). The conference is a discussion between two professionals following the gathering of solid evidence provided by classroom observations, where the teacher’s teaching and assessment strategies are seen in context (Harmon, Gordanier & Henry, 2007). These visits, whether planned or unplanned, should occur fairly regularly throughout the school year. An analysis of the class results should also be part of the conversation (Luo, 2008). The conference is not only a pedagogical dialogue between principal and teacher, but aims at targeting needs and reflects on how best to remediate problems and issues as they arise, in order to maximize student achievement. The dialogue should be nonthreatening and ought to recognize and praise success, just as much as it aids in coming up with agreed-upon solutions to problems and issues (Ahuja, 2007). A conference requires mutual trust and a fair degree of understanding and integrity. It requires that a principal demonstrate well-developed communication skills such as active listening and the ability to make suggestions
that will build on teachers’ strengths and not on weaknesses. Although a basic knowledge of the
subject matter may be beneficial, it is the principal’s ability to ask thought provoking questions,
to trigger teachers’ reflection that ultimately may lead to professional growth. Conferences
should be ongoing and not only as part of a performance appraisal process mandated by higher
authorities; “As critical component of instructional leadership, the instructional conference
should be positive, reflective, and motivating to teachers” (Blase & Blase, 1998, p. 47).

Gitlin, Ogawa, and Rose (1984) looked at the supervision of student teachers using two different
models of conferences following teacher candidate observations during their teaching placement.
One model was the traditional one where the feedback was mostly supervisor-directed and the
student sat passively to a list of positive and negative observations, often based on the
supervisor’s judgment and a list of recommendations to improve performance. By contrast, the
other group of supervisors were trained to use a reflective approach where nonjudgmental
questions started a two-way conversation on classroom observations which were descriptive in
nature rather than judgmental. The findings clearly demonstrated that the instructional
conferences following classroom observations were a very different experience for each group of
student teachers. The participants from the first group of students felt continuously on the
defensive, having to justify their actions and decisions. Furthermore they felt somewhat
intimidated by their supervisor and did not dare disagree with any of the recommendations given.
On the contrary, participants from the reflective group rated the experience as being positive,
meaningful, and a true learning experience. They felt comfortable asking questions and asking
for advice, and the reflective questions asked by the supervisors prompted them to really assess
the lesson taught. “Models of supervision that focus on prescriptions for practice, even if the
prescriptions are helpful, do not really prepare teachers to consistently promote their own
development through thoughtful reflection of their work” (Gitlin, Ogawa & Rose, 1984, p. 52).
Arguably, such reflective process requires that participants be receptive to constructive criticism,
which may not always be the case when professional conversations happen with experienced
teachers.

Whether with student teachers or experienced teachers, the power of reflection has serious
limitations if the dialogue is not focused on teaching practices, and more importantly, because
such practices are linked to student learning and ultimately to student achievement. Principals
who are not themselves reflective of their own leadership practices may find the whole process not only very challenging but equally useless. The importance of having a clear understanding of reflective practice is not to be underestimated. The ability to ask the right questions in order to maintain a professional and worthwhile dialogue is a skill that principals have to learn and practise. Being convinced of the benefits of reflective practices is also critical if school leaders, given their numerous responsibilities, are to devote the time required to conduct effective teacher/principal conferences or facilitate any discussions, with and among teachers, on problems of practices. Just like in any other workplace, the leadership of an institution sets the tone, for better or worse. Teachers take their cues from their principal and, understandably, will devote time where their efforts will be appreciated and supported. Hattie (2012) argues that we should no longer be talking about “instructional leaders” but rather about “learning leaders” (p. 154), implying that such a shift in mindset not only allows the focus to be on learning rather than teaching, but that the learning in question is geared towards adults—i.e. educators—just as much as students. Given the heavy burden of covering the curriculum in a relatively short amount of time and the pressure put on schools to move students from level 2 to level 3 on standardized testing results (in the province of Ontario), the shift from teaching to learning as advocated by Hattie represents a formidable challenge for all school leaders. Besides the knowledge and skills, one could argue that just as importantly (or perhaps even more importantly), the challenge requires that school principals possess a hefty dose of those cognitive (problem-solving expertise, knowledge of school and classroom conditions, systems learning), social (ability to perceive and manage emotions, and act in emotionally appropriate ways), and psychological (optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity) personal leadership resources, that were recently added to the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) (Institute for Education Leadership, 2006). I might also add that it requires a hefty dose of courage.

Hattie (2012) argues that a “key role of the learning leaders” (p. 154) is to instil, promote, and sustain the learning of all within the school. In order to accomplish this feat, Hattie cites several features such as data analysis, coaching, and teacher collaborative work. I would add that regardless of the feature being used to improve learning, it is incumbent of the school principal to understand the particular school context, circumstances, staff, and needs in order to implement what will work best to resolve teachers’ problems of practices in order to increase student achievement.
2.6.5 Classroom Observations

In their book *Instructional Rounds in Education City*, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2011) speak at length about the importance for instructional leaders of developing a descriptive voice, particularly when describing classroom observations. The same argument is made by Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004) in their book *The Three Minute Classroom Walk-Through*. Downey et al. (2004) argue that asking reflective questions is challenging for supervisors and in order to have any kind of meaningful dialogue with teachers, principals need to develop that skill. The authors define a reflective discussion as “a professional non-judgmental conversation that is to be interactive and thought-provoking in nature” (p. 74). What appears contradictory is the fact that the authors do not recommend having a follow-up session after a walk-through except in a case of exceptional circumstances.

The walk-through model has gained in popularity in recent years mostly because it seems to provide a quick, efficient way of monitoring classroom instruction several times a week. Downey et al. (2004) provide a step-by-step procedure as well as templates of checklists and examples which, although allowing one to do more in less time, may also result in the whole process becoming somewhat perfunctory when not followed up by any kind of dialogue between the supervisor and the teacher. If little reflection is involved in the process, this kind of monitoring rarely leads to a change in practice, which in turn does not support capacity growth.

2.7 Conclusion

According to Stein and Nelson (2003), “principals must not only be capable of providing professional development for their teachers, but also have the knowledge, skills, and strength of character to hold teachers accountable for integrating what they have learned in professional development into their ongoing practice” (cited in Timperley et al., 2007, p. 192).

Learning is about knowledge and knowledge is abundant. Research in education has made great strides in the past few decades. We now understand better than ever how children learn and we have seen first-hand what best classroom practices look like and their great impact on student learning and achievement (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). Hattie (2009) cautions that any classroom intervention will have an impact on student learning, and that therefore what matters is the magnitude of the effect. After studying more than 120 factors
influencing student success, Hattie was able, through an extensive meta-analysis, to put each one of those factors in order of importance from having the most to the least significant effect on student learning. According to him, learning has to be visible in schools. As Hattie aptly says, “The fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure that all students learn and not merely that all students are taught” (Hattie, 2012, p. 62). Although the literature in education is pointing the way to learning for all, the quality of education received each day by the millions of students in classrooms around the globe varies greatly from classroom to classroom. The degree of learning goes from one extreme to the other. Assessment practices have to be refined and teachers must determine with better accuracy the needs of individual students in order to select appropriate interventions. The same can be said for principals and teachers. Knowledge has to be made available to teachers whether through PLCs, collaborative inquiries, or action research. Reflective practice has to become the new mantra if a school is to build capacity.

Neumerski cautions that “each day others work with principals to lead the improvement of instruction; a failure to expand our conceptualization of instructional leadership to account for this shared work seriously constrains our understanding” (Neumerski, 2012, p. 314). I would argue that understanding which behaviours or activities bring about changes and innovations in instructional practices is critical to improving practices. This is essential if school systems are to adequately respond to the increasingly different needs found in the classroom. Spillane, Diamond, and Jita (2003) and Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond’s (2004) findings echo Neumerski’s when they insist that leadership is essential for innovations in the classroom, but instructional leadership is better studied within a distributive leadership framework. Specifically Spillane et al. argue that “In developing a distributed perspective on leadership, we move beyond acknowledging leadership practice as an organizational property in order to investigate how leadership might be conceptualized as a distributed practice, stretched over the social and situational contexts of the school” (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004, p. 5). The “social context” means the numerous interactions and tasks performed by the principal and his followers i.e. teachers and other educators. The “situational context” means “leadership activity is, to varying degrees, distributed or stretched over various facets of the situation, including tools, language, and organizational structures” (Spillane et al., 2004, p.21). In other words, professional growth is better sustained when all stakeholders commit to the same vision and goals and work as learning communities towards continuous improvement of student learning.
2.8 Summary

This brief overview of the literature demonstrates the important role school principals play in the professional growth of their teaching staff. Furthermore, the literature shows evidence that such involvement of principals can have a positive impact on student achievement. The literature equally shows that the principal exerts his influence through both direct and indirect activity. Direct activity which, for the purpose of this study, is defined as a close involvement in instructional matters, has been linked to accountability and largely tied to supervision of teaching practices through the use of teachers’ performance appraisals. Indirect involvement largely consists of the principal’s activity in establishing and maintaining a school culture of learning for all stakeholders. The literature speaks at length of the principal’s role in driving a common school vision, shared school values and goals, consistently maintaining focus on student achievement. By establishing trusting relationships with and between stakeholders and modelling a learning stance, principals put in place the basis for teachers’ collaborative learning and working. Those professional learning communities can adopt different forms such as the Teaching and Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP), as well as coaching, team-teaching, and reflective professional dialogues.

The conceptual framework for this study, discussed in the next chapter, has borrowed heavily on the concepts presented in this literature review as the basis to examine in depth the reality of school principals as school capacity builders.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Rationale

This study used a qualitative research design. The rationale behind this approach cannot be better explained than by using the words of Patton (2002) when he states that “qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail” (p. 14). Specifically, this study wished to examine in depth the phenomenon of instructional leadership to support the professional development of teachers as it is experienced and perceived in the field—i.e. schools—by principals and vice-principals within the publicly-funded education system of Ontario.

Therefore, the study intended to probe deeply into the reality of school administrators, specifically principals, and their day-to-day direct or indirect involvement in instructional matters. Acknowledging the relatively small sample used, this study does not wish to generalize findings to a large population but rather seeks to better understand this important aspect of the school leadership role. Such precision about qualitative design is further enhanced by Merriam (2009) when she cites Van Mannen (1979) to say that qualitative research seeks to “come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of phenomena” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). However, equally acknowledging the diverse contexts of participants, the potential for generalizations could possibly be made if one particular finding holds true across participants.

In qualitative studies, the sample size matters less than the richness of descriptions obtained (Patton, 2002), this particular study being practical in nature, the researcher hoped to collect detailed responses from up to 20 administrators from different contexts and therefore tap into different expertise and realities. In a study that examined the impact of the principal leadership on instruction, Quinn (2002) collected quantitative data from a broad sample obtained from participants in 24 American schools that represented different settings. In order to establish a link between teachers’ instructional practices and their principal’s leadership, Quinn surveyed teachers from eight elementary schools, eight middle schools, and eight high schools in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Various socio-economic levels were also represented. The author argues that “There is no single leadership style or approach that is fitting for all settings” (Quinn, 2002, p. 452). Therefore I would argue that studying the phenomenon in a variety of contexts
could provide insights into practices, or lack thereof, positively impacting student learning through the principal’s influence on teacher practices regardless of settings, despite a particular setting, or because of a particular setting. Quinn’s results indicated a strong correlation between the principal’s leadership and teachers’ instructional practices, however he does acknowledge that his quantitative results could be better understood paired with qualitative data and urge further research on the topic. In light of Quinn’s results, I wished to explore further by digging deeper into the daily lives of principals from as varied contexts as possible.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is inspired by the work of Timperley and Alton-Lee (2008) and Timperley, Parr, and Bertanees (2009). They argue that “an outcomes-linked
approach” (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008, p. 336) is the most pertinent approach to respond to the multitude of needs that face teachers daily, particularly when it comes to reducing the learning gap in underserved children’s populations. Therefore, according to these authors, teachers’ learning or professional development should be tailored to their students’ needs. For example, a Grade 1 teacher whose students are challenged by having to decode words should be proficient in the teaching of phonics in order to remediate the situation. If, for whatever reason, the teacher has not mastered the art of teaching phonics, then that teacher’s professional development should be geared towards acquiring that element. Ultimately the teacher’s new learning should be followed by a change in practice, which in turn should positively impact students’ decoding skills. Just as it is essential to properly assess students’ knowledge and understanding to plan for learning, it is just as critical to properly assess teachers’ needs for professional development. Identifying pertinent and relevant professional development opportunities and monitoring a teacher’s performance are two critical aspects of the principal’s instructional leadership role. I have modified Timperley & Alton-Lee’s model of Inquiry Cycles for Developing Teacher Knowledge and Effectiveness (p. 354) by adding the principal as the instructional leader overseeing the cycle (Figure 1).

The study will seek to examine principals’ instructional, tasks, activities, and behaviours that have an impact, either directly (teachers’ performance appraisals, classroom visits) or indirectly (establishing the vision, mission and goals) on teacher practices and student achievement. As demonstrated in the literature, one of the first tasks of the principal in enacting strong instructional leadership is to build a school professional learning community and establish a culture of collaboration through sharing his or her leadership. The literature has discussed the impact of activities, tasks, and behaviours such as instructional conferences with teachers, critical learning pathways, providing staff with professional development, and developing the teacher’s ability to reflect on her/his practices, through strategies such as coaching and team-teaching. It should be noted here that the above diagram illustrates the connections between teacher learning and professional development and assumes that one cannot happen without the other.

The Working Table on Teacher Development (2007) defines professional development as “self-chosen learning activities that teachers investigate individually or as part of a professional...
learning community” (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007). The resulting report released by that Working Table adds that, along with training and staff development, professional development forms the basis of professional learning which learning must, in turn, take into account the concepts of adult education—i.e. understanding the learning styles of adults—and adult education must be goal oriented, sustainable, and evidence-informed (Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007). Peter Cole (2004) goes further by arguing, that for the vast majority of teachers, the term “professional development” has become synonymous “with a training program” (Cole, 2004, p. 6) and therefore it would be more appropriate to use the term “professional learning” if one is to encompass all aspects of teachers’ learning and development. Equally, both will influence the principal’s instructional leadership practices, including his or her reflection on his or her own practices. Cole insists that “school leaders need to take more responsibility for establishing a professional learning culture within the school” (p. 9). Professional learning serves the purpose of continuously improving student learning, which will, in turn, dictate the professional development needs of the learners’ community defined by the teaching staff who work closely with students.

3.3 Data Collection

The qualitative design used a purposeful sampling method coupled with a snowballing sampling strategy. The sampling strategy was used to specifically locate “information-rich key informants” (Patton, 2002, p. 237) where a key, information-rich informant is defined as a full-time public school administrator willing to speak at length about their involvement, direct and indirect, in supporting teachers’ professional development and instruction on a daily basis. As most Ontario school administrators are members of professional principal associations, I solicited the help of school administrator associations to obtain participants. The Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC) agreed to send my request (Appendix A) via the OPC Newsletter (Appendix B), which is emailed once a week to all its members, for a period of three consecutive weeks. A request made to the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO) did not result in a response. Twelve (12) participants responded to the OPC newsletter whereas the other 2 participants were the result of the snowballing sampling.

The requests asked potential participants to specify their status according to the criteria shown below. Initially, up to 20 participants were to be selected, preferably 10 elementary principals...
and 10 secondary principals, from among the respondents. For the purpose of this study, the
gender of the participants was not an issue for selection nor was the type of school system—i.e.
Public boards or Catholic boards. In order of importance, the selection criteria were as follows:

1. Secondary school administrators. Existing literature is lacking in the area of instructional
leadership at the secondary level (versus primary and middle levels).
2. Preferably, administrators with a minimum of 3 years’ experience in the same school
setting. Ideally, interview subjects should be those who have established administrative
routines and are beyond the learning curve stage in their administrative role in general
and in their specific school.
3. Schools which are performing at near an average level of EQAO results and have not
changed for three years or more. So-called “outlier” schools—those that perform
significantly above or below average results—have already been studied much more often
than schools with little or no changes in their average performance results.

In the end, the above selection criteria were not applied as only 14 principals responded to the
researcher’s request for participants. All 14 participants were interviewed individually. Half of
the participants (7 out of 14) were from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and worked for the
same school board. They were given the choice to be interviewed face-to-face or by phone,
whereas the other participants living outside the GTA were interviewed by phone only. The
following section provides details on the participants and the interview guide.

3.3.1 Participants

As previously stated, all school administrators who expressed an interest in participating in the
research were interviewed. Although the three selection criteria described earlier were not used
to actually screen participants as intended, the following gives a brief overview of where
participants stand in regards to the criteria and provides a bit of school contextual data.

All 15 respondents, 14 principals and one newly promoted vice-principal, were interviewed. The
vice principal data were subsequently discarded as the analysis revealed a teacher perspective
rather than an administrator perspective. Of the 14 principals interviewed, 3 were secondary
school principals and 11 were elementary school principals; of those 11 elementary principals 2
were system principals.
One elementary school principal was actually principal of a junior school which comprises students from Grades 6 to 9. For the most part, the principals were experienced administrators, specifically 10 principals had more than 3 years of experience in the role of principal following an average of 4 years in the vice-principal role. Only 4 experienced principals had been at the same school for more than 3 years. Prior to becoming school administrators, most of them had held central leadership positions—i.e. board positions—most notably as instructional coaches in literacy or mathematics while others had supported schools in special education initiatives. Two of the secondary principals had been department heads while the third one had been a Grade 7 to 12 literacy consultant. In other words, all participants had instructional leadership experience in one capacity or another, prior to becoming school administrators. Such experience, having possibly allowed the participants to hone their instructional leadership skills while augmenting their knowledge of capacity building strategies, may also explain their willingness to participate in this study as well as their responses to some of the interview questions. Participants’ characteristics are summarized in Table 1 below. Characteristics of individual participants are found in Table 3 (Appendix G).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of participants</th>
<th># of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary principals</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary principals</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than three years of experience in the role</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than three years of experience in the role</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than three years in present school</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than three years in present school</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior instructional leadership experience</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1, Characteristics of Participants.
The researcher acknowledges the paradox that such a sample may present. On one hand participants’ instructional leadership experience may provide important insights of how capacity is built in those particular and different school contexts; but, on the other hand, does not allow the findings to be generalized to the population of principals without any background in instructional leadership, of which numbers are unavailable. Furthermore, the lack of respondents from the secondary school division limits not only the insights one may gain from the secondary principals’ perspective but equally prevents any potential generalizations to the secondary principal population, nor any potential comparison between elementary and secondary principals’ realities.

Of the 14 schools represented, only three were qualified by their principal as being rural, all others were located within city boundaries. The Socio-Economic Status (SES) of the school population ranged from one affluent school to four schools with low SES status; while most schools were described as being middle to low SES. Most schools were described as being multi-ethnic with a high English as a Second Language (ESL) student population. Several schools also had a high incidence of special education students. The schools’ characteristics are summarized in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School characteristics</th>
<th># of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High SES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average SES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2, Characteristics of Schools.

School performance was measured by the school results in the provincial standardized assessments in junior (Grade 6) reading, writing, and mathematics, and school results in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) and the Grade 9 mathematic test. It would appear that most school results have remained stagnant over the past four years with relatively high performance in literacy and, except for Grade 9 academic maths, steadily declining results in mathematics. One secondary school has scored lower than the provincial standard (75%) in both literacy and mathematics, hovering around the 50% mark for the past three years. Three (3)
elementary schools have consistently scored below the provincial average with one school significantly below and another one steadily declining in all three assessments.

3.3.2 Interview Guide

Patton (2002) suggests developing an interview guide with open-ended questions, neutral in nature as opposed to leading, with probes and follow up questions. The interview guide provided in Appendix C was used and, as data were collected, the researcher adapted or modified the guide in order to optimize discussions around, and responses to, the research questions.

As previously mentioned, instructional leadership, although defined in the literature, may not be perceived quite the same way by school leaders and principals may differ greatly in how they understand the term. For some being an instructional leader simply means completing teacher performance appraisals as for others it involves pedagogical knowledge. Some see the role as one of facilitator and others admit being strictly managers and leaving instructional matters to teachers.

Research tells us that teacher professional development should be an important factor given consideration by a principal when dealing with the organizational management of their school. Therefore I judged it important to verify the principals’ perceptions and understanding of teacher professional development and growth, and to establish whether teacher professional development is seen as an important role for a principal. As the principal’s instructional leadership role is closely linked to change of practices and student achievement, it is important to understand how principals monitor student learning as well as teacher professional development. Borrowing from Blase and Blase’s (1998) discussion on teacher supervision versus teacher development and the vast literature on collaborative learning and professional learning communities, it is important to determine if such activities are happening in schools and how they operate. In other words does the principal take an active part in such activities and what means do they employ to ensure that the students benefit from the collaborative work of teachers?

I found interesting the distinction made by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) between “macro functions” and “micro-tasks” (p. 13). Spillane et al. argue that although the literature has addressed the macro functions successful instructional leaders accomplish, such as establishing and communicating a clear vision, it is much less clear what are the specific, concrete steps,
activities, or tasks (the micro-tasks of the macro function) used by principals to accomplish those goals. I would argue that as long as principals remain at the level of macro functions and cannot articulate how exactly they achieve them, it is very difficult to get a clear picture of whether the important function of establishing the school vision is actually being achieved. Therefore my questions aimed to probe for details in order to determine how concretely involved in instructional matters principals are. Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) found that peer influence between teachers was a crucial factor in influencing teaching and learning, and had a direct impact on student learning. However they argue that peer influence cannot happen without the involvement of the principal and I would suggest that the extent to which such influence positively affects teacher practices largely depend on the principal facilitating “active interaction among faculty around teaching and learning” (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010, p. 36). My interview guide wished to address the successes and challenges or barriers to school principals promoting a culture of learning for themselves, their staff, and their students.

Interviews, averaging 60 minutes in length each, were conducted individually. Of the 15 interviews, 8 were conducted over the phone and 7 were face-to-face. Interviews were audio-taped and the tapes transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

“You can be doing some rudimentary analysis while you are in the process of collecting data as well as between data collection activities” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). As suggested by Merriam, the analysis was ongoing, allowing the study of themes that the researcher wished to explore more in-depth in subsequent interviews. Merriam argues the benefits of beginning analysis as soon as the first interview is completed and “to plan data collection according to what you find in previous observations” (2009, p. 172). She also recommends going back to the literature as the researcher pursues concurrently both data collection and analysis to help make sense of emerging results.

In keeping with the conceptual framework of the study, the first few readings of the transcripts served to establish the first two broad categories pertaining to the type of principals’ involvement in the professional growth of their teaching staff. While all principals perceived their role as being indirectly involved, such as P14 and P2 who describe themselves as being somewhat
withdrawn from the teachers’ learning and working and act mostly as “facilitators,” or P1 who speaks at length about his role in establishing a true culture of learning in his school, only 2 participants indicated that they understood their role as capacity builders as facilitators, as opposed to co-learners.

Eleven participants, while acknowledging the importance of creating an opportunity for learning, clearly expressed that being closer to instruction was critical and insisted that principals had to be learners alongside teachers in order to better be able to support their professional growth. For example, P5 not only helped establish a learning network with another school but also sat in on the team and actively participated in the collaborative assessment of Grade 3 and 6 math student work. I then proceeded with extracting information related to each subcategory: professional learning communities, collaborative practices, and reflective practices. All principals spoke at length about their schools participating in professional learning communities in one form or another, such as P13 when describing a school board professional learning network, which involved a group of teachers from several schools collaboratively planning, teaching, and assessing math lessons. Principals equally mentioned some other forms of collaborative practices, such as P11 describing attempts to establish teams of co-teachers and P6 pushing for regular peer classroom observations. The third sub-category, reflective practices, was in evidence in all transcripts. For 9 participants, it meant using staff meetings “posing questions, then starting conversations, and then facilitating the conversation,” (P3) and for others such as P14 it was about providing feedback to teachers following a classroom observation.

After having established a link between the literature, the study’s conceptual framework and the data, I looked at the strategies, both direct and indirect, employed by principals first in a generalized manner and, in subsequent readings, placed each category under one of the three sub-categories mentioned above. As several strategies overlap, I attempted to place them according to the principals’ perception of each one. For example, while all participants understand professional learning communities as being a group of teachers working and learning collaboratively, either as a network of schools or a network of classes, 9 participants responded that they used staff meetings for professional development or classroom observations when asked what other types of teacher collaborative learning, besides professional learning communities, they were promoting in their respective schools. Therefore, although professional
development occurring at staff meetings could arguably fall under professional learning communities, it was placed under collaborative practices. In attempting to answer the third research sub-question pertaining to the barriers faced by principals to properly build their school capacity, several more readings extracted some that could be generalized to all participants, such as time and budget restrictions. Several other participants talked about the general lack of support and skills, and the heavy administrative workload. A few more readings examined the barriers in terms of their impact on the professional development strategies promoted by the participants.

As I proceeded with the analysis I established colour-coded categories, which were then collapsed into themes. Merriam (2009) advises that categories should be “responsive to the purpose, exhaustive, be mutually exclusive, be sensitizing and conceptually congruent” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 185-186). Such an approach, as previously mentioned, required several readings of the transcribed data.

In summary, I initially began by grouping my data according to key themes from my conceptual framework. I also considered the specific behaviours chosen by Quinn who categorized principals as “resource provider, instructional resource, communicator and a visible presence” (Quinn, 2002, p. 454). Quinn’s themes are consistently found in the abundant literature on instructional leadership (Neumerski, 2012).

Keeping in mind that the purpose of the qualitative analysis is not to generalize findings but rather to better understand the reality of school administrators’ instructional leadership as it exists in Ontario schools, I used Tesh’s (1990) coding process as suggested in Creswell (2014). Tesh’s method consists of eight distinct steps to ensure proper coding of data. He suggests, among other things, several readings of each transcript in order to capture “the underlying meaning,” listing emerging topics, clustering similar topics, and organizing data into well-described categories. Furthermore, Creswell argues the importance of looking for not only similarities but also irregular patterns and “unusual codes” (2014, pp. 198-199). I paid particular attention to themes that were less frequent, unexpected, or lacking in the literature. In other words, all data from all transcripts were coded and given attention. Constantly comparing and contrasting all data provided an in-depth analysis and hopefully a better understanding of the phenomenon.
3.4.1 Researcher’s Position

As previously described, the analysis of the data collected followed a methodical and rigorous process. Moreover, given the nature of qualitative research and the researcher’s stance toward objectivity and subjectivity, it was critical for the researcher to reflect on the influence of past experiences and realities. Having been a school principal for several years, hugely concerned with building the capacity of my school and having also extensively researched instructional leadership, I had to take into consideration my own ideas, values, beliefs, and biases toward the phenomenon of a principal’s instructional leadership. In other words, I kept in mind the constant “care of the text” (Page, 1997, p. 152) as well as the acknowledging of my particular role as a researcher (Moghaddam, 2007, p. 229).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Research involving human participants requires ethical approval. Therefore this research proposal was submitted to the University of Toronto Research Board of Ethics, which gave approval (see Appendix D). I paid particular attention to the following ethical issues suggested by Patton (2002) and covered in Merriam (2009): explaining to participants the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used (see Appendix E), ensuring participant’s anonymity and confidentiality by giving participants code names, obtaining informed consent (See Appendix F), and paying particular attention to storage of data by using a personal computer locked in a secure office (Patton 2002, in Merriam, 2009, p. 233). Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. They will also be given access to the final findings. As for acknowledging my own biases and limitations I will leave the final words to Merriam: “The best a researcher can do is to be conscious of the ethical issues that pervade the research process and to examine his or her own philosophical orientation vis-à-vis these issues” (2009, p. 235).
CHAPTER 4: Findings

Centering on teacher professional development and growth, the 14 interviews conducted for this study served to provide some insight into the influence of principals on teachers’ practices in order to promote and sustain continuous student learning. Focusing on the perception of the role itself, the strategies employed, and the challenges faced, the study examined the perspectives of 14 school principals from both the elementary and secondary panels. This chapter presents the findings that emerged following a thematic analysis of the data which, as aligned with the conceptual framework of this study, are categorized under the broad umbrellas of direct versus indirect principal involvement as staff developer. Under direct activity, a thematic analysis of the data yielded the following themes: Monitoring, Collaborative Learning, and Reflective Practices. The themes of Culture, Management Factors, and Principal Leadership Capacity were considered indirect involvement activity.

4.1 Question 1: How Do Principals Perceive their Role in Influencing the Professional Development of their Teachers?

The most consistent finding related to the perception of the participants of their capacity building role lied in its importance. All participants in this study firmly believe in the critical role they, as school principals, play. P15 expresses it in this way: “I genuinely believe that it’s fundamental to the role of principals and its impact on teachers.” And, in P1’s words: “I really think the principal plays the most critical role in terms of their (teachers’) learning, because education is kind of like a business where you’re supposed to be able to impact the people that work with you.” Whether their involvement is perceived by principals as being more direct, such as P12 when she states “my role in influencing teacher professional learning, I mean, it’s a huge part of my role to do that… It’s what we do to try to inspire, motivate, staff through PD,” or more indirect such as P2, who says “I see my role as being a supporter of their learning, and a guide in a sense,” the principals interviewed saw the importance of their role as “second only to teachers because we do not have direct contact with the students” (P13). And again: “I’m a firm believer that a teacher in the classroom in front of the kids has the most effect on student achievement, and our role as principal is to help teachers be better in front of those kids, and I think that has a direct effect” (P6).
Notwithstanding the importance of the role, the reality of the position can be quite different and presents challenges that can be daunting to principals; besides causing stress, the role can result in a lot of frustration as revealed by the data. The data also revealed that when it comes to capacity building all participants utilize some forms of both direct and indirect involvement in the professional growth of their teaching staff. The following section examines the data under those broad categories.

4.2 Question 2: What Are the Strategies Employed by Principals to Support Teachers’ Professional Development?

4.2.1 Direct Activity

Direct involvement, as defined for the purpose of this study as working alongside teachers to improve teaching practices, has had different meanings over the past decades. Whereas it was traditionally tied to the supervising aspect of the role through performance appraisal, it evolved into active engagement in professional learning communities. If Blase and Blase (1998) have been decrying the punitive aspect of the typical performance appraisal, Seashore-Louis (2008) for her part has spoken at great length of the poor implementation and results of school learning professional communities. Regardless, both practices are still widely used with somewhat unclear results as demonstrated by the data from this study. This category contains the following three themes: Monitoring, Collaborative Learning, and Reflective Practices.

4.2.1.1 Monitoring

In our political world of accountability, Ontario school boards, financed entirely by taxpayers, are under great pressure to perform or, in other words, demonstrate continuous improvement in student achievement. Hence school principals have to meet “the demands for external accountability” and “clearly define accountability for individual staff in terms that are mutually understood and agreed and that can be rigorously reviewed and evaluated” (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 13). The Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) process is meant to accomplish this “rigorous” assessment of teacher practices. The irony of the process’s individuality is certainly not lost on believers of 21st-century skills, who claim that learning and working collaboratively is a skill of prime importance largely in demand nowadays. Although participants agreed that monitoring performance is a crucial element of capacity building, the process actually taking place is far from effective in terms of changing practices. In P3’s words,
it is “not overly useful, it’s once every five years for an experienced teacher and they sort of get ready for that once every five-year formal evaluation and that’s it”. This sentiment is reiterated by P7: “What I struggle with is that they have to be a five-year sort of summative report. But I always feel a bit disingenuous writing them (reports) because I’ve really had a snapshot of things.” That snapshot may not be very genuine either as expressed by P15 when told by a teacher that she had practiced the lesson with her students the day before being observed by her principal. “I could not believe that. Does it not speak to the artificiality of the process potentially right? That is just again not about learning, just about I want to do something that looks OK and I get the check box of ‘successful.’ ”

The perfunctory aspect of the process is further emphasized by its prescriptive nature. The Teacher Performance Appraisal Technical Requirement Manual (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) provides step-by-step guidelines that have to be followed by principals when conducting TPAs, and involves a pre-observation meeting, a minimum of two classroom observations, and a post-observation meeting to debrief. All 14 principals were very cognizant of each phase involved and described following them, although lamenting that, given the time required to complete a single TPA while considering the number of TPAs to be completed every year, the entire process had become far too standardized and therefore not helpful to teachers learning much or changing their practices, as explained by P10:

I think sadly, we’ve become our teachers and report cards are sort of in the same way that TPAs are done… it’s just copying a phrase or it’s just a double click on something and it becomes part of the TPA. I really try to balance out some of those basic things that we need to have in there with some very personal things that I saw and some very specific suggestions for improvement.

One principal went as far as to suggest that a review of the process is needed:

I think it should be modified, because the amount of time to do one is quite a lot. Yet at the same time, to have an appraisal every five years, I think is too infrequent. And the process by which… you know… I don’t want to overemphasize the satisfactory, unsatisfactory part of it, but where somebody is clearly unsatisfactory, certainly their job needs to be protected. But beyond a certain point it’s unfair to a school or to the students, you know where somebody is protected and not doing a proper job. And that makes the
principal’s role difficult as well because you know you’re putting 25, 30 kids into a room where you know they’re not going to get a proper education. (P4)

Here the principal made reference to the work union that comprises the powerful Teachers’ Federation and the fact that wanting to improve teacher practices is far more complicated than one would think, as exemplified by P13 when she says:

I remember putting down on one person’s TPA the slightest hint that they were having difficulty with a certain area in terms of an interpersonal skill and immediately she called her union and had them sit down with me in a meeting.

The somewhat combative nature of the process is also echoed by P15 when describing how she used to proceed with the observations:

I always did three, so I could get a really good snapshot, and one of the teachers went and complained and said P15 is asking for three, I thought we only have to have two, and they went to my superintendent and the superintendent and the union discussed it. I don’t know where it says anything, but I was told to back off, just do two. Now I have done three, if the second one was terrible and the teacher wanted me to see a better lesson, but I could not set up three at the beginning. (P15)

Such expressions of frustration on the principal’s part is even stronger when a teacher has to be given an “unsatisfactory” on their performance appraisal, which calls for the creation of a growth plan for the teacher as P2 says:

Then they have a growth plan, then you have to observe again, then if they’re still not improving, then you have another growth plan… That is the amount that a principal has to do for an unsatisfactory one, for a person who basically is never changing, and does not change, and does not get fired.

The process, besides being ineffective, can be extremely grueling and stressful for the principal, as expressed by one principal when explaining that writing any feedback perceived as being negative is tantamount to harassment for some teachers, which as P13 adds “is why a lot of principals don’t go that route.” P4, for his part, suggested that this feeling of being harassed may
be justified in some cases, particularly when the school leadership tends to be more traditional, that is, top-down:

Not all principals have a collegial approach to how they work with their staff. And so I mean it can be abusive, right? But I mean in any endeavour your performance is appraised annually. And so it doesn’t have to mean that you’re going to be on the chopping block every year but a means to be supporting in a collegial way how we’re going to approach teaching and learning in the school. (P4)

That being said, the process would appear to be more effective for beginning teachers, defined as newly hired by the board. The New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) is a mix of mentoring and supervision where the whole TPA process is conducted twice within the first 12 months of employment and which requires the teacher to obtain two consecutive successful appraisals before being offered a permanent contract with the school board. The fact that teachers involved in the NTIP are on probation and hence possibly more amenable to improve practices is not lost on principals.

P10 described conducting an appraisal on a new teacher with the board whom, despite glowing letters of reference, had proven to be less than satisfactory. In her own words:

I was seeing some small steps but a lot more needed to happen, and I said, “you know I need to see to see that continuous growth for your next NTIP because you need to have two satisfactory ones… to get you a permanent contract as a teacher.” (P10)

The same principal added, “I did see some effort from the first NTIP which was ‘needs improvement’ to the second which was ‘satisfactory.’ ” (P10)

That is not to say that the participants did not value the TPA conducted with experienced teachers who are defined as having obtained two consecutive satisfactory appraisals. Although principals lamented the lack of time they could spend on every single TPA, 3 principals, such as P14, greatly valued the opportunity to spend that time working with individual teachers. During the process, “teachers get your undivided attention to affirm what they do in a professional way” (P14). Another principal acknowledged the benefits of the TPA for teachers: “Some teachers when it’s their TPA year they really want to do well. So it almost elevates their own concern to
do well. So I think there’s power for it (the TPA)” (P2). While 5 principals found the process useful without being able to articulate to which degree, 6 principals qualified the TPA process as being useless.

Although the formal appraisal or TPA is conducted every five years, it would be a fallacy to think that the process does not account for the intervening years. In fact, an important component of the TPA is the Annual Learning Plan for Experienced Teachers (ALP). The Teacher Performance Appraisal Manual states the purpose of the plan as follows:

The Annual Learning Plan (ALP) provides a vehicle for experienced teachers’ professional learning both during the appraisal year and in the years between appraisals. Developing and maintaining an ALP provides teachers and principals with an opportunity to collaborate and to engage in meaningful discussions of teachers’ performance and growth strategies. The updating of an ALP also provides the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their professional learning and growth each year. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 26)

According to the data gathered in this study, this yearly opportunity for reflection and dialogue between professionals focused on improving practices is often overlooked, if not totally put aside. In reflecting upon the usefulness of the ALP, P13 said that often “the annual growth plans are handed in and if the principal has a moment to look at them, that’s great. They will if it is their PTA year; I don’t know if they do if it’s not.” Another principal when discussing the ALP stated:

Yeah, all teachers are mandated to have that done and some teachers take it more seriously than others. In the past I’ve made sure that each individual teacher meet with an administrator to go over the learning plan, just to talk about it and make sure that it’s not just a piece of paper. And some teachers actually put a lot of thought into it and they find it useful, and then there are some that just do it because they have to do it. (P3)

Asked to estimate the number of teachers that took the ALP seriously and for whom the plan had proven to be useful, P3, a high school principal, deemed it to be about 50%. For P11, a principal’s involvement in the ALP was not so much about discussing the goals of the plan but rather providing the means for teachers to fulfil their goals. P11 trusts that the goals chosen by
teachers are indeed tied to the recommendations made on the TPA report, but also stem from the teachers’ own interests. When describing the review of ALP goals, P11 stated that “when you talk about it, it’s actually something they really are interested in, they will pursue… You don’t really need to pressure them. They really kind of lay it out, as something they want to do.” P13 disagreed; for her, teachers were not always capable of articulating their needs in terms of professional development. When discussing the choice of learning goals, P13 explained that “they will just pick a new initiative that they’re not familiar with and put that down: ‘I’m going to learn about this.’ I don’t think it goes any deeper than that.” The disconnect between the TPA recommendations and the ALP was also noted by P12 when she talked about conversations on selecting learning goals she had with some teachers:

It is supposed to be linked with the TPA, so one of the things we just said, what growth plans were suggested in your TPA? And some people do link it to the TPA, some people there wasn’t a lot of areas of growth to focus on. They would just take something that they feel they’re weak in and say they would improve on. (P12)

P15 does not mince words, deeming the ALP “superficial” and “a waste of time.” However, for P15, the fault resides with the plan itself. She argued that teachers, failing to understand its purposes and the jargon on the form they are supposed to fill out, find the whole ALP exercise cumbersome and tedious. There is a pressing need to adapt the plan to the contextual reality of the teaching staff, in her own words:

I have requested permission from our superintendent for next year to abandon it and create our own annual learning plan template that’s more meaningful to staff, because they don’t even understand some of the boxes that they are supposed to fill out. (P15)

When considering the obvious helplessness felt by the participants towards what they perceived as a waste of time that represents the performance appraisal process, one can only applaud P15’s initiative. P15 does not stop at criticizing the process, but actually demonstrated the boldness to want to change it to render it meaningful for teachers and useful for their professional development. Such attitude stands out in comparison to the other participants for whom the process has become somewhat perfunctory at best and, at worst, a necessary evil. Furthermore, P15 may be emboldened by a supportive superintendent, staff, and even union representatives, but such support does not seem to be the norm for most of the participants. This perceived lack
of support is in itself hugely problematic as it does not allow willing principals to question useless strategies and adopt better ones. Interestingly enough, just as P10 earlier compared the performance appraisal report to the students’ report card, one could compare the learning of teachers with the learning of students, which is making it challenging to respond to individual differences and needs. This could present a strong argument for the need to establish school learning cultures, which would treat learning as an individualized process rather than attempting to mould learners—both teachers and students alike—to systemic mandated requirements.

The sad conclusion remains that, in terms of impacting positively on teacher practices to increase student achievement, the TPA does not appear to be useful, as expressed by the following quote from P6, who summed up the effectiveness of the TPA process, stating: “I think in theory it is a valuable process. The reality of it on the ground, I think most teachers would tell you, is that it’s not a valuable process: but I mean it does not change their teaching practices.”

4.2.1.2 Collaborative learning

Collaboration built on trusting relationships is at the heart of effective professional development endeavours and permeates the data collected in this study. Whether talking about principal/teacher or peer collaboration, all participants expressed the importance of establishing positive professional relationships within the school community. P8 stated, “The big thing for me is it’s provided more resources and more abilities… or more avenues for connection with my staff, with other staff.” That need to develop a collaborative culture is also well expressed by P10:

> In my school, I also have noticed a lot of doors closed after attendance is taken. I’ve made a point of that and said if we’re working collaboratively and if you want to invite other people into your classroom you need to leave your doors open. (P10)

This section looks at the principals’ direct collaboration with staff during professional development activities. The following sub-themes emerged from the data: Professional Learning Communities and Classroom Observations.
4.2.1.3 Professional learning communities

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) describe school professional learning communities as “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 14). In other words, regardless of the strategies being used or the size of the group, a learning community adopts an inquisitive approach to finding ways to continuously better the achievement of its students. For the purpose of this research, a professional learning community is defined very simply as more than one educator working together to improve student learning. The data reveal that in our participants’ schools, such endeavours are often more random than structured, as expressed by P13:

So yes, we were told that we had to have PLCs and they (teachers) all divided into groups. And I, my PLCs, they morphed over many different years; at first they were (grade) teams, and then they decided they wanted they wanted it to be topic-based, and then it became topic-based. And then there were no PLCs because there were no more staff meetings during the pause, and then I tried at division meetings, we actually used to have those at well, and that was a lot of PLC time and then that was hard to do. (P13)

As if establishing PLCs based on a board mandate and not actual contextual need was not enough, it would appear that the purpose of group work was not always clearly understood by the very ones having to lead the work. In P1’s own words: “We definitely had that, what they call that, the teaching learning critical pathways, we had the PLCs. We had a number of those things in our school.” P1 went on to explain that his was a “model school,” a school categorized by the board as having numerous challenges, and thus allowed more human and material resources. At first glance, it would appear that being given so much systemic attention could only be beneficial for any school. However, largely because too much was attempted too quickly, the reality turned out to be quite different, as P1 explained:

It’s not authentic. Yes. If it’s not authentic, the kids aren’t going to have the learning they should have. Also the teachers are not going to have the learning they should. They’re just going to feel pressured to do what their principal is telling them and, you know, that might take away some really good teaching they have already been doing. (P1)
The importance of context and meaning for establishing efficient learning communities is also reiterated by one participant, who said: “We looked at that a number of years ago and the staff felt that it was not something they wanted to pursue at the time” (P14). Other principals, such as P3, had to refocus PLCs to better respond to actual school needs. He said:

When I inherited my new school, our PLCs, were set up in a non-subject-based manner. And one of the things was to quickly change that to more subject-based slots. They (PLCs) were dealing with things like attendance, lates, and behaviour, and I did not really like that focus. I wanted the focus to be more on classroom practices. (P3)

Regardless of the group type, size, or topic tackled, principals generally felt strongly about the importance of actively attending PLC sessions. For example, P11 insisted that “it is part of the modelling,” or P15, who considered attending PLCs as being a “co-learner at the table.” P3, a high school principal, felt that some PLC groups had to be monitored to ensure that any work was getting done. In his words:

I think I intentionally sat on some of the most difficult ones. There are a couple of areas that are more traditional or stagnant that I wanted to sit in on and have conversations about. I’ve not gone around as much as I would have liked to other departments, but they probably did not need me… as much as the ones that I focus on right now. (P3)

Board-driven professional learning communities, where boards encourage networking between schools, were also cited many times by participants. P2 related such an experience in these terms:

We do sometimes, within our family of schools, take a team of teachers… In past years, we’ve sort have taken one teacher per grade. And that team we’ve gone, along with our K-5 schools in the neighborhood and the middle school. This year, we really tried to make it work so that every member of a grade team could go. So we went with Grade 1, 2, 3, and then later, we went with Grade 4, 5. Because what we found in the past, you take one teacher and they’re all excited about what happened there and they try to convey it to the team. And the team is not as enthused because they weren’t there. They did not get the whole picture. So we’ve found it important to kind of, as a team, build them up as a team, and have them all go. So, we could do it less often, because we did
not have as many release days, but I think we got more out of it, the teams got more out of it. (P2)

The power of board learning communities is also well expressed by P5 when she described a group session that gathered school teams comprised of principals and teachers which was aimed at establishing networks based on schools’ common “challenge of practice:”

We developed a challenge of practice and then what (the school board) did—and I’m not sure it worked. I did really good, but what (school board) did is then all—at the principal meeting we all got together and we put out our challenge of practice, and they tried to make it very organic for them. They said, okay, just stick them on the wall, like, me, I had my literacy teacher and my special ed. teacher. Put our challenge or practice on the wall and then all around the room we tried to group our challenge of practice into these organic groups to make school networks. (P5)

If the exercise was useful in establishing school networks, which were to develop professional learning activities for the school’s members of the network, the end results of what followed up were not as hopeful. Describing subsequent meetings with the network of schools, P5 added: “I can tell you that when we met with those schools we did not gel around our challenge of practice at all.”

The challenge of creating and sustaining engaged and efficient professional learning communities is cited by all principals, in part because the lack of relevance for teachers, or “authenticity” as termed by P1, greatly reduces the odds of any teacher learning positively impacting classroom practices. P1 put it in this way:

The concept of them (PLCs) is great. So if it got people to start talking instead of working in isolation, then that huge concept itself is fantastic. But to make it authentic, I don’t think it’s there yet. I don’t think we’re there yet in terms of people doing it because it really does make sense. (P1)

According to P1, the mandatory aspect of professional learning communities greatly affects the credibility of the whole process. He said:
I think that superintendents have to be more versed in terms of how they’re speaking to their principals, less in terms of “Thou shall do this,” but more “So that’s what we want to be able to do, how can I help you out?” (P1)

The selection of participants for professional learning communities, particularly board-mandated ones such as professional learning networks created with the aim to increase EQAO scores, may deny much-needed opportunities for some teachers, as expressed by P4:

For example, often there’s a lot of PD provided for EQAO teachers, but typically you’re putting your strong teachers in those grades so they might not need to be pulled out all the time... You know, I mean I had like super strong Grade 6 teachers who either were or, you know, could be coaches being called out for lots of PD for stuff that they were already very skilled in. So, I was kind of going, ‘I’m not sure that I should be removing you from your class from that.’ Things like that, I try to be thoughtful about, so sometimes, you know, we might have missed out on a few opportunities here and there but at the same time it’s the stability and the order in the school that is important. (P4)

P5 experienced much the same thing when her Grade 3 teachers were taken out of the classroom to receive training on the inquiry method:

And they would come back and say to me, “We didn’t do anything. Like, I don’t know what that was about. We just kind of walked around.” So the teachers themselves did not understand that they were being pulled for inquiry. So they should have come with, like, an if-then statement, or they should have come with a challenge, a practice, but they didn’t understand that, and I was new to the board, so I didn’t even really know that.

Her frustration was evident when she added: “You know, now they’re understanding that they have to explain it to teachers better and I, myself, will explain it better to teachers” (P5).

However even more than the relevance, the sustainability of PLCs is affected by what would appear to be a chronic lack of time to not only meet, but equally follow up. As stated by P6:

The thing is we had these sessions set and the reality of school is sometimes the sessions got cancelled because some of this was going on or report cards were, you know, so, you know, you save your system schedule. But everything is always flexible and I’d be lying
to say that it happened every week on the week on the week, right, but we certainly try to do that. (P6)

P8 shared the same sentiment:

One of the issues is it’s very difficult to find common preps in schools now, just in regard to how the schedule works, and when we look at lunch time, too often, unfortunately, lunch time’s one of the busiest times for administrators, and I usually have to fill in for missing lunch supervisors because we have nobody to watch the kids. So I can’t be there, or the VP can’t be there, so it’s usually the teachers get to meet, and then sometimes the direction is not always there. The follow through is not always there. (P8)

After school meetings are not always feasible either, according to P10: “A lot of the young teachers with young families, they want to get home to their kids and I get that as well.”

As for P7, embedding PLCs into the timetable proved to be next to impossible, and P7 refers to carving time out of the schedule as “stealing” time. She says that her ideal would be to have that special time in the timetable where the whole staff get to meet and “talk about instruction” (P7).

For the most successful PLCs, creativity had to play a big role in finding common times to meet, as described by P6:

And how did we do that? We combined the classes, so myself and the staff that were working with me on professional development designed social justice-themed lessons for every classroom between K to 6. We purposely matched junior with primaries for this. So you’d have the Grade 6 teacher with the Grade 1 class, the lessons were appropriate for across the grades and it covered another focus that our school wanted, which was a focus on social justice, right, and asking big questions and enquiry. Well, the other teachers were learning about enquiry so it actually was a wonderful process. It was a lot of work because we needed to provide those things for the teachers and the lessons and talk about them beforehand, but it was powerful for the whole school to be focused on something an hour each week at a time in social justice issues. (P6)
As for P13, she freely admitted that, with a staff of more than 50 teachers, she soon gave up the idea of scheduling common group time. She called her attempt at scheduling “a nightmare” (P13).

The most consistent manner in which most participants had been successful at carving out time for regular group PD was by using a portion of monthly staff meetings. As P14 stated:

> We moved a couple of years ago to staff meetings in the morning. So we have monthly staff meeting that starts at about 8:30 and we go until about 10:00, and we sometimes have outside speakers come. We sometimes have our staff do presentations. (P14)

P14 was careful to select topics that could be of interest to everyone, such as library or special education. While acknowledging the challenge of finding suitable topics for all the staff, P2, for her part, described her choice of PD topic as such:

> I think I try to keep it—the pace of the staff meetings—quick because it’s at the end of the day, people are tired, and depending on the time of year, there’s a lull in people’s energy. So, that’s why I would sort of try to have a variety of things, like you know... start with a rich task, go into something else. And I usually try to keep the staff meetings and then at the end do a little bit of business items. (P2)

Regardless of the richness of the task, P3 firmly believed that using staff meetings as a means to deliver PD may not be engaging for staff. According to him, the key to engage staff is for the principal to admit not knowing everything there is be known on winning classroom practices and show willingness to learn alongside teachers. He explained: “At the last staff meeting, what we did was talk about the use of these virtual classroom, in terms of their ability to increase student achievement. But what I did then was to model that; I went and designed my own website” (P3).

Principals in this study, while acknowledging the value of working and learning collaboratively for the most part, found it challenging to sustain professional learning communities within their schools. Citing issues of establishing common time to meet, lack of time to follow up, and relevance issues, the participants admitted to the difficulty of truly engaging teachers in a mode of continuous growth.
4.2.1.4 Classroom observations

Two different types of classroom observations emerged from the data: teacher observation and peer observation. Whereas classroom visits by principals appear to be a well-established practice, the same cannot be said for teachers visiting colleagues’ classrooms. However, for participants, both types of observations can be beneficial for professional growth, to the teachers being observed or the teachers observing. P12 found walking through classrooms a meaningful way to take the pulse of the learning situation: “I do regular walk-throughs in the classes to see what’s happening and what’s going on with the teaching and learning process. Like I do go in regularly and see.”

P15 described a typical classroom visit as follows:

I usually come into the classroom. I’ll approach the students and I’ll just ask them, “What are you learning about today?” And I’ll often sit down with the students, so maybe it’s an empty desk beside a student. Or if they’re doing group work, I’ll join the group. So I really do believe in actually partaking. (P15)

For P10, taking part in several district reviews allowed her to better understand visible learning and to quickly assess the state of the learning when doing short classroom visits. The district review process established by the Ontario Ministry of Education aims at improving students’ achievement by gathering information on individual schools in order to better plan for human and material resources allocation. Using a specific list of indicators of success as defined by the School Effectiveness Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), a team of educators visits individual schools and provides feedback and recommendations for further growth. P10 described how efficient she had become in these terms:

In a district review in 10 minutes you’re quickly going through and you get a very quick impression of what’s happening. In the same way I can quickly look around and read the walls, you know, look at the third teacher, see what’s on or not on... You know, and just reading the classrooms, so are learning goals posted? Do I see anchor charts? Do I see co-created success criteria that kids are working on with their teachers? And do I see kids sitting at their desks or do I see kids collaborating together and working on large projects? (P10)
P13 was equally deliberate when visiting classrooms:

So my walk-throughs were very prescriptive, I had a list of all the teachers’ names and I made sure that I got to see them more than once a year for a specific reason. Like I would walk-through classrooms all the time but they weren’t always purposeful walk-throughs. And walk-throughs were also the thing that I’ve always felt in my entire career that I didn’t necessarily always have enough time to do it properly. But for this I was still young and fresh and I had my checklist and my spreadsheet and so what I would look for is I would ask for them the time when they were actually doing guided reading—I didn’t want to come in on a math lessons or a phys. ed. lesson. (P13)

She added that those visits were often crucial in determining the professional development needs of her staff, allowing her to plan for targeted, relevant, and efficient growth opportunities for teachers. But if principals value classroom visits as an opportunity to gain an understanding of classroom practices favoured by teachers, the impact of those visits on positively changing classroom practices is unclear. Participants acknowledge that the irregularity of the visits does not help. Principals, such as P10, expressed their frustration at not being able to spend more time observing classrooms in action. Despite his best intentions, P10 readily admitted “being in the classroom is difficult” and that he is lucky if he gets to make two visits weekly. As for P11, managing to do regular classroom visits and provide timely feedback to teachers following the visit, can only be done by what she termed “exceptional leaders.” In P10’s words: “Being in the classroom is that real exceptional leader (responsibility), but that’s where it falls flat because you just get bogged when it’s behaviour or administrative paperwork, whatever the case may be. You just get bogged with those things.”

All participants agreed that instructional leadership often takes a back seat to administrative tasks and that, although they may find time to drop in on some classes, they rarely manage to follow up with teachers on the visit. Although the lack of time is always cited by participants, another factor also comes into play when discussing the provision of feedback to teachers. When asked if classroom visits were followed up upon, P15 explained that “the first couple of years that I did it (classroom visits), I didn’t. And I did that on purpose. And I don’t know whether it was the right move or not, but I did not want it to seem evaluative.” The balance between sounding supportive or sounding evaluative is always on principals’ minds when attempting to provide feedback to
teachers. P10, for whom feedback is crucial, used suggestions when following up on a classroom visit. P12 always tried to provide feedback to teachers, considering feedback as a way to elicit reflection on classroom practices.

If principals’ classroom observations did not always lead to pedagogical dialogues, peer observations, on the other hand, never failed to leave a deep impression on the participants. P2 witnessed the power of peer observations first-hand when she took a team of teachers to another school to observe what she termed “exemplary practices in guided reading.” She described the experience in these terms:

I think there’s a lot of power in observing… You can talk about different practices, but when you go and see it in action with children, I’ve never heard a teacher or educator come back without a great deal of enthusiasm about what they saw and what they want to try. And sometimes they see things they wouldn’t try, but they come back validated that “I’m on the right track.” (P2)

P2 explained that selecting classes to be observed, or what she termed “model classes,” requires principals to have knowledge of best practices being implemented in schools across one’s own school board. The search is well worth it as it benefits both novices and experienced teachers equally, and validates the work of exemplary teachers across the board. For P2 a simple look around a classroom could elicit much needed questioning and reflecting on practices and be the starting point of pedagogical dialogues between professionals.

However powerful a tool peer observations amongst teachers may turn out to be in some cases, establishing the practice presents major challenges for principals. When asked if teachers were observing each other teaching, P6 responded:

It wasn’t very much. I certainly wished that it was and that would have been something that I would have been pushing probably this year, the following year, had I stayed there. There was a bit of it, certainly with the new teachers who were provided the time to do that with their mentor, there was some of that. Unfortunately we usually did it when someone was struggling and we felt they needed to go into somebody else’s classroom, but it didn’t happen as much… I think it’s a valuable tool but it’s very hard to make happen in the actual reality of school. (P 6)
The challenge is particularly obvious in secondary schools where, according to high school principal P14, teachers were reluctant to being observed while teaching. Although her English department successfully implemented peer classroom visits, P14 admitted that the practice never fully translated to other departments.

Classroom observations are of two kinds, according to the participants. Firstly, principals indicate the importance of regularly visiting classrooms in order for them to gain an understanding of needs both for students and for teachers. However it is also evident that the lack of time for visits to happen on a regular basis or to be followed up upon would appear to defeat the purpose. Principals also talk about the power of peer observations, which give the opportunity for teachers to observe colleagues in action. Finding teachers willing to be observed proved to be particularly difficult in secondary schools.

4.2.1.5 Reflective Practices

I think you get a chance to know and understand teachers, specifically through the conversations you have about education and that lets me gauge where their mindset, where is there attitude, where some of the roadblocks they perceive. And I’ve actually had conversations with staff members in the past where they said, “You know what, after conversation I’m really open to now trying this.” (P3)

All participants in the study valued every opportunity to have conversations with teachers around teaching and learning. Whether formally or informally, principals value the sharing of expertise and ideas and consider dialogue a crucial tool to elicit reflection on classroom practices. Unfortunately, as the data have shown so far, such occasions to discuss pedagogy are few and far between. All participants admitted that most of the daily conversations they had with teachers were rarely about teaching and learning but rather about discipline matters or other administrative subjects. P2 estimated that she spent about six hours a month discussing instructional matters with teachers, and that is including the monthly staff meeting and a monthly half day professional development. As to why, she explained:

I think because there’s so much else people want to talk to us about, and that we’re having to deal with. You know, we aren’t necessarily… people aren’t usually seeking to talk about pedagogy. And so unless we are the initiators of it, it might not happen. We’re
talking a lot about behaviour, which isn’t linked to pedagogy. But behaviour is a concern here. We have some really struggling students, behaviourally. So those are a lot of conversations. Conversations might be around other things, like budget, supervision, you know. (P2)

Although participants valued greatly the occasional informal sharing of ideas and expertise, like P3 when he admitted favouring “spontaneous, very informal conversations,” what he also terms “those casual conversations, water coolers conversations,” the data indicate that most pedagogical conversations between principals and teachers mostly happen in formal settings. Such settings included the pre- and-post observation meetings mandated as part of the Teacher Performance Appraisal. P12 commented:

Before we have the appraisal, I do ask for a rough plan, it’s a rough of idea of what I’m going to see. And we meet before, talk about what it is that’s going in the class… you know, I always ask for a language or math… unless they’re not teaching language or math… because those are the main areas we want to be focusing on. And our school improvement plan is all around math right now. So that’s how we start. And then we sit down… we talk about any questions I might have about what they’re going to be doing. You know, background knowledge and what’s been going on leading up to this unit… that’s the pre-observation. And I usually do that a couple of days before the lesson. Then I come into a lesson. When I come in I write copious notes about, you know, what I’m seeing, what I’m observing, and then I also write questions I have. I give immediate feedback the same day. For me, it’s important for staff to know right away how they’re doing so they’re not going home going, “Oh, I wonder what happened.” And I always ask the question, “How do you think that went?” to get them to reflect on what they thought went well… any areas of concern. And then I give my feedback as well. (P12)

Another principal relates a rich discussion with a group of teachers following a classroom observation. The enthusiasm was palpable when P13 stated:

The rich learning that came out of watching someone teach a lesson and debriefing and figuring out whether the kids have learned it and how do we know they’ve learned it—that model is brilliant. The nice thing about that is, the teachers that did it came back and they offered to do it for just teachers in our school that were interested. (P13)
P7 saw the challenge of professional development as creating the right conditions for teachers to learn when she poses the question, “how do you create curiosity in staff?” For several other participants the challenge was all about fostering a growth mindset which required the adoption of a reflective stance by all staff. P15 put it these terms:

I try to do that by having a reflective stance with staff. So for example when we were learning as a staff about growth mindset, I did a self-reflection questionnaire and I shared my results with the staff about how I have a fixed mindset in certain aspects of my work, in my life, and a growth mindset in others. And I thought it was important to, to be reflective in front of staff and reflective on my practice. (P15)

The importance and the need for developing a growth mindset is reiterated by P14 for whom student achievement is hindered by the fact that, although teachers know a great deal about teaching, they know much less about learning. She says “I don’t think we understand enough about the whole learning process from the...whatever it’s called, the brain functioning, that... I’m not sure that we understand learning” (P14). Whether we talk about student or teacher learning, according to P3 it begins by asking the right questions. He said:

I pose questions. That’s how I generally work—posing questions, then starting conversations and then facilitating the conversation and they’ve not always gone honestly the way I would have liked and the way I would have hoped. Because at least I’ve started the conversation and they know where I stand on certain things. And I don’t hesitate to tell you that, the area I need to do the most work with and struggle with the most, is the math department. Math is a very unique breed. They very much hold true to “we’re doing it this way and this is the right way and it’s sort of the only way that it needs to be done.” And I want to get through that “no, we still need to work on looking for better ways for having students understand because when students are struggling, what are we doing to support that?” (P3)

P6 also guided staff discussions on teaching practices by questioning school practices rather than individual teacher practices. She described one such staff discussion:

We had a huge talk and a couple of sessions about what is a 21st-century learner; are we teaching them those skills or are we teaching what we’ve always been teaching? Which is
memorize this, regurgitate it to me and move on, and the kids are bored, they’re not engaged. So once I had that buy-in, once the staff were like, “yeah, you’re right,” and we should be teaching them these other skills. Are we going to do that? Oh, my God, enquiry might do that. If we throw out an enquiry question … The staff began to see, oh my God, they’re totally uncomfortable, they can’t do this. Because some staff were like, of course they can do this, this is a smart kid, and I’m like, okay, let’s try that because some of us are willing to be that no, they actually can’t. And sure enough, our kids struggled with that. (P6)

Some individual conversations, such as one following an unsatisfactory performance appraisal or after witnessing a serious mishap during a walk-through visit (a “serious conversation” as termed by P2), are less about reflecting but more about the bottom line, about “really being clear that they cannot be doing what they’re doing” (P2). Fortunately, if those challenging conversations are far and few between, it remains that establishing and sustaining reflection on teaching practices for the benefit of student learning is no easy feat due largely to the fact that questioning is still perceived very much like a threat for many. As a system principal, P13 has had conversations with colleagues, principals struggling with being questioned by their staff. In her own words: “There’s a lot of principals that I have tried to guide who don’t understand that when a teacher questions them, it’s not insubordination.” Further, she added that too many principals view “the principalship as a position of power and they need to look at themselves as a leader and what kind of a leader they want to be. Because I loved it when teachers came in and questioned and were passionate and spoke to me” (P13).

However challenging having regular conversations on teaching and learning have proven to be for all participants, they reiterated time and time again the value of such conversations. This could not be better expressed than by the following quote:

The other commitment I’ve made to staff is that if you ever want to see me for something related to your classroom practice, feedback on an assessment, I will make time in my calendar. I will privilege that time in my calendar. So never feel badly about, oh I don’t want to interrupt. If what you have to talk to me about is related to your classroom teaching, or student learning, I will make time for that. I will cancel, you know, other things to move those things out of the way for those conversations. (P15)
4.2.2 Indirect Activity

So as lead person, I think my role is to know—have a holistic picture of the school and know where we need to go in the school and then guide my teachers in that direction in terms of their professional learning and how they can improve based on the needs of the school. (P11)

Much has been said about the indirect impact that a principal’s instructional leadership has on student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). From establishing a common vision and mission, to strategically planning for school improvement while aligning budget and resources, to ensuring that all spheres of the school run properly, principals work relentlessly to set up the basis and maintain the school structures in which all stakeholders will thrive. Participants in this study agreed that all the work accomplished behind the scenes was as important as all the work accomplished working alongside teachers. In P2’s words, “My impact is there as weaving through the general direction of the PD over the course of a year and guiding that through PD days and staff meetings. But on a day-to-day basis, definitely it’s more indirect, yeah.” As much as principals in this study recognized and appreciated the value of taking an active part in professional development activities, co-plan lessons with teachers, or leading instructional discussions at staff meetings, they very much perceived their role as facilitating the growth of their staff.

Whether by being a co-learner alongside teachers or by indirect involvement such as “creating opportunities for the teachers to have access to the learning they need” (P14) or through “guiding” (P2) or “inspiring and motivating” (P12), all participants agreed that, regardless of the strategies used to build school capacity, it begins with establishing and maintaining a culture of learning within the school community, which has to rest on solid foundations or organizational structures. This following section presents the findings as they pertain to the indirect involvement of principals on teacher’s professional development. All principals acknowledged that, if establishing a school culture may not appear to be directly related to instructional matters, the particular culture of a school can influence the professional development of teachers, which in turn will impact instructional matters. Participants spoke of the strategies they utilize to establish a school learning culture.
4.2.3 Culture

Although 21st-century education preaches the importance of collaboration and risk taking for any successful endeavours (Ministry of Education, 2012), and despite the fact that those very skills are the ones teachers have to base their teaching practices on, according to P7 educators themselves are not by nature risk-takers and more often than not feel uncomfortable discussing problems of practice in a group format. In other words, being put in a situation where they feel vulnerable, teachers will adopt a passive stance rather than actively engaging in challenging conversations. P7 described a professional development session on critical thinking skills led by Laura, an expert in the field:

> She (Laura) would throw out questions and there would be 60 teachers in the room and no one would raise their hands. And I think the issue with that is no one wants to look like they don’t know in front of their colleagues so they just don’t say anything. And I don’t think that’s a good environment for learning. You know we do need to work on that idea of risk-taking if we’re ever going to tell students they need to risk-take. Then we as adults have to risk-take too. (P7)

The importance of creating a school climate that will encourage continuous learning is not lost on P3 either. In fact, P3 saw creating a “climate of learning” as one of his most important tasks. In his own words:

> I guess that is what I keep focusing on as my primary role, is to help others to become better. And that’s true in a number of things, primarily through support and through creating a climate of learning, keeping the distractions away, dealing with some of the other issues that you don’t want ever to cross over into the classroom. So I guess it’s very much focusing on the big picture. (P3)

For P3, a secondary principal, there is no need to be “the one in the classroom doing whatever” or “the sage on the stage” (P3).

However, creating a collaborative culture of engaged learning is complex and particularly challenging due in part by the fact that until recently the prevailing model of professional development delivery has been largely through in-services, that is large gatherings of teachers in a large venue a couple of times a year during PD days. In P5’s words, this is “the old-fashioned
model,” which she described as when “on a PA day everyone goes to one spot, and then they, you know, get the PowerPoint, like they get all the information.” P5 acknowledged that such presentations rarely respond to teachers’ needs and therefore never change teaching practices, not to mention the fact that teachers, who traditionally have been passive recipients, are asked to actively engage in professional conversations that target problems of practices. For all participants, the most important aspect of creating a culture of learning was by establishing, first and foremost, a culture of trust based on sound positive and professional relationships. When people trust each other, they feel less vulnerable and can honestly partake in courageous and challenging professional discussions. Principals spoke at length of the strategies they used to establish a culture of trust. From those conversations three sub themes emerged: Teambuilding, Modelling, and Delegating.

4.2.3.1 Teambuilding

At the onset of taking over the leadership of a school, principals put a lot of effort into teambuilding. According to P1, teambuilding is about relationships, that is creating positive and caring relationships with all stakeholders and particularly with the teaching staff. He made it clear that no professional learning communities can be sustained unless all members trust one another. P1 stated that, in his school:

Most of the professional development or learning in the beginning was really about ourselves, finding out what we were about in terms of the individual person in the school and what we can do as a team to make things better in terms of that learning environment. (P1)

For him and for many others, establishing trusting relationships requires principals to develop a non-judgmental approach to problems of teaching practices. He added: “It’s not about pass or fail, it’s about just trying, if this isn’t something… here’s an opportunity to try it. And I’m not going to judge you based on it. Remember that we’re doing this for the kids” (P1). P1 suggested that such an approach should be adopted by all stakeholders, “right from the top,” that is from directors of education down to the students in the classroom. This is echoed by P10 when he said:
You know, I could say that this what the Ministry expects or this is what the (school board) expects, but in all honesty some people aren’t there. So I think you have to work with the strengths of what people already have and then move them forward. Now, that’s not the way everyone’s going to do it, but I just know that that’s the kind of way that I’ve learned the most. There are scare tactics and, you know, thou shalt and whatnot, but that’s not the kind of style that I want to have. I want to work with people and find out what their strengths are and add to what they’re able to do. (P10)

For P4, trust was established by creating an “open environment,” where informal conversations led to tapping into the collective expertise of the staff, and for P8 it was all about “human contact.” He argued that being visible and accessible, what he calls “being out and about” (P8) made all the difference in how his staff perceives the leadership of the school. A sense of humour helped him establish a work environment where staff feel comfortable “opening up.” He compared establishing trusting relationships with staff to the caring relationships teachers develop with their students:

I go back to that relationship, that human connection. Pretty much every suggestion I’ve given you, on what would make a difference, has to do with that human connection. People you can talk to centrally... your colleagues that you can bring in to help you. Absence or not, of a superintendent to provide support. Colleagues that have time to sit with you, and you can visit them, and they can visit you. Just like a classroom, the contact the teacher has with the student makes all the difference. It doesn’t matter if it’s a class with 40 kids or 4 kids, if you don’t make good connections with your kids, you’re not going to get much out of them. (P8)

Taking a genuine interest in the people you work with goes a long way toward establishing the rapport that may allow for frank pedagogical dialogues and true professional development, as expressed by P13 when she said:

Doing your inter-personal relationships and you’re asking about their son, Billy’s ballgame. To develop the rapport, I think what you need to do to model the fact the you are more than just a friend or colleague, which you’re not as a principal, you weave in the question about oh yeah, like I said before, “you tried three-part problem solving last week and with a real emphasis on consolidation—how did that go?” (P13)
This sentiment was echoed by P7: “I think it’s really important to get to know people on a personal level and to, you know, make sure you know their kids’ names, make sure you know what their hobbies are, make sure that you have that open door policy.”

Taking an interest also means valuing and acknowledging the context in which schools have traditionally operated. As principal of a small rural school with a sedentary staff “that had not moved instruction for about 10 years,” P5 experienced first-hand how threatening any change can be. She described the challenge she faced when first appointed to the school:

They (teachers) didn’t understand that things were clipping along outside of the building, so they’ve kind of become aware this year, and some teachers are upset about it, and some teachers have come to see me and said, “you know, all these years I’ve thought I was a good teacher, and now you’re here and all of a sudden I’m being told I’m not a good teacher.” And of course I never said any of that, but they’re feeling—they’re feeling very threatened because they haven’t changed their practice and all of a sudden they’re now—they’re at the awareness stage that, you know, when you go to another school and you sit down and look at work, and you don’t know what you’re talking about, it’s a little bit upsetting. A big push this year was just to, I think, raise awareness. (P5)

Secondary principals acknowledge that teambuilding does present particular challenges due largely to the organizational structures of high school where departments often operate in silo. Nevertheless, P3 firmly believed that cohesion was not only possible but desirable. He took advantage of every opportunity he had to bring all departments together to “build cross-curricular relationships.” He was instrumental in creating many of these opportunities such as the one he calls the “treat crawl,” where each department takes turn hosting bringing treats on Fridays. Every Friday, P3 witnessed the camaraderie that led to meaningful conversations and the informal sharing of expertise. He saw benefits in structuring formal team building activities to engage the whole staff. He described one of his first professional development days in these terms:

Our first PD day, we spent an entire day doing teambuilding activities and I do find that that’s important for a number of reasons. Number one to de-stress staff, number two to get to know staff better, to build relationships with staff. (P3)
All principals agreed that no real cohesion or trust could happen unless they themselves model their expectations for the staff, what is commonly referred as “walk the talk,” and which is the next sub theme: modelling.

4.2.3.2 Modelling

“I don’t have all the answers but that’s why we are learning this together, right? Together we’re going to create those answers; we’re going to go and figure this out” (P6, addressing a group of teachers on inquiry-based learning).

All participants talked at length about the importance of modelling a learning stance by working and learning alongside teachers, but just as importantly by showing their staff that they too are vulnerable. The idea that leaders have all the answers has long been pervasive and is one that is difficult to shed for both principals and staff. For the principals in this study, one of the first steps in modelling a collaborative culture of learning was acknowledging to their staff their own ignorance and, at times, being wrong. In P5’s words:

I think they (teachers) need to see me in all aspects of PD. I think they need to see me at times sitting at a table with other teachers learning along with them. But I do think there are times when they need to see me conducting, facilitating PD as well. (P5)

The importance of being open to constructive criticism was well expressed by P4:

I don’t micromanage people, I don’t like to be micromanaged. So, people tend to, you know, express their creativity and professionalism a little bit more that way. And if we need to improve on things, like I’ve accepted all sorts of comments and criticisms from staff openly whether it’s at staff meetings or just in the office or what have you. And I don’t over-defend myself, if I’m wrong. And if I’m not sure, I’ll kind of table it and sort of get back to you on it and try and figure it out. (P4)

When newly appointed as a principal of a middle school, P4, whose experience was mostly at the elementary level, tutored Grades 7, 8, and 9 students in mathematics “to get a better understanding of the curriculum.” He also made a point of sharing with the staff some of the challenges he faced in his pursuit of a doctoral program. For P4, it was about learning new skills but also exemplifying lifelong learning regardless of the position one occupies. P12 agreed that
sharing her own areas of growth with staff enabled her to walk that fine line between credibility and vulnerability. She said that she modelled learning by:

> Sharing my areas of growth, you know, the areas I’m focusing on, for example, technology. Talk to them about some of the workshops that I attended and a conference that I went to as well as, you know, the different areas for math. So I attend and talk about the fact that I’m a learner, just like they’re learning, and improving in various areas. (P12)

P14 insisted that a leader could be demanding of others only if being just as demanding of oneself. She said, “Somebody had said to me recently, ‘You ask a lot of us, but we know that nobody puts in more than you do and you’d never ask us to do more than you yourself are prepared to do.’ ”

For P3, one specific way principals should choose to model learning had to be “letting others know what you stand for and then demonstrating that through your actions.”

### 4.2.3.3 Delegating

“If I had a team that consisted of department heads who were instructional leaders, a coach, a success teacher, two VPs, and myself... I think we could work magic. I really do think that we could move things forward” (P15).

In describing a “dream team,” P15 argued that unless school leadership is developed at all levels, addressing all the issues of problems of practices will remain difficult and whatever gains made will not be sustainable. A true culture of learning cannot rely on any one particular individual or position, not only because capacity building is just one of the multitude of roles played by principals—and as P15 put it, principals “can’t be in all places at once”—but because unless it becomes intrinsic to the culture of the school and permeates all levels of the system, such culture cannot be sustained in the long run. This is well expressed by P7 when she said:

> I try to intentionally empower others and to take a step back to a certain extent because I really don’t know...am I going to have the time to be able to come into the classroom like I was hoping, when I’m dealing with somebody calling me for X, Y, and Z and you’ve got this fire to put out? (P7)
P5 admitted to having been out of the classroom for too long, stating “I really need now to turn to a teacher leader to do the instruction work.”

Although most principals interviewed were able to tap into some external expertise such as instructional coaches, they admitted the impact of system coaches on changing teachers’ practices is not obvious. According to one participant, “that breath of fresh air” (P7) procured by board expertise, if appreciated and re-energizing, is too inconsistent and irregular to allow for any long-lasting changes in practices. For participants, relying on school internal expertise is more sustainable and can also have a snowballing effect on resisters to change. P11 believed that teachers instructing their peers “makes a huge difference when that person is a teacher versus a principal. Teachers are more responsive; they feel like they need to hold the line because their colleague is kind of asking to do something.” Later on she concluded that “having someone in is vitally important” (P11). P13 agreed, stating that resistant teachers will eventually be “shamed to come along” as she experienced with a particular individual, very set in his ways, who finally relented and, according to the principal, begged his principal to instruct him on a new teaching strategy.

Advocating the need for more internal expertise, one principal spoke of past models where schools had instructional coaches on staff:

If you had a good literacy coach combined with the principal as instructional leader—because that was my experience, I worked with the literacy coach to develop the professional development sessions—I led them with the literacy coach, so I didn’t sit back and let the literacy coach do everything, it was in partnership. And I found that really powerful because that person was on the staff, that person had credibility with the staff because they were teaching half the day, plus they had a half a day of time to plan and program and go into other people’s classrooms and support. That is a good model, you know if you had the money to put one coach... Let’s say, you know, the focus is now going to be math, if they put their money where their mouth is and they put one math coach in every school, right, in every school, not shared between the schools, that would have, I believe, a huge, significant impact on changing teaching practice. You know that’s not going to happen. (P6)
Many school boards’ professional development initiatives have allowed selected teachers to participate in system professional learning communities with the mandate to instruct their colleagues upon returning to their respective schools. P1 insisted that an important aspect of his role as staff developer was “to find those people that are really experts in that area. And ones that are able to communicate with staff appropriately. And then put them in positions where they are able to do that.” However, as several principals remarked, the sharing of expertise is done on a voluntary basis and it is important to present such an opportunity as an invitation that serves the dual purpose of valuing the work of the staff and instructing peers. P5 described extending such an invitation to a Grade 8 teacher and what resulted:

I did get her to do something for the October PA day and she did come to me, and said “Wow, I was really nervous, I… no one had ever asked me to stand up in front of my colleagues before, but actually, I really liked it and it was okay.” (P5)

All principals acknowledged the value of having staff take charge of the professional development portion of staff meetings whether it is through presenting on a topic of expertise, sharing a successful strategy or even visiting a classroom. On the last PD day of the year, P14 had each department present to the whole school a brief synopsis of the year and reflect together on successes and challenges. P14 did not see herself as the “lead teacher” when it comes to professional development. She explained: “I think that at the elementary level the principal is seen as the lead teacher because teachers at elementary teach most of the subjects. Well that’s very different at secondary.” She insisted that with the advent of online learning, more than ever, teachers have opportunities to pick and choose the subject, time, place, and pace, and therefore there is no excuse for not growing professionally. P14 summed up her capacity building role as follows: “I’m the conduit, I set the parameters, I set the conditions that allow teachers to grow, but I’m not personally responsible for all their growth experiences.”

4.3 Question 3: What Are the Barriers to Supporting Teachers’ Professional Learning and Growth, School Leaders Face Daily?

Although the data demonstrate that the participants believe strongly in their role as capacity builders and can speak with some knowledge of evidence-based strategies such as PLCs, for nearly half of them (6 of 14), their attempts at implementing those strategies proved to be not
only challenging, but for the most part fruitless. While one principal did not comment on the usefulness of professional development initiatives and 7 others were optimistic that practices were changing, none of the 7 participants could articulate the degree to which teaching practices were changing nor the effect on student achievement.

The participants spoke of the barriers to efficiently support their teachers’ professional growth mostly in terms of the planning of professional development itself, management factors—school organizational structures, staffing, timetabling, and budgeting—and principals’ instructional leadership capacity. Each theme is explored in turn.

4.3.1 The Planning of Professional Development

All principals interviewed spoke at length of the importance of properly planning professional development activities, regardless of whether they take place on designated professional development days (PD days) or whether they take place throughout the school year. Professional development days, in the province of Ontario, are mandatory set days in the school year calendar where students do not attend school and which teachers use for their own professional learning. Although tailoring professional development to staff needs remains an important preoccupation for principals, it would appear that the content of professional activity days is still largely determined by school boards, the decisions of which are based on Ministry initiatives. In P2’s words:

The board would give us some guidance around saying every school needs to at least focus on this and this. So, for example, it might be math and it might be touching on something from mental health or whatever it is. But, the specifics, we would really be hashing it out ourselves as a team, with our instructional coach. We submit our plans then to the superintendent. I think if the superintendent saw the plans and thought “that really is not what you should be doing” or “it’s not rich enough or deep enough,” they would let us know that. We need to flesh out the day and send that to them. What it’s going to look like. So, I guess, to some extent, it’s up to us within the parameters of certain topics. (P2)

When talking about the use of designated PD days, P6 could not help but express some frustration:
I think two of them are interview days (parent/teacher), two of them are report card days and the staff don’t come to school, and I think there may be one other. So it used to be that, you know they all did tons of staff development and PD on those professional development days. This has essentially gone and really they don’t… no they don’t dictate anymore what to do because we really don’t have it. And if we have the one-off where it’s an interview day and the staff are done at noon and we’re there for the afternoon, nobody is going to do PD because it’s like two hours of uninterrupted stuff where we can get all this paperwork done, right, like everybody is always like, my God, I’ll just catch up or whatever. (P6)

That frustration was also felt by P3, who lamented the lack of focus on teaching and learning caused by the number of Ministry initiatives, to be concurrently implemented by boards yearly, and the undue stress felt by educators. P3 cautions “We have just to be careful of not stretching staff, employing them in too many different ways… That the Ministry is famous for coming out with some new flavours of the month and I think that sometimes it does more harm than good.” He added:

Our school improvement plan should be almost identical from year to year. It does not change. Jumping around from initiative to initiative… I want us to say, this is what we’re committed to over the next X numbers of years and we’re going to continue to work on it. We might tweak it here and there but we want to make sure we’re staying the course. (P3)

This sentiment was echoed by P10 when he said:

It’s one of the things I’m struggling with in my current school because I find that the staff is almost PD’d out and there’s been a lot of initiatives and so they just don’t want to… just sort of fall, you know, and they keep saying “what is going to be the next flavour of the month or what, you know, is the next issue we’re going to jump into?” (P10)

P1 reiterated the importance of aligning professional development with the particular needs of the school in these terms:

There’s a huge breakdown. And I understand exactly what the Ministry is saying, and I understand what the board is saying. But we as the principals we are the ones in the
school who are going with that group of teachers, we have to take those messages and know how to make them authentic and meaningful for those teachers... so that they don’t feel overwhelmed. (P1)

The argument that mandated PD may not benefit all teachers was also clearly expressed by P4:

“I don’t think that one size fits all. If I were to say we need to focus on, you know... growing success and learning goals and success criteria and descriptive feedback, research shows that it’s a high yield sort of strategy. But many of my teachers will say, “well, you know, here I’m doing this so… and I see it’s effectively happening in different ways in different classrooms.” (P4)

According to P15, secondary principals have much more latitude when it comes to planning professional development during designated PD days.

We have our school-wide professional development days. So at the secondary level, we have... in our board, more autonomy than in our elementary panel in terms of direction for professional development. It needs to be aligned with our school plan for student achievement. But we do have a lot of autonomy in terms of what we do with our staff on PD days. (P15)

But for most principals interviewed, planning professional development days was challenging and many, such as P12, admitted that, given little time provided for PD, she is “constantly struggling” between responding to board demands and school needs to provide, what she termed, “quality PD.” P8 could not agree more, saying:

Even though we’re supposed to create our school improvement plans locally, and have local goals based on our local community needs, so much of our PD was dictated to us already, and it’s very frustrating to set your PD for the year, based on your school improvement plan. And then, as the year progresses, you’re told to go here, go there, do this, do that, and it may or may not have anything to do with your school improvement plan. (P8)

He added, “The Ministry initiative this year is numeracy, even though we may be strong in numeracy and literacy may be the thing (need), but all our staff gets pulled out for numeracy
training.” P7, for her part, likens the importance of differentiating professional development for teachers to the importance of differentiating classroom instruction for students. P4 could relate when talking about the PD mandated for the teachers of the grades administering the provincial assessment: “I had like super strong Grade 6 teachers who either were or, you know, could be coaches, being called out for lots of PD, for stuff that they were already very skilled in” (P4). Added to the fact that other teachers may have much more benefited from the training, was the class disruption caused by always pulling out the same teachers.

P8 went even further, suggesting that rather than being imposed on teachers, professional development for teachers should be organic. He said:

I’m a great believer in the subtle approach to professional development, where people see something that really works and they want to try it. They’re interested in it. It’s less threatening, and it’s less risky. In their mind, they can go to a local person, one of their colleagues, and ask about it, as opposed to the boss saying “I want you to all do this and do it this way, with these things.” (P8)

In P8’s experience, such PD has a much better chance to change practices than any PD forced upon teachers.

P10, however disagreed with the notion that teachers can always assess the strengths and challenges of their own practices. He explained that upon taking the lead of a high-performing fully dual-track French immersion school, he soon came to realize that the vast majority of the teaching staff did not see any need for professional development. This was partly due to the fact that, being French teachers, the staff, as a whole, had been working somewhat in isolation from the rest of the board. Talking about the task of breaking that isolation, P10 explained:

In my school there’s been a bit of a separation from that (new instructional practices) and I’m trying to bring that back and help them (his staff) become aware of what they don’t necessarily know or what they’ve not been doing and then tying it into what other people, other schools are doing as well. (P10)

P2 agreed:
They (teachers) may not realize their gaps in their teaching or some of what they’re doing is a bit archaic... But I think we have to persist with that PD, of the direction we believe is the right direction. So it might be that they don’t think they need any PD, some of them, right? Or that if they got to pick their PD, it might be in something slightly different. But I think when we look at the student needs, then to me, that has to direct the staff needs and the gaps that might be there. (P2)

The importance of orienting teacher professional development based on students’ needs was clearly expressed by most participants. While almost solely determined by provincial standard tests results—administered yearly by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in the areas of mathematics, reading and writing—10 out of 14 principals insisted that the results drive much of the school improvement plan including the resources (human, material, and financial) allocated to the professional development of teachers. Nonetheless, there was a common understanding amongst the participants of the importance of involving the teaching staff in the decisions regarding the content of their professional development.

Whether it is through the establishment of professional development committees or through surveying their staff, principals found the consultation necessary in order for teachers to buy into the PD activities. Sometimes, however, professional development can be in reaction to a particular situation that “sort of bubbles up in the school” (P14), as in the case of P14, the principal of a secondary school with a high special needs student population. Upon realizing that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were not being followed, P14 took it upon herself to deliver professionals sessions on special education to the whole staff.

According to P13, much of the difficulty in planning for the delivery of effective professional development that will positively impact teaching practices could be explained by principals’ lack of understanding of the change process. Citing change theory, P13 explained the importance of being able to determine the specific stage—stages of concerns versus levels of use—in which each individual is at in order to properly determine the next steps for professional development, particularly if the aim is to positively impact classroom practices. In her words:

I think principals don’t understand the difference between stages of concern and levels of use, and they don’t go deep enough and we don’t have the tools with which to help
teachers time-wise, money-wise, resource-wise... to get to those higher, higher levels of really using it (PD) effectively and doing a really good job with kids and their understanding. (P13)

P10 put it more simply: “There are some people who are ready for that next challenge and other people who still need some of those basics being reviewed again. And really that’s just a classroom in many ways.” P10 did not lose sight of the fact that attempting to respond to the different needs of teachers by individualizing PD presents a formidable challenge, as she asked, “Do you teach the middle or do you have little sub-groups of people that, you know, you’re working with in different areas?” Regardless, P10 considered that the reflective stance she adopts when planning her staff professional development could be beneficial for her own leadership. She admits that makes her “a reflective practitioner” (P10).

P3 summed up the planning of professional development for teachers by saying, “it is more about where they (teachers) are and the time needed to get them to move forward.” Further along the interview, about teachers’ growth, she adds “it is never about you, it’s always about them, and their pace.”

The above quotations demonstrate to a certain extent, the participants’ understanding that, to be efficient, professional development has to respond to actual needs and has to be aligned with pertinent goals and strategies, as indicated in the section pertaining to the indirect strategies, such as establishing and driving a common vision, values, norms, and focus used by principals. However, despite their best intentions, it would appear that the planning of professional development for all participants is largely decided at the board level. According to the data, principals have little say in the planning, including the topic and format of delivery of teachers’ professional learning development activities, which clearly flies in the face of the participants’ own beliefs and understanding. Furthermore, participants perceived that the lack of alignment between professional development planning and actual school needs could explain the lack of results when attempting to resolve teachers’ problems of practice. While acknowledging that such a lack of results is compounded by some principals’ inability to understand how to implement changes by assessing not only needs, but also teachers’ readiness, the multitude of boards’ initiatives requiring training unrelated to instructional matters leave most participants in
a perpetual state of having to comply with boards’ instructions while attempting to respond to their teaching staff’s needs, with the former having to consistently prevail.

Moreover, despite favouring a consultative process in the planning of teachers’ professional development, it is unclear how much consulting is actually happening or how much impact the consulting process has on the planning and delivery of professional development activities, as the principals in this study did not always trust teachers’ capacities to assess their own professional learning needs. The data unfortunately reveal little in terms of strategies employed by principals when planning professional development, if not to say that the planning lacks needed flexibility. Regardless of whether they consulted with teachers or allowed the need for professional learning to emerge organically, as in P14’s special education example, the planning and delivery of professional learning development are fraught with constraints that impede the process itself.

4.3.2 Management Factors

Principals agree that managing the smooth running of the school operations can have a tremendous impact on capacity building. However, for the participants in this study, putting in place the structures that would allow for the creation of true learning cultures has proven to be not only extremely challenging but equally frustrating.

4.3.3 Organizational Structures

High school principals find it particularly difficult to support teacher professional development due largely to the particular structure of secondary schools and the still very prevalent mentality of subject expertise. According to my participants, high school departments are still very much operating in silo and are reluctant to accept the instructional leadership of principals unless they have some expertise in the subject matter. In P15’s words, “That’s been my biggest challenge in every school I’ve been is to break through with the math teachers and have them to be open and reflective, because it comes down to a content, expertise type of conversation.” As a member of several school district review teams, P13, a former science department head, had witnessed first-hand the disconnection between subject content and pedagogy. Several visits to secondary classrooms led her to conclude that high school teachers in general were still very much concerned with lecturing on content rather than engaging learning. She expressed her dismay when visiting her former school. “I saw them (former colleagues) using the exact same notes
when I was a high school teacher and I’d been gone for 10 years.” Comparing elementary and secondary teaching strategies, she added, “I was really disheartened by the fact that the secondary schools had not embraced the same ideology of ‘the teacher is not standing in front of the classroom yakking at kids.’” In fact, P13 admitted that the review experience was a determinant in her decision to become an elementary principal and not a secondary principal. In her words: “I didn’t want to become a bureaucrat and that’s what I felt a secondary principal was” (P13).

Notwithstanding the lack of subject expertise, this perception of high school principals as being bureaucrats may stem from the understanding that department heads are in a better position to assume the role of instructional leader for their specific subject matter, thus leaving principals more time for administrative duties. In an attempt to redefine the roles and responsibilities of the department head to include instructional leadership, P15’s school board investigated various other boards’ department heads’ duties. Although in some cases, instructional leadership was listed as one of the department head duties, P15 said:

I wouldn’t say that we saw glowing examples of instructional leadership, but we saw that they (the boards) had more clearly defined instructional leadership as an aspect of the department head role whereas we don’t have any language around that at all. (P15)

Although principals acknowledged the importance of managerial tasks, they deplored the lack of school administrative support leaving principals in charge of fulfilling clerical duties that have become all-consuming. As a result, instructional leadership often takes a back seat. In P15’s words:

A lot of the stuff I was talking to people about and spending time on were, “oh, we need to put a work order in for this” or signing pay sheets or budget. And it was staggering how little of my time was spent interacting with teachers about teaching. (P15)

The organizational structure of most schools places the principal at the top and is constantly pulling leaders in far too many directions. This difficulty between managing and leading the instruction was equally well-expressed by P4:
The ongoing management of the school, supply teachers, making sure the lesson plans are there for the supply teacher. There’s going to be one in the school most days. I’ve got an LTO; she’s struggling with her assignment. So, she shows me what she’s teaching and I’m trying to talk to her about it. Communication with parents, communication with superintendent requirements, board, surveys, where is this report? We were audited a few weeks ago, that was right in the middle of the staffing process. I’m pulled out to meetings. We have the special education processes, our SSTI; SSTI has to sit in on all of those. I have to go to the IPRCIs, I have to... and then when I come back there’s a mess to clean up often. (P4)

P4 quoted the SSTI which refers to the Student Success Initiative launched in 2003, which mandates that Ontario secondary schools form teams comprised of the principal, the student success teacher, the guidance counselor and the special education teacher, responsible for supporting struggling students and ensuring that they graduate high school. This team would be involved in major decisions regarding a student Individual Education Plan (IEP), which would be based on the results of the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). Although the creation of such teams would appear to improve the coordination of efforts needed to ensure the success of secondary students at risk, according to the participant it did not reduce the load of principals but rather added another level of complexity to their role.

4.3.4 Staffing

If the workload, as well as the lack of time and money, appears to negatively impact the building of school capacity, another factor impedes even more, that of staffing both teachers and administrators. In the province of Ontario, principals have little say when it comes time to fill teaching positions:

    Control over staffing and who we have teaching what, again that’s being eroded in regard to who we can choose, for a variety of reasons. Everything from, you know, Regulation 274, seniority, collective agreement things, those are challenges as well. (P8)

Yet ensuring that every classroom is adequately staffed is one of the major preoccupations of principals, as expressed by P4:
My staffing is really big. And so I got to, you know, well, I mean I’ve pulled a couple of rabbits out of the hat to get, you know, Wayne Gretzky in the classroom instead of, you know, a dud... And then they do the PD for staff or they’re running the model classroom. (P4)

Judicious staffing goes a long way towards building the capacity of schools. As P4 later added:

It can be disappointing at times when you sort of have a certain direction or ideas in mind and whether it’s somebody who just is not willing to pour their strengths or maybe not in areas you want them to be. (P4)

P4, who valued professional growth for administrators as much as for teachers, made staffing issues her own focus for growth:

In terms of professional development and professional learning, the learning for me has been how to work the staffing process and cultivate the people who work in the board in those areas. And I connect up with faculty of education student teachers and with the occasional teaching department. I go to those interviews and see who’s good there. I really try to connect up with the staffing department employee services and kind of work those rules and those people as much as I can so that I don’t get lemons. (P4)

Teacher staffing can also be highly affected by the size of the school. Bigger schools have much more flexibility when it comes to assigning teachers to a specific grade, class, or subject. P7, the principal of a small school, explained:

When you have the school the size of, you know, 400 to 500 elementary kids, you can put teachers in a place where they can be more effective. Such as in a prep role you know, let’s say you have a phys-ed. specialist, well in a school of 400 to 500 kids, you can, staffing wise, you can have a phys. ed. specialist. But in my situation, you know, I can have a very weak teacher and have to assign them homeroom and there’s not enough prep to generate a 100% teaching time for that person. (P7)

Administrative staffing was also a concern according to the participants. The yearly turnover of school administrators is a significant impediment to building school learning culture. According to P7, who admitted being the fifth principal at her school in five consecutive years, the number
of administrative transfers each year coupled with the lack of time to ensure proper transitions for both staff and principals result in principals having to spend a considerable amount of time learning the school culture and environment while following a school improvement plan, including a professional development plan, created the year before by a staff that may or may not be there any longer. Despite some school boards’ best intentions and efforts to leave administrators in place for a number of years to ensure consistency, administrative staffing has its own challenges and this may not always be feasible. Case in point, of the 14 participants in this study, only 4 had spent more than three years at their actual site.

For P15, the turnover of school administrators coupled with many administrators’ lack of pedagogical knowledge was disastrous for the sustainability of learning culture in schools. In his own words:

That’s the case in any of our schools. And I know that HR... when they do the admin moves, they try to make sure that there’s an instructional leader on each one of the admin teams in the schools, in the hopes that whatever momentum has been built will be sustained. We’ve seen it happen countless times. And I mean staff will even joke about it that, “oh once, once so and so was here, all that other stuff just sort of fell by the wayside.” So staff see it and know it to be true. (P15)

Although staffing issues may impair the capacity building of a school, by far the most prevalent challenge for all participants was timetabling for professional development.

4.3.5 Timetabling

As previously mentioned briefly, finding common preparation time for teachers to work and learn together is a constant preoccupation of principals. All participants agreed that embedding professional development into the work day by making professional growth a consistent endeavour for all teachers is the only way that professional development will have a lasting impact on changing teaching practices for the better:

It always has to be like one session in the classroom teaching and you can have one out, one back in, because if they’re not in the classroom it’s just sitting around a table talking about it, and it’s not actually changing any practice. (P5)
The importance of allowing for complete learning cycles to occur is critical according to P5, a former literacy coach, who insisted that simply talking about new practices with teachers never translates into resolving problems of practice in the classroom, and that the only way he was able to positively impact teaching practices was to fully implement what he calls “the 4Cs” (P5). This involves co-planning, co-teaching, and co-debriefing. If “carving out time” (P10) to meet once in a while is problematic for principals, freeing pairs or groups of teachers to fully implement the cycle is next to impossible. Yet collaborative learning is critical to building capacity and finding time is a struggle for principals. P10 explained:

Where there are opportunities for them to work together as great teams so that they can start to build up that trust and start to work together and share ideas so that those doors will open up a little bit more... To share common practices and hopefully find out that they can really help each other out in a lot of those ways. (P10)

For P8, making professional learning part of the teaching day is what will ultimately sustain school capacity. In talking about job-embedded professional development, he said. “That’s what every administrator wants. That it’s embedded, that it’s going to continue even after they’re not there” (P8).

Another issue of timetabling common preparation time is the distinction made between planning, which is already scheduled according to collective agreement stipulations, and preparation time. Planning periods, which could be opportunities to meet, is in fact protected by collective agreements and is for the teachers to use as they see fit. If some teachers will willingly use their planning time to meet with colleagues, many others will not. In P5’s words:

Teachers hang onto their prep time as their time, and especially at the school I’m at, it’s very sacred time. I want to tell my vice-principal about scheduling next year, and we were going to try to schedule co-planning time or co-prep time for, and I said to him, I don’t care about this teacher, this teacher, and this teacher, I’m not giving them co-planning time, because what do they do on their planning time? They sit there and they get on the phone, they book personal appointments... I’m not going to work my schedule around people who are not going to sit with other teachers and plan. (P5)
Some principals, such as P15, had difficulty inserting some professional development time into the monthly staff meetings. In P15’s words: “There’s been pushback from the union at both elementary and secondary level that staff meetings not be used for professional development,” and “In one of our secondary schools, the principal sent out an article and asked people if they could read it before the staff meeting so that they could discuss it. And there were a lot of calls to HR about that” (P15).

Advocating for protected time devoted to professional development, P12 suggested that “it should be put in the collective agreement that they (teachers) need to be meeting for discussion meetings and other areas.” P4 lamented that even the school calendar year is an impediment to properly structuring meeting times:

What really drove me crazy (is) where I would want to be setting the goals and direction for the school with my staff. But we have to have a staff meeting, you know, once the school year has started. And the horses have already left the barn, right? Like they’re busy occupied already with the start-up of the school year and... I think it’s ridiculous that we don’t have time during the week before school starts to sit down quietly in a relaxed way for two or three days. Not the whole day for two or three days but have a bit of time for a couple of days to meet and plan and organize without having students in the building. (P4)

4.3.6 Budgeting

I used to hate having to manage the budget and now I’m realizing, well, it’s really good I manage the budget... Again, it’s my way of influencing where we’re putting our money, and what I’m able to have in the building, and where the focus is. So that meets my instructional goal. (P5)

It would appear that budgets, however, especially in terms of professional development are not nearly enough and that principals have to advocate to boards for more resources. P8’s frustration was obvious when he said, “If I could show you all the emails I send up to say I need another social worker, I need more funding for this so that I free this up… My emails don’t get answered very often anymore.”
According to principals, most of professional development money is used for release time for selected teachers to attend external events or board-planned PD activities. While benefiting the learning of a few, that professional development model has rarely had an impact on teaching practices. P6 did not mince words when he said:

I hate that model; PD needs to go on in school with the school staff or with a partnering school, right; if you’re doing a partnership that’s great. But this, I’ll send one teacher and they’re in theory supposed to come back and share this information with the other teachers; everybody knows that doesn’t work. (P6)

According to P6 the same costly professional development model also applies to principals’ professional development:

It’s much like what we do with teachers: Pull one out and that one is supposed to go back and tell all the other ones, all the other principals in your family of schools, all the things that you learned and all the things that they do. Well, sometimes that happens and most of the time it doesn’t. (P6)

P6 went on to explain that, much like in the case of school staff meetings, the time scheduled for agenda items at principal’s meetings, regarding the sharing of professional learning information, will be the first to be sacrificed to address more pressing matters. In other words, although considerable sums are spent on release time for some teachers to attend professional development activities, such spending contributes little to the building of school capacity.

Whether participants perceive their building capacity role as co-learners directly involved in the professional development of their staff, or as facilitators indirectly involved, or both, all agree that the greatest challenge in building school capacity lies in the general lack of focus given to learning throughout the system. Principals claimed that learning cannot happen without safe structures, discipline, and proper budgeting—in other words without the smooth running of school operations. They however lament that the amount of time devoted to managerial duties far surpasses the time for capacity building, which could send the message to school communities that teaching and learning do not always come first in education.
4.3.7 Principals’ Instructional Leadership Capacity

All principals participating in this study had a strong instructional background. All of them had occupied positions such as instructional leaders, coaches, or mentors prior to becoming administrators, and it is obvious that they value school capacity building. However, according to the participants, in their experience, this is far from being the reality for most school administrators. While 6 participants did not respond to the question, numerous conversations with colleagues participating in principals’ professional development communities have led 8 participants to believe that, when it comes to developing staff” capacity, most administrators are out of their depth and would much rather manage than lead instruction. P7 talked about one of those PLC sessions on math instruction in these terms:

When the math consultant comes and says, “Hey you know, this is something to think about.” It is crickets in there. Complete crickets. So I think it is…and my thing is I don’t have a math background. I enjoy math. Every time I go to in services, I learn something and I’m always flabbergasted with how did I not know that, you know? But I feel I’m confident in my not knowing. Whereas there are a lot of people who are not confident in their not knowing. (P7)

This was echoed by P10 when he related his own experiences attending principals’ PLCs:

My other principal colleagues, there are some who have definite strengths in certain areas, be it math, be it literacy, and some people are just good leaders at their building but they don’t have the instructional piece. But some of them are really good at finding other people who have it and other people sort of are ostriches and bury their heads in the sand and just hope that no one notices. Just like teachers, to be quite honest. And they’re kind of hoping that the wave of this instructional might pass. (P10)

If modelling good practices such as watching a video on communication in mathematics with a group of teachers and then co-planning a lesson, as P5 relates during the interview, is setting the tone for much reflection on math teaching practices, being able to receive feedback from your staff is just as important for a principal’s own reflection on leadership practices. P4 admitted that building school capacity has always been a role for which he felt unprepared and uncomfortable.
This was reflected in the report produced by the district review of his school. He described the staff discussions that followed the receipt of the district review report in these words:

But during those discussions my staff would give me feedback and... I would try to be a little bit more overarching in what I wanted the school to do. I would still see a range of practices where I would say well I kind of need to focus on individual teachers rather than treat everyone the same thing. So, I think I have some more learning to do with that. And I think that learning would come from talking with my colleagues and just seeing what they do in their school and seeing if that’s effective or not. (P4)

All principals interviewed deplored the lack of support for their own professional development. If some of them had the occasional opportunity to meet with colleagues through board initiatives, few found the time to reflect on their own learning. P5 talked of the benefits to her practice when, at the beginning of her vice-principal career, she was given a retired principal as a mentor. She recalled fondly the “reflective conversations” she had with her mentor adding that nowadays “as principals we don’t have time to have reflective conversations.” Strong capacity builders have to be placed at the highest echelon, as explained by P10 when describing board PLC sessions:

I can rely on my superintendent as well. What she has done, this is her second year in our area—sorry, this is her second year as a superintendent—and what she does too is as part of our leadership team meetings she’s invited teachers three times this year, actually maybe six... where she’s invited teacher leaders to come to the meetings as well. And so part of our leadership team meetings of a superintendent level is to meet with instruction leaders and for those teachers to sit beside their principal and work with their principal and start changing practices as well. So that they’re coming back and reporting back to the school about what they learned and about what other schools are doing as well. So it’s not just coming from me, it’s also coming from the superintendent as well that this is someone that’s she values. (P10)

P10 firmly believed that all stakeholders have to keep abreast of the research and participate in a multitude of opportunities for sharing best practices while empowering all to lead the journey to discovery. As for her own specific role in capacity building, P10 added that it is:
Just being able to support people on their journey and hopefully help them out and find out where, you know, not only the school needs to be, but where we can be as reflective, and recognizing our strengths and our weaknesses. (P10)

As former instructional leaders in different capacities, all principals in this study admitted entering administrative leadership to build school capacity to continuously improve student achievement.

The reality, however, has soon caught up with them and many expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the role. Being continuously pulled out in so many directions and regularly asked to focus on the latest research piece when the previous one has neither been fully understood nor implemented has not proved to have any kind of long-lasting impact according to the principals in this study. In P3’s words, “As soon as you start investing time on one thing it’s changed to something new. So I’m very much a proponent of just, you know, stay the course on good teaching and good learning.”

I will let P15, a system principal, conclude this chapter as she summed up well what would appear to be the general perception of the participants when talking about school capacity building:

If I’m someone who values this so much and I am not feeling that I’m being successful, that says something to me, because I’m a believer. If I’m a believer and I still can’t do what it is that I really, really want to do in this role, then there is a problem. And I just, I don’t know what the answer is. But something’s got to give in terms of those competing demands of the management—managerial—and the instructional leadership aspect. Because it’s, I mean it’s just a shame. (P15)

4.4 Summary

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the reality of principals as capacity builders, specifically how principals support and influence the professional growth of teachers, 3 secondary and 11 elementary principals from publicly-funded Ontario schools were interviewed. Individual interviews, averaging 60 minutes in length, yielded over 25 hours of qualitative data
which were subsequently analyzed using a thematic approach. The themes were grouped into two large categories, direct defined and indirect principal’s involvement.

The direct activity of principals, where principals work and learn alongside teachers, related mostly to the monitoring aspect of their work focusing specifically on the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) which principals are mandated to perform twice in the first year of teaching and subsequently every five years. While the data indicate that all principals considered the process valuable in theory, nearly half the participants expressed frustration, claiming that the whole TPA process is largely perfunctory and has become another administrative burden to satisfy Human Resources requirements. The highly prescriptive, time-consuming process has little or no impact on changing teaching practices for the betterment of student learning. Acknowledging valuable aspects of the process such as pre- and post-observation conversations, the participants did not feel that they have enough time to dig deeper into the learning of teachers and that such conversations are much restrained by political imperative, largely due to union involvement.

The second theme, collaborative learning, looks at principals’ direct involvement in the delivery of professional development, largely centred around professional learning communities as well as both planned and unplanned classroom observations. The majority of principals participated, as much as time allows, in professional learning communities alongside their teachers and value the co-learning aspect of their role. They also conducted classroom visits and encourage and facilitate classroom observations by teachers. However, they rarely had opportunities to follow up with a conversation after a classroom walk-through and admitted that few teachers took advantage of the opportunity to observe their colleagues. The importance of reflective practices was also foremost in the minds of most and participants, who considered their professional conversations with teachers and between teachers to be critical for professional growth. Both formal and informal exchanges were encouraged and most participants used the monthly staff meeting to trigger conversations around issues of practice. Although principals recognized the impact that teacher collaborative learning and working may have on student achievement, they acknowledged the challenge it represents. They cited among other things issues of trust and time, which explains the importance they put on building a culture of learning.

The indirect involvement of principals in supporting professional growth revolves largely around the culture of the school. Besides discussing the importance of common values, norms, and
goals, principals build and maintain learning cultures through strategies such as teambuilding, modelling a lifelong learning stance and delegating professional development to both internal and external expertise. According to the data, the school context greatly influences the development of a collaborative learning and working culture, and it would appear to be somewhat easier at the elementary level than at the secondary level. This is largely due to the departmental structure of high school, which segregates teachers into subject categories and perpetuates the conviction of a field of expertise that no one else can touch.

The last theme explores the barriers principals face in supporting the growth of their teaching staff, beginning with the planning of professional development itself. According to participants, the planning and delivery of teachers’ professional development is, to a concerning extent, largely decided by boards and mostly fails to provide for the professional development and growth of the teachers. Organizational factors such as staffing, timetabling, and budgeting impede principals’ efforts in establishing strong and sustainable capacity in their schools. The constant tug-of-war between the ever-increasing managerial tasks and the leading of meaningful and effective professional development permeates the data.

The final theme addresses the problem of principals’ instructional leadership capacity, most notably principals’ lack of support when it comes to their own professional growth and particularly the lack of opportunities for personal reflection on their own practice. The data do reveal that the participants’ perception of their role as instructional leader responsible for the capacity building of schools is critical. In order to accomplish this task, they employed different direct and indirect strategies, which are closely related to the ones provided in the literature and are evidenced-based. Prior experience as instructional coaches, which may have involved more training for them, demonstrated an understanding of how to implement such strategies and genuine attempts to do so are evidenced in the data. Paradoxically, their presumed knowledge and skills have proven to be mostly useless in changing teaching practices as they face systemic barriers and hurdles daily, such as a lack of time due to a heavy administrative load or a lack of flexibility in the planning and delivery of professional development activities. In fact, rather than talking about what they actually did to build school capacity, the principals spoke mostly of what they are prevented from doing. Indeed the thematic analysis could hardly confine the data on barriers to a particular section as those seem to permeate all interviews, which is indicative of a
serious malaise. Worse still, firm believers of collaborative learning were overwhelmed and disheartened and do not seem to be able to find answers to their own conundrum.

Such results would appear to indicate that school boards, and in turn, teachers and students, could benefit from increased dedication, at the highest administrative levels, to policies, practices, procedures—and the budgets to implement them—designed specifically to improve school capacity. The process could be advanced by more evidence-based study, acceptance that new advancements must be tailored to varying needs, and perhaps most importantly by genuine consultation with front-line educators.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Over the past decades, the role of the school principal has evolved considerably from that of a manager mostly preoccupied with the smooth running of school operations to that of a transformational leader whose impact on teachers’ efficacy has been well documented by Leithwood and colleagues (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). In that time span, several other leadership theories have come to light and, at times, competed to provide a continuously enhanced explanation of the impact of school leadership on student achievement. Instructional leadership is often featured as one of the most prominent. The link between instructional leadership and student achievement, whether direct or indirect, has long been established by many scholars in the field (Leithwood, 2006). The exact nature, however, of instructional leadership strategies employed by school principals remains somewhat of a mystery.

From the very beginning of the teaching profession, when teacher professional development was limited, to much later with the adoption of the traditional model of in-servicing teachers, and most recently to the creation of professional learning communities commonly known as PLC, the literature, both empirical and popular, on school capacity building has shed some light on teacher learning by providing insight on practices proven to have had some positive impact on teaching practices (Blase & Blase, 1998; Bredeson, 2003; Cole, 2004; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008).

It seemingly stands to reason that, by the very nature of their position, school principals can have an impact on teachers’ practices to improve student learning. Although the role of the principal as a capacity builder has been well documented in educational research (DuFour, 1991), “the nature of learning that results in higher student achievement” (Parr & Timperley, 2010, p. 158) or what Parr & Timperley (2010) refer to as “black boxes” (p. 158), is less understood. Granted that Parr & Timperley may have been addressing the issue of student learning, this present study has argued that the analogy of the “black boxes” was just as relevant for teacher learning.
The successful implementation of a professional learning community, regardless of the form it takes, relies heavily on reflective work. Osterman’s work (1990, 1993) highlights the critical importance of being reflective learners in order to grow. But reflection requires time, and if there is one thing schools appear to be short on it is time. Competing demands, such as heavy curriculum to cover, numerous Ministry initiatives to implement, and governmental orientations that may or may not respond to school needs, have made time a rare commodity. Such a reality has left teachers overwhelmed and with few opportunities to reflect on their practices, let alone find solutions to problems of practice they may be faced with.

According to Lambert (in Davies, 2009), the constructivist approach posits that unless teachers consistently question their own practices by continuously assessing their strengths and challenges in light of students’ results and by relentlessly seeking answers to problems of practices, little professional growth will happen and practices more than likely will not change for the better. Timperley, Parr, and Bertanees (2009) argue that growing professionally begins with shifting our already firmly established schemas, or what I like to call our stories. This implies, amongst other things, questioning our values and experiences in light of the evolution of teaching practices as they relate to optimal student achievement. Status quo is surely comfortable, but unacceptable when teaching practices are not responding to students’ needs.

Research also tells us that adopting a growth mindset is best achieved through collaboration (Bredeson, 2003; Davies, 2009). Collaboration takes many forms, from large groups such as those found in some professional learning communities, to smaller entities involved in teaching and learning critical pathways, mentoring, coaching, peer observations, or co-teaching. Regardless of the format, learning alongside colleagues on similar issues, giving and receiving expertise by bringing a critical lens to problems of practices will build school capacity and may sustain a school growth mindset in the long run.

Collaboration implies trust between stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2010). Bryk and Schneider (2003) go as far as suggesting that trust is, or should be, a “core resource” just as important as any other school resources. I would argue that without trust little genuine collaborative learning can be achieved. Learning partners cannot open up about problems of practice unless they trust that they are fully supported and not judged. Trust is essential if one is to engage in professional,
reflective dialogues whether the discussion takes place in a group of educators, or with a mentor, a coach, a peer, or a principal.

Bredeson (2003) argues the necessity of redesigning to allow for optimal learning for all learners and not solely student learning. The author acknowledges the unique position of the school principal in establishing and sustaining a true culture of learning that is a culture that provides “opportunities for learning ‘in,’ ‘at,’ ‘outside,’ and ‘beyond’ work” (p. 140). Bredeson posits that first and foremost principals have to establish “powerful norms of professional learning at work” (p. 100). According to Bredeson, the role of the principal goes far beyond providing time and resources but demands that school leaders be seen as “active learners” (p. 100) themselves. In other words, workplace learning, or what I would call the quest for continuous improvement, has to be modelled from the top.

Over the decades, the case for job-embedded learning has been made (Blase & Blase, 1998; Strieker, Logan & Kuhel, 2012; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Yost, Vogel & Liang, 2009). Moreover, the role of the principal in providing opportunities for teacher learning is firmly established (Holland, 2008). Research on adult learning has also corroborated those findings confirming that, unless the learning is relevant to the learner and responds to a need, teaching practices do not alter for the benefit of student learning. In fact, in 1998 Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin defined job-embedded learning as “teacher learning which is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning” (in Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, Powers & Killion, 2010). The direct link between teacher learning and student achievement is echoed by Timperley and Alton-Lee when they argue for “an outcomes-linked approach” (2010, p. 336) and suggest that professional development should be continuously informed by student results and follow a model of iterative learning. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it would appear that the most pertinent approach to respond to the multitude of needs that face teachers daily, particularly when it comes to reducing the learning gap in underserved children’s populations, would be to tailor teachers’ learning or professional development to their students’ needs.
5.2 Overview of Research

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the reality of school principals as capacity builders by answering the following question “How do school principals influence the professional development of teachers to support teachers’ instructional practices for student learning?” Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 14 school principals. The interview guide centered on the three following sub-questions:

1) How do principals perceive their role in influencing the professional development of their teachers?
2) What are the strategies employed by principals to support teachers’ professional development?
3) What are the barriers to supporting teachers’ professional learning and growth that school leaders face daily?

The study’s conceptual framework borrows from the work of Timperley and Alton-Lee (2008), whose iterative model of teachers’ learning adopts an “outcomes-linked approach” to professional development (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008, p. 336). While their model is primarily concerned with the illustration of the teacher’s cycle of inquiry, where students’ outcomes inform professional development needs, the present conceptual model adds the role of the principal as capacity builder through direct and indirect involvement in the professional development and growth of teachers. Looking more specifically at evidence-based practices in teacher’s teaching and learning which, for the purpose of the study, have been grouped into three types of activities, namely: professional learning communities (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Venables, 2011), collaborative learning (Burke, 2003; Cramer, Liston, Nevin, & Thousand, 2010), and reflective practices (Osterman, 1990; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). This conceptual framework suggests that principals’ involvement in their teachers’ professional development and growth is informed by the resolution of problems of practice through the teachers’ adoption of different instructional practices.

A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews yielded several themes and subthemes. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, each sub question is discussed in light of the results presented in Chapter 4 and the literature covered in Chapter 2.
5.3 Conclusion from Literature and Interview Data

5.3.1 How Do Principals Perceive their Role in Influencing the Professional Development of their Teachers?

According to research literature (DuFour, 1991; Downey, Steffy, English, Frase & Poston, 2004; Gupton, 2003; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007) school principals can have an important role in supporting teachers’ capacity in order to support students’ learning. The nature of the principal’s involvement appears to take many forms. For some (Daresh & Playko in Gupton, 2003; Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger, 2005; Kleine-Kracht, 1993), the principal’s role is mostly of an indirect nature, that is to say not involved in instructional matters such as teacher supervision per se but rather being responsible for establishing the structures that will allow the school to function optimally. Such structures may go from the primarily physical aspects of the building—i.e. safety and cleanliness—to the more complex role of establishing a common vision focused on student’s optimal achievement, all while setting, implementing, and assessing the strategic goals, the fulfilment of which will lead to greater student achievement. Although few would argue that a safe learning environment, a clear vision, and pertinent strategic goals can have a significant, albeit indirect, impact on teaching and learning, much of the scholarly work in school leadership is uncovering the power of principals as capacity builders (DuFour, 1991; Fullan, 2010; Lambert [2003] in Hinds & Berger, 2010).

At first glance, it would appear that the findings of this study echo the findings of the literature on the role of the principal in the capacity building of schools. All participants acknowledge the importance of their roles as instructional leaders, and particularly their influence on school capacity building whether direct or indirect. For some, such as P1 and P2, it is more about facilitating professional development by maintaining a vision, providing directions, opportunities, and resources whereas for others, such as P6, the co-learning aspect takes precedence. Regardless of participants’ experiences, philosophies, or beliefs, the principals in the study highlight, albeit to varying degrees, the words of Hinds and Berger (2010) who themselves—using the words of colleagues—define the principal’s role in teachers’ professional development as one of building relationships (Barth, 1990), building school capacity (Lambert,
and by promoting teacher leadership (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinback, 2004; Spillane & Timperley, 2004).

Numerous quotes in the study point to the participants’ belief that several school leadership theories, which at times have been competing to explain successful school leadership, have to be at work simultaneously if school capacity is to be built. Participants such as P11 and P5 state the importance of inviting expertise, which this research has categorized as delegating, and which would appear to be in agreement with the shared leadership theory (Harris in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010; Lambert, 2003). Participants also speak at length of the importance of being close themselves to instructional matters by visiting classrooms, monitoring teacher performance, or participating in collaborative work sessions highlighting their role as instructional leaders (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2011; Downy, Steffy, English, Frase & Poston, 2004). While acknowledging the role of school manager or organizational leader and its importance in staffing, developing strategic plans, aligning resources, and scheduling common preparation time to allow for group work (Levacic in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010), principals also perceive the role as one of support that, while providing the means to achieve, continuously pushes teachers to improve practices. According to the participants, modelling an ongoing learning stance by admitting their own lack of knowledge and transforming teachers by recognizing their expertise, passions, and sustained hard work has just as much value as being able to build common preparatory time into the school timetable. The transformational influence of principals on teachers’ sense of efficacy has been well established (Leithwood & Jantzi in Davies, 2009) and distributing leadership has proven to positively influence achievement (Trail, 2000). Furthermore, Leithwood’s extensive work with principals and teachers has established that academic press, efficacy, PLCs, and time, components of his Four Paths theory, are necessary spheres of influence for principals to impact student learning (2010, p. 2). Although the present findings corroborate that principals do believe these are important factors in building school capacity, it remains that participants in this study are at a loss as to how capacity building can be best achieved, even though strategies employed by principals are numerous. Indeed, the data reveal the importance of setting a vision, common goals, alignment of resources, common work time, the sharing of expertise, the establishment of trusting relationships amongst education stakeholders, collaborative learning and work, and continuous co-learning. Equally as important, according to the participants, is first seeing to the establishment of necessary structures, which
could mean anything from the proper staffing of schools, to the number of desks and chairs in each classroom, to ensuring the safety and cleanliness of the building. Principals are in agreement that attempting to establish a genuine culture of deep learning in schools may seem futile for stakeholders if “ensuring an orderly and supportive environment” (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009, p. 101) has not been seen to.

5.3.2 What Are the Strategies Employed by Principals to Support Teachers’ Professional Development?

Principals are instrumental in selecting the professional development format, providing release time to teachers and procuring human and material resources. But many argue that the capacity building role cannot stop there. Research is now unveiling the impact principals have when they are directly involved in professional development activities alongside their teachers, that is the impact of the principal as a co-learner (Middlewood, in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009).

The data also reveal the level to which knowledge is being mobilized in school settings. All principals talk about collaborative work in one form or another, echoing the vast literature of professional learning communities. P2 and P6 could describe collaborative work sessions centred on student achievement data where they were involved either as a facilitator, co-learner, or both. All participants insisted that school improvement had to be driven by students’ result outcomes, thus substantiating the work of Robinson et al. (2009) that clearly links the role of the principal to student outcomes as stated here:

> Pedagogically focused leadership has important impacts on students’ outcomes: the more leaders concentrate their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on the well-being and achievement of students. (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009, p. 103)

Using student achievement data for professional learning brings to mind the iterative model suggested by the work of Timperley et al. (2008, 2009) that looks at teacher professional development as a continuous iterative process where student results inform teacher learning, which in turn informs student results.
All principals mention coaching as being a strategy for teacher professional development. Whereas most principals may not have acted as coaches themselves, they all worked closely with instructional coaches assigned to their school. While agreeing with the early work of Showers (1987), and more recently the work of Amendum (2014), who argued that coaches’ main sphere of influence is in assisting teachers in transferring new knowledge into practical applications in the classroom, principals were less optimistic about the sustainability of changed practices. This was due largely to the dependency some teachers develop on their coach, the lack of time for follow-up, or the lack of instructional coaches altogether. The punctual, short-lived nature of their coaching program was not lost on the participants.

The relevance and practicality of the learning in engaging teachers in professional development activities regardless of the types of tasks involved is a recurring theme in the data. Duncan puts it this way: “much of what one knows about adult learning mirrors what is known about best practices in children’s learning” (2010, abstract). In fact one principal in this study, P10, makes the very same comparison when discussing engaging teachers in professional learning.

According to Quinn (2002), relevance depends largely on context and context greatly differs from school to school. Participants could not agree more and insist that one of the first tasks incumbent upon a new principal is developing a clear understanding of the school culture and its context so as to be able to better assess actual needs in order to determine a proper course of action. According to P13, it means understanding changes, particularly when it comes to developing an efficient professional development plan. Knowing your staff, their strengths, challenges, and problems of practice, and even more importantly being able to situate each individual on the learning curve, is precisely the challenge for many participants. This is compounded by having to find appropriate ways to respond to individual teachers’ needs in the hope of resolving problems of practice to optimize student learning.

Hochberg and Desimone (2010) make a distinction between “contextual factors” and “contextual facilitators” when examining context and influence on learning. The authors suggest that contextual factors can be broadly understood as sets of characteristics, which are “teacher characteristics, student characteristics, and curriculum characteristics” (p. 99) and contextual facilitators such as “the presence of trust, leadership and collegial norms” (p. 100).
The data present striking similarities with the characteristics of both contextual factors and contextual facilitators. Participants talk about their school context as greatly influencing their efforts to create learning communities regardless of the shape such learning communities may take. They are cognizant of the importance of trust in the proper establishment of collegial norms. They equally discuss characteristics of their student population such as the large number of special needs students in P14’s school or the wide cultural and socio-economic diversity and disparity within and between schools. Others emphasize the characteristics of their teaching staff, as in the case of P10 with the reluctance of French immersion teachers to adopt innovative practices, or in P5’s case the large older demographic of the teaching staff and its reluctance to adapt to new teaching practices. One principal talks at length about the relevance of the rural context—where the school is located—explaining that teachers have been literally and figuratively isolated having spent the majority of their teaching career not only in the same school, but often teaching the same grade. Although most participants acknowledge the importance of school context and present a realistic portrait of their particular school’s context, few participants directly address the challenge of school capacity building as it relates to their specific teaching context. Except perhaps for P14, who used the poor achievement results of her large special needs student population to trigger much-needed teacher training in the area of special education, participants seem to perceive their challenging context as another layer of difficulty for which they do not have an answer.

The specific contexts of elementary and secondary schools is also apparent in the data. Notwithstanding the fact that only four secondary principals were interviewed, high schools principals report a state of professional development very similar to the findings of Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) who refer to the typical organization of high schools into subject-specific departments as “Balkanization” (p. 206). Despite the fact that the Timperley et al. review of the literature on high school teacher professional development did not yield significant differences between elementary and secondary school professional development initiatives, the impact of said initiatives may differ greatly between the different departments of a secondary school. While they argue that “Balkanization” can have tremendous positive impact on teacher professional development linked to subject-specific content, Timperley et al. also found that the very same structure was detrimental to the “school-wide communication and community” (p. 209). This study reveals that Balkanization is real in the high school context; for
one principal, P14, it is a fact of high school life, while for two other high school principals, P3 and P15, it is a cause of great frustration, preventing them from enacting important professional development initiatives. Despite positive attempts, such as P3’s, at creating cross-curricular interactions between departments and establishing pedagogical dialogues with teachers, secondary principals admit that high school departments are still very much functioning in silos, with subject-specific teachers continuously bringing up their expertise as an excuse for not adopting new practices and concentrating much more on their subject matter than on their students. Timperley et al. surmise that the phrase “secondary school teachers teach subjects but primary teachers teach students” (p. 208) may very well have its roots in the so-called expertise mentality adopted by high school teachers.

The establishment of professional learning networks aimed at reflecting on problems of practices, as they relate to student achievement described by participants, is quite different from the in-service model decried by Cole (2004). In fact, the data reveal a will to discard the one-size-fits-all model in favour of collaborative, intentional work focused on optimizing student learning potential. Moreover, it would seem that politicians have made good on their promise to reform teacher professional development. It would appear that many, if not most, of the recommendations from the Working Table on Teacher Development (2007) have been implemented, in one form or another, in most Ontario schools. Yet perceived deficiencies persist despite the seemingly good use of research and the large sums of governmental money invested in teacher professional development over the past decades to address problems of practices and student achievement.

5.3.3 What Are the Barriers to Supporting Teachers’ Professional Learning and Growth that School Leaders Face Daily?

The participants in this study, all of them with prior instructional leadership experience, were in agreement as to what were the barriers or challenges in establishing true reflective communities of practice which would allow for the continuous increase in student achievement.

The following three sections discuss those factors that, in the participants’ opinions, are detrimental to their roles as school capacity builders. Based on participants’ responses, those factors have been regrouped into three categories: Standardization, Managing versus Leading, and Sustainability.
5.3.3.1 Standardization

In their book *The Global Fourth Way*, Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) applauded Ontario’s effort in the establishment and the implementation of a special education policy by the Ontario Ministry of Education, which aimed at not only including special needs students into the regular classroom but also fully integrating them, through the use of a universal design of learning (UDL), which would benefit all students equally. According to these authors, the policy aptly named Education for All (EFA), was an example of Fourth Way thinking, as one of its basic tenets was to allow school boards to design their own implementation plan. While acknowledging that Ontario educational policies, such as the extensive use of provincial standardized testing, were still very much reminiscent of a Third Way approach, which Hargreaves and Shirley define as “top down pressure” in the form of system targets in literacy and mathematics achievement” (2012, p. 7) these authors had great hopes that the shift towards more school board autonomy coupled with broader governmental directives would pave the way for a more individualized—as opposed to standardized—approach to responding to educational needs, thus achieving excellence regardless of school context. But if, in theory, the Ministry of Education would appear to recognize the critical element of context in school reforms, the data of the present study paints quite a different picture of the reality. According to the participants, school reforms are still very much operating in the Third Way sphere, as defined by Hargreaves and Shirley, that is “predicated on making change non-negotiable, give people targets to motivate them or direct them, and then provide lots of support to get them started” (p. 118). P1 laments that the prescriptive nature of professional development results in a lack of authenticity and makes the learning irrelevant for teachers.

According to the data and as far as teacher professional development is concerned, it may be that school boards are more autonomous but schools are definitely not. Much of the professional development would appear to be mandated including the format of delivery. Money is allocated but only as far as it is spent within the confines of Ministry directives. For example, large sums are devoted to establishing particular work groups such as families of schools networks, which, while they may be beneficial for a minority of teachers (apparently often the same individuals), for most teachers, they rarely translate into solving problems of practice. The Ministry also dictates the topics to be covered during the two mandated professional development days. These topics have, for years, been determined by EQAO scores. What this has meant for the principals
in this study, in attempting to build their school capacity, is a lack of autonomy which renders the task of responding to actual staff professional needs very challenging. Currently, mathematics is the topic selected Ministry priority for professional development. According to the participants, professional development designed around improving standardized scores would appear to have created a constant fear of EQAO results but more importantly has done very little, if anything, for the improvement of teaching practices. We are a far cry from the “voluntary commitment and inspiration” (p. 119) preached by Hargreaves and Shirley’s Fourth Way.

When discussing optimal “conditions” for a school to move forward, Hallinger and Heck (2011b) state that “In our view, these “conditions” include not only important features of the context (e.g. student composition, school size, school level) but also the location (e.g. current status) and trajectory (i.e. stable, declining, improving) of the school on “its” journey of school improvement” (p. 22).

The present study reveals that, at least for the schools of the participants, those conditions are not being met. P4 argues that professional development appears to benefit always the same individuals, often the ones who need it the least i.e. the teachers administering the provincial test and the same keen individuals who always volunteer to participate in professional development activities. Participants insist that as long as professional development needs are determined by standardized test scores and not student data from every grade level, or by too few, short lived coaching programs that have to be divided between a large number of needy schools, problems of practice will not be positively resolved and student achievement will, at best, stagnate and at worst deteriorate.

There is no denying the MOE’s good intentions in using the EQAO scores to reduce the student achievement gap. The Ontario Ministry of Education has used research on professional development and allocated funds for teachers’ professional development. Furthermore, there is no denying the importance of accountability to the public. But the only public data available are those provided by EQAO. Without doubt, the consistent work analysing EQAO data has yielded astonishing results in reading and writing, putting the province at the forefront of high education achievers in these areas. However, it is equally true that mathematics results are indeed decreasing and that most elementary teachers have a language arts background and struggle with math teaching, thus justifying the MOE focus on teacher math training. The question should then
be why should capacity builders, such as the ones in the present study, feel so overwhelmed and frustrated by the lack of results? Hinds and Berger (2010) argue that along with “cost, leadership shortcomings, length of teacher training and program planners who often use the one-size-fits-all approach” another major barrier in the implementation of efficient professional development initiatives is that “governments, school districts, and professional development providers often do not communicate clearly the rationale for change and the direction in which schools are expected to move” (p. 83). In my work as an education officer for the MOE, in charge of supporting school boards in the implementation of Ministry strategies and initiatives, I have experienced first-hand and on a regular basis, the misunderstandings between government and school boards and between schools and boards. Could messages be so distorted that, by the time they reach the classroom, they have lost their true intent?

This apparent conundrum between mandates and needs would seem to be the norm rather than the exception as expressed by Hardy and Wagga (2009) “PD is often understood as a binary relationship between employer-instigated initiatives -designed to implement specific reforms, or address accountability concerns- and more collective, profession-generated approaches and content, focused on more immediate, specific localized concern” (p. 511). This is echoed by Hallinger and Heck’s review of the literature which has led them to conclude that, by and large, the pressure of accountability is still driving professional development initiatives from “broader conceptions of learning” (2011b, p. 512) adding that teacher professional development is often “narrowly focused on improving standardized measures of learning” (p. 512).

On the one hand school boards appear to be moving away from the one-size-fits-all delivery of professional development by pushing forward the establishment of professional learning communities and encouraging innovative job embedded practices such as co-teaching, peer observations, coaching and mentoring. On the other hand, it would appear that boards have not fully committed to these precepts as demonstrated by the lack of consistency and follow up revealed by the data. This irony is not lost on the majority of the participants (10 out of 14) who are, for the most part, experienced instructional leaders who, not only have a clear understanding of the importance of their particular school context and some understanding of the individual trajectory of their teaching staff, but also understand the importance of relevance and practicality which are basic tenets of adult learning. P4 and P8, along with several other participants, are
often caught between enacting board mandates and responding to their teachers’ professional development needs. In fact, the data present a somewhat disconnected picture of PD initiatives (i.e. a peer observation here and a professional network there) with no follow up or measurable effect on student achievement.

Such poor results should not come as a surprise as numerous studies have showed a significant impact of job embedded PD on teachers practices and increased student achievement (Althauser, 2015; Striekes, Logan & Kuhel, 2012; Yost, Vogel & Liang, 2009). The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) (2012) points out that efficient job embedded PD goes far beyond selecting PD practices geared towards resolving problems of practice but has to also “focus on curriculum, collective participation, opportunities for active learning, sustained duration and coherence with student achievement goals” (p. 1). According to the bulletin Issue of March 2012, job embedded professional development will have a true impact only if the infrastructure it necessitates is put in place. The NIET clearly defines the role of school leaders in putting in place job embedded professional development initiatives. Principals “emphasize the importance of continued learning for all faculty, work to develop a school culture among teachers in which continued learning is considered an essential aspect of professional practice, identify and support effective instructional facilitators among the faculty, provide common teacher learning time, distinct from planning time and use student performance data” (NIET, 2012, p. 12). Remarkably those strategies are found within the data of the present study. Participants use student achievement data and model a continuous learning stance, they look for the expertise within the school to lead professional development, and they show creativity in attempting to find common time for collective work. Principals in this study are aware of and attempt to use strategies that are widely applauded by professional development experts and yet the lack of results is clearly an element of frustration for the participants in this study.

Besides the fact that the data used may not be the most comprehensive as they are mostly derived from one source (EQAO), perhaps the greatest frustration of the participants seems to lie in their dual, and somewhat irreconcilable, roles of managers and instructional leaders.


5.3.3.2 Manager versus leader

The data suggest that the constant tug of war between managing the school and leading instruction is still very much a reality. According to Hsieh and Shen (2010), the managerial perspective:

... views successful leadership as creating mechanisms to coordinate groups and link individual effort to shared goals of quality service or product. A manager is concerned with maintenance, follows the script, reflects legal and bureaucratic authority, develops schedules and budgets and exercise power of sanction and reward. (p. 109)

The role of manager has been often construed as being removed from the actual work. In the school context, it has for a very long time meant being removed from the matter of instruction which has traditionally been seen as the sole purview of teachers. While research has shown that “ensuring an orderly environment and supportive environment” (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd, 2009, p. 101) was an important dimension in building school capacity, it remains that its effect is not as significant as that of “promoting and participating in teacher learning and development” which, in the Robinson et al. review of the literature, has shown a size effect of .84, with anything over .6 being considered as very significant. The participants acknowledge the importance of setting up appropriate infrastructures such as timetabling, hiring and allocating staff, organization and safety of the facilities, strategic planning, as well as aligning and allocating financial, material, human and other resources.

While agreeing on the importance of having an overview of all aspects of the school—such as for P5 for whom budgeting is the necessary evil and allows her to adequately align material resources with needs—most participants decry the amount of time they have to spend on bureaucratic tasks such as filling out order forms, signing pay sheets, attending numerous and seemingly endless board meetings, writing and sometimes rewriting reports, reading and signing hundreds of report cards, answering board, parent and teacher emails, investigating discipline issues, and documenting poor staff performance.

Levacic (in Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010) argues that the proper management of resources is essential, highlighting the preponderant role of school principals in determining the “efficiency, equity, and adequacy” (p. 204) of resources so that they will positively impact student
achievement. However, Levacic points out that, according to the vast literature on school leadership, the “most important resource” (p. 211) is the teacher.

Although the research on teacher professional development as well as the funds invested in innovative professional development activities such as job-embedded practices, would indicate that no one disputes the importance of tending to schools’ “most important resource”—in other words, the capacity building of teaching staff—the present data suggest that principals are still mostly absorbed by administrative tasks as opposed to the capacity building of their schools. Whereas the participants indicate that many of their colleagues feel more comfortable being primarily administrators, for most principals in this study, the little time they have to work and learn alongside their teachers is a palpable cause for frustration. They cite lack of time to visit classrooms and lack of time to follow up on visits. Deep reflective professional dialogues are rarely happening and practices are not changing. Most of the professional development budget is spent on releasing teachers to attend professional learning networks assuming that the knowledge acquired will be shared amongst faculty, which rarely happens. For many professional activity initiatives occurring outside of the mandated PD days, such as board professional development teams, participation is often voluntary which, in many cases, means that the teachers actually needing to attend choose not to. Attempts at using monthly staff meetings for professional development often lead to union complaints.

The one tool that should help promote capacity building, the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA), has become highly regulated by human resources with deadlines, specific language, and processes that have to be followed exactly, rendering the whole process cumbersome, highly time-consuming, and perfunctory. In cases of unsatisfactory reports, the process often involve teachers’ unions leaving principals to navigate an even more complex process, through which they are not always supported and which may take place in a hostile environment. According to the participants, the Annual Learning Plan (ALP), has also proven to be useless as when reviews of the ALP actually happen, principals have to carefully measure their words when discussing learning goals for the plan as they may have to deal with complaints to the union. One high school principal argues that the TPA is a worthwhile process whereas for the other three secondary principals, the TPA, while being perfunctory at best, takes away precious time that
they could be spending building and sustaining opportunities for cross-curricular learning in the aim of engaging teachers in a pedagogical dialogue.

Yet if the data indicate that principals have “strategic conversations” (Davies & Davies in Davies, 2009, p. 19) which sometimes lead to “strategic participation” (p. 19), it is unclear even to them that “strategic motivation” (p. 20) ensues much less translates into capacity building. Principals ask pertinent questions to groups of teachers but find individual discussions with teachers on problems of practices much more challenging.

According to participants, building the capacity of individual teachers was always difficult and for some of them it has meant, in some drastic cases, requesting an administrative transfer to another school thus passing the problem around.

Furthermore, as stated by P8, capacity building has been rendered even more difficult since the adoption of Regulation 274 (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2014) which mandates that a hiring committee select applicants from a very limited pool of candidates, often from a long term occasional teachers list which, according to the data, has resulted in hiring teachers either less than competent or simply not a good fit for the school needs or vision. While acknowledging the fairness of giving priority to teachers who have been waiting sometimes years for a permanent position, such a regulation can backfire. If, as Levacic cautions that “While school leaders can attempt to recruit the best teachers for their school, this will not improve teacher quality for education as a whole” (p. 211), it remains that hiring the wrong teachers has dire costs, in Middlewood’s words “a mistake in making a bad appointment is extremely costly both in financial and human terms” (in Bush, Bell, & Middlewood, 2010, p. 135). Such a statement is consistent with the present findings as expressed by half (7) of the principals in this study.

I would argue that the debate over direct or indirect involvement of school principals in instructional matters may be less relevant than the distance separating the activity itself—or the individual—from teaching and learning.
5.3.3.3 Sustainability

Following a review of the literature, Towers (2011) sums up the underpinnings of inquiry-based learning in the following eight points:

- Knowing how to teach for understanding, the ability to understand and draw out the deep structure of the discipline, responsiveness to students, a commitment to exploring student thinking as well as skill in probing and making sense of student’s ideas, understanding the provisional nature of knowledge and the complexity of the teaching/learning relationship, a commitment to building a community of inquiry in the classroom, and a host of social and personal capacities such as care and concern for others. (pp. 261-262)

Arguably one could replace the word “students” for teachers and the word “classroom” for school, the leader of the inquiry process being, in such a case, the principal. Looking closely at the data, it is undeniable that along with caring deeply for their school community, participants exhibit many of the above mentioned characteristics. However, at the very heart of inquiry-based learning, regardless of the learner status, is the notion of reflection. For educators, adopting a reflective stance implies, among other things, the constant assessment of one’s practice based on students’ achievement, and the ability to adjust one’s programming and skills based on students’ needs. While the data reveal a common understanding of the value of professional growth based on collaborative reflection, they also indicate that the implementation of professional learning communities or PLCs related activities within the participants’ schools has not led to many changes in teaching practices and, when changes occurred they were not sustained. While evaluating the impact of professional development is beyond the scope of this study, for many participants, it would appear that all the relentless work and efforts and relative success in establishing a professional culture of learning, did not last past their tenure at the school, leading them to conclude that all that good work was ultimately wasted. The same results were equally observed by Fullan (2005) when discussing the real impact of the turn-around Ministry initiative which although yielding promising results at first glance was unsuccessful in changing teaching practices in the long term. This is particularly worrisome when considering that, according to the data, a principal’s tenure at a school is often shortened resulting in a lack of consistency for the teaching staff, contributing somewhat to the blasé attitude developed by teachers. As far as the data indicate, the inquiry stance required for the changing of practices does not take root and
never truly becomes etched in schools’ practices. Although one logical explanation could be that inquiry-based learning, being a relatively new aspect of teachers’ training, is a foreign concept for a great number of practicing teachers more used to the traditional in service model of professional development, it would appear that the same holds true for newly minted teachers whose training was based on inquiry based learning. Towers (2011) argues that the trend for new teachers, regardless of their initial training, is to quickly adopt the practices of their colleagues, whether such practices are efficient or not. Towers’ findings makes the case for the principal’s influence in positively and actively establishing an inquiry based approach to professional development. According to him, it is not sufficient for principals to have “a benevolent disposition” (p. 270) towards the practice of inquiry based learning but more importantly, principal have to be actively involved in the mentoring of new teachers by spending “lots of time in classroom observing, interacting with students, and later discussing his (teacher) ideas and processes” (Towers, 2011, p. 270). As for experienced teachers, it may very well mean succumbing to the beneficial influence of a strong instructional principal but unless they are continuously supported, most of them will revert back to what they know best. This is expressed well by Mitchell & Sackney (2011) when discussing the adoption of new practices, as they state “after an initial frenzy of initial excitement over the initiative, interest waned, energy was diverted elsewhere, educators returned to past practices, and any observable differences in teaching and learning fell away” (p. 27). The one explanation for the failure in entrenching new teaching practices that could help increase student achievement given by authors reiterates the importance of relevance and school context. They explain that “initiatives imported from outside the school fail to capture the issues of compelling interest or concern to individual teachers” (p. 27) and they also add that teachers “are not encouraged to move the initiative in personally, meaningful directions or to transform it to honor the learning conditions in the school” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011, p. 27). Such statements are eerily similar to the findings of this study as evidenced by the comments of participants on board mandated PD content and delivery.

The data reveal the importance of reflection through pertinent questioning as setting the bases for inquiry. Inquiry based learning for sustainability of innovative teaching practices is not a new concept as demonstrated by Franke, Carpenter, Fennema, Ansell & Behrend (1998) who argue that inquiry based professional development was at the heart of “self- sustaining generative change” (p. 68) of teaching practices.
According to Hallinger (2003), sustaining the use of winning teaching practices will depend largely on the extent to which staff will “assume ownership” (p. 347) of any change. Whether this is achieved simply through awakening the curiosity of teachers as mentioned by one participant or by relentlessly building teacher self-efficacy by developing teachers’ capacity, the participants in this study appear to have a clear understanding of the critical leadership role they play in establishing a “learning-centred” culture at the “pupil, teacher, staff, and organizational levels” (Southworth in Davies, 2009, p. 105).

Whereas they may lament the lack of money, time, coherence, and relevance when attempting to build their school capacity, most participants see the lack of sustainability as a major impediment in moving schools forward. Although lack of sustainability can be partly explained by the funding, time and coherence, P7 and P15 perceive sustainability as a separate factor tied closely to the high turnover of staff particularly turnover of principals. For the participants, the short length of time they spend in a particular school, not only prevents them from making substantial gains in terms of capacity building but more importantly instill in teachers a blasé attitude towards any kind of innovative practice the new principal may attempt to implement. If teachers develop a certain cynicism towards so called innovations, principals feel the strain of having to start all over again in a new setting.

Southworth (in Davies, 2009) insists that:

If new forms of learning are to take root in classrooms and if the emphasis of teaching and teachers needs to be more learning-centred, then such a shift, not only needs to be led, but led in ways which are consistent with these new forms of learning. (p. 105)

While clearly establishing the role of school principals in, not only establishing, but sustaining needed changes in teachers’ practices, Southworth’s statement along with the findings of this study have serious implications for the future of the role of principals as capacity builder.

5.4 Overall Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to shed some light on the reality of school principals as capacity builders. Fourteen principals, three of whom were high school principals, were interviewed to elicit their perceptions of their role as staff developers, the strategies they employ, and the
barriers they face in changing teacher practices to resolve problems of practice and increase student success. A thematic analysis of the data demonstrated that the participants, for the most part, had a clear and deep understanding of the role they play in staff professional development and the importance of promoting a continuous culture of learning in schools. The data also made it clear that although school boards, using the research on effective professional development, are pushing for the implementation of evidence-based professional development strategies, there is little evidence that those initiatives are impacting student learning. Professional learning communities with a focus on student data are being implemented, collaborative learning is encouraged, instructional leaders and coaches have been in schools on a short term basis, and embedded job learning initiatives are encouraged.

In light of the thematic analysis results, a revised conceptual framework is found in Appendix H. The revised framework emphasizes the distinction between direct and indirect involvement strategies, placing Monitoring, Collaborative Learning, and Reflective Practices under Direct Activity whereas Culture, Management Factors, and Principal Leadership Capacity are listed under Indirect Activity. While capturing the perceptions of participants as strategies used to influence teacher professional learning and development in the hope of influencing teacher instructional practice, the revised version has eliminated the arrows showing the iterative aspect of the model. The revised model wishes to acknowledge the participants’ use of professional development strategies commonly found in the literature, both empirical and popular, the perceived distinction made by participants as to the degree of involvement (direct or indirect) pertaining to the different strategies used, while also pointing out that professional development, as happening currently in Ontario schools, is not always informed by student outcomes. Just as importantly, the removal of the arrows pointing from Teachers’ Instructional Practice back to the Principal Instructional Leadership indicate the lack of pertinent data demonstrating the actual effect of the professional development strategies employed by principals on changing teachers’ practices for the betterment of student learning. Considering the present investment in time, money and human capital in Ontario schools, it is imperative that any strategy being used in the hope of improving practices and student learning be thoroughly and empirically assessed.

Indeed, despite their best efforts, principals acknowledge that, by and large, all this professional development has not, for most teachers, led to sustained change in teaching practices. According
to the data, this can be explained by factors such as standardization, described in this particular context as a lack of autonomy in designing contextually based professional development directly linked to individual class student achievement, an increasing all-consuming managerial role for school principals leaving little time for properly supporting professional growth, and the lack of opportunity to sustain positive changes in teaching practice.

One cannot help but notice the strange paradox of such a reality. On one hand, knowledge is mobilized, and money and efforts are spent to adopt efficient practices for staff growth as it relates to improved student achievement, and, as suggested by the research, professional development and the critical aspect of job-embedded learning for adults is recognized. On the other hand however, decisions on school professional development format and content are made centrally, irrespective of individual school context. The paradox does not end there. While the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2006) adopted by all Ontario school boards and used as the basis for hiring principals, features prominently the instructional on the leadership role of principals, boards’ administrative demands, according to the participants, require them to spend most of their time on administrative tasks such as report writing and purchase ordering. Furthermore, participants indicated being often absent from their school to attend numerous board meetings geared towards the implementation of board-wide initiatives that may or may not have a direct link to student achievement.

Unsurprisingly, such a mishmash of beliefs and efforts presents a very disconnected picture of the actual state of professional development, such as described by the participants of this study. According to the participants, many of their school principal colleagues are quite content to keep busy with administrative matters and facilitate professional learning from afar, rather than being actively involved as co-learners. The data from the present study would also seem to support Towers’ observation (2011) that principals actively involved in building the capacity of their school are few and far between. Participants, who for the most part are experienced instructional leaders, estimate that few of their colleagues are comfortable in the role of capacity leaders. According to several participants in the study, and based on conversations at principals’ meetings, most of their colleagues would rather concern themselves with the managerial aspects of running the school than playing a key role in the professional development of their teaching staff. Granted that most principals may not possess the knowledge or the skills required to lead
genuine professional learning communities. Nevertheless, the fact remains that school leaders’ relentless pursuit of a common vision of excellence or what P3 refers to as maintaining the course coupled with their involvement in developing relevant, research based, and student achievement driven professional development that “is of sustained duration (to) enable new approach to take roots” (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010, p. 99) is crucial if capacity building is to be sustained.

For several participants in this study, who are strong believers of schools as professional learning communities as the key to improving student achievement, the end result is an overwhelming sense of failure and frustration and disheartenment at having to start all over when they move to a new school.

I would argue that as long as schools are asked to “innovate” while following prescribed guidelines from boards, principals will have little chance of establishing true cultures of learning within their schools. Southworth (in Davies, 2011) argues that school leaders “make a difference to the quality of teaching and learning” (p. 91) by “modelling, monitoring and dialoguing” (p. 95). Southworth also points to the importance of system structures and processes insisting that “leaders bring about reculturing by restructuring” (p. 103). While Southworth largely views restructuring as establishing classrooms as “learning centres for staff” (p. 103), I posit that in order for principal to have the flexibility to adopt the precepts of a genuine learning-centered leadership as brought forward by Southworth, the restructuring has to happen on a much larger scale. Bredeson (2003) insists that professional development in schools has to be redesigned so as to clearly become an integral part of teachers’ duties. Professional development should not be perceived as an add-on but rather a teacher’s learning should be seen as “the” work. In schools where trust has been established, problems of practices are not perceived as failures but as challenges. Ongoing professional learning is not just a fashionable mantra but a way of life. Regardless of the format or content required to address problems of practices, Venables (2011) states that stakeholders must remember that at the heart of authentic PLC are the people not the programs (p. 5). In his own words, authentic PLCs are “about using to the fullest extend the talent and wisdom of a collective, an existing faculty of teachers that can, with intense and sustained focus on a few important things, bring about the most significant change and improvements in student learning” (Venables, 2011, p. 5).
If we are to believe than no one better than the school principal knows the context, understands the school community and the learning needs of students and teachers, then school authorities have to allow school leaders the autonomy and the time to establish true collaborative and cohesive professional communities

5.5 Implications for Policy

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2012), the success of Finland’s educational system can be explained by several factors. Finnish teachers are well trained in cognitive science, they understand how children learn and even more importantly that their own learning is just starting. Furthermore, collaborative learning and collaborative responsibility for all student learning is a way of life for them and trust in colleagues is inherent. Finnish teachers also have autonomy, what Hargreaves and Shirley refers to as “decisional capital” (p. 54). In other words Finnish teachers are allowed to decide on and implement evidenced based practices that, in their professional judgment, will benefit their students.

However, even more importantly, Finnish teachers have time. The instructional day in Finland is shorter than in North America, allowing time for teachers to collaboratively reflect and tackle problems of practice. Finland’s consistent high student achievement would appear to give weight to Bredeson’s idea that teacher’s professional development should be part of the day’s work. I would argue that building professional learning into the daily timetable without having to sacrifice preparation time while eliminating after school or lunch time meetings would go a long way towards eliminating some of the principals’ timetabling and teacher union concerns. But it would do a lot more than that. It would eliminate class interruptions and disruptions while considerably reducing supply teaching costs. More importantly it would help to establish collaborative responsibility for all student learning.

Hattie’s (2012) meta-analysis of factors influencing student success has clearly demonstrated that time spent on a task bears little influence on learning. Therefore a first step in solving the issue of time, or lack thereof, without compromising learning may very well be to look at the instructional day itself and give consideration to the mandated minimum of five hours a day, as stated in the Education Act (Brown, 2013, p.312). The Ontario Ministry of Education defines instructional time as follows:
The time during which students participate in planned learning activities designed to lead to the achievement of the curriculum expectations of a course. Planned learning activities include interaction between the teacher and the student and assigned individual or group work (other than homework) related to the achievement of the learning expectations in the course. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 64)

Such definition being closely linked to assessment of curriculum restricts the instructional time to the teacher and student interactions and gives principals little, if any, flexibility to organize the school day to maximize teacher and student learning. Along with the length of the instructional day, a reconsideration of the definition of scheduled instructional activities to include supervised structured activities broadly related to the curriculum but without the burden of assessment could be equally beneficial. In other words, the restructuring of the school day to allow teachers to learn as well as to teach without subjecting parents to a change in schedule would be, similarly to Finland, to reduce the amount of contact time a teacher has with students so that collaborative teaching and learning could become the norm rather than the exception in all schools regardless of their particular context. Structured activities supervised by parent volunteers or other community members could not only establish stronger bonds with the community, but would allow all students to regularly participate in a variety of activities such as music and drama, not to mention the possibility of actually fitting in daily physical activities. The need for embedding professional development into the culture of every school as a norm rather than exception could not be better expressed than as follows:

Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners now recognize that professional development cannot be an add-on to the end of an already busy workday, nor can it be just an option for those who are interested. Opportunities to learn are not organizational frills and they should not be subjected to the whims of capricious budget cutting exercises. Ongoing professional learning must be a dimension of professional work embedded in daily routines and organizational culture. For this to happen in schools, professional development must be seen as legitimate work, essential to professional expertise and exemplary practice. (Bredeson, 2003, p. 10)

The second implication for the Ministry of Education is a thorough review of the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) process. The present data suggest that the actual process has
become perfunctory and is not accomplishing much in terms of capacity building. While very
time consuming and costly in terms of human resources, it is not only failing to improve
teachers’ practices but would appear to have little impact on making teachers accountable for
their students’ achievement. Furthermore, the highly regulated and procedural nature of the TPA
seem to contradict the intent of adult professional growth as it does not focus on individualized
need and, according to the data, rarely leads to deep reflection on practices, both individual and
collaborative. While participants acknowledge the importance of holding teachers accountable
and most of them diligently follow and complete as many yearly mandated TPAs as possible,
thus agreeing with Middlewood when he states the importance of “monitoring the constant
appraisal of other people” (p. 135), they just as equally agree with Middlewood’s statement
about the appraisal process that “reviewing the process is also critical” (p. 135).

The third policy implication arising from the study is the notion that school and school board
funding parameters may be too restrictive when they concentrate on standardized testing results
for reading and mathematics (EQAO testing in Ontario), to the seeming exclusion of other
measurements. Data elements influencing funding decisions could be expanded to include
measurements of student success directly related to teachers’ ongoing learning and growth,
facilitated by principals who would have the time and budgets to maintain professional learning.

5.6 Implications for Practice

Participants in this study admitted being constantly divided between fulfilling administrative
tasks and supporting the growth of their teachers. Although they described themselves as
instructional leaders, they expressed frustration at the lack of time spent on building their school
capacity. Capacity building requires time and focus. Principals have to be provided with the
means to support professional development. This implies taking a close look at the principals’
duties by eliminating tasks and operational procedures that are not closely related to teaching and
learning. This may mean, among other things, reorganizing school structures by redistributing
duties and eliminating distractions such as the planning of the monthly all staff meetings which,
more often than not, is filled with informational items that could be easily communicated using a
different format.
Above all, there is an obvious need to look at the coherence and alignment, or lack thereof, of professional development planning within boards, particularly as it relates to the implementation of professional development initiatives. This may mean looking at the hierarchical structure of school boards and determining whether the centralised nature of board operations supports or impedes the resolution of problems of practice. Participants lament the lack of autonomy in selecting format or topic for teacher professional development arguing that needs can differ greatly depending on school context and therefore a systemic, board wide approach to professional development may not be as efficient as it could were it to be better tailored to individual needs.

The third implication for practice relates to the notion of systemic use of data. Notwithstanding the fact that my observations are derived from a brief examination of EQAO scores, it appears that the most vulnerable portion of the Ontario student population, namely applied stream students, special needs students, are not faring any better than they were prior to the implementation of professional learning communities. In other words, teaching practices have not been able to address the needs of all students. While acknowledging that many factors can influence student’s provincial test scores and granted that standardized testing presents only a snapshot of student learning, and one that may not always be accurate, it remains that, in Ontario, massive amounts of money are invested in schools based on their EQAO scores, showing, at first, great improvement in EQAO scores but, later on, unsustainable results (Fullan, 2005). In other words, from a systemic point of view, professional development funding, such as for release time, instructional coaches, mentors, professional learning communities, material resources and the like, has not greatly influenced teaching practices. The data in the present study would appear to confirm the situation. Participants were unable to determine the degree to which their best efforts in implementing professional communities regardless of the type, had been significant in changing teaching practices but they could confirm that for many teachers, it had definitely not.

This speaks to the need of using a greater array of data when considering the funding of schools. I would argue that by the time EQAO results are made public and recommendations are implemented, it is already too late for the vast majority of struggling students. In schools where teachers’ professional development aims at resolving problems of practice as informed by
student achievement results, data, both achievement and demographics, have to be regularly collected and immediately acted upon throughout a child’s schooling, beginning with the establishment of a solid baseline upon entering the school system.

Due to the particular organization of high schools, the role of secondary principals as capacity builder has to be redefined. Those principals are fully aware that, whereas, one may have thought that department heads were providing instructional leadership to their respective departments, it would appear that traditionally the role has been mostly confined to ordering textbooks and setting department meeting agendas. Problems of practice are not being addressed in high school classrooms and teachers still very much teach subjects and not students, in other words, teaching in secondary schools has not evolved from the traditional lecturing style of delivery. These observations are consistent with the findings of Printy (2008) who concluded that, although both secondary principals and department heads should play a role in establishing communities of practice, secondary school principals are usually far removed from classroom matters and department heads do not play a significant role in teachers’ professional development. Printy’s position mirrors the words of P13, a high school teacher herself, who chose to become an elementary principal to avoid becoming a high school “bureaucrat.” Yet, Robinson et al. (2009) insist that “the most statistically significant aspect of school leadership which impacts positively on student outcomes is promoting and participating in teacher learning and development” (p.10).

Finally, the success or failure in establishing a deeply-rooted culture of learning depends largely on the comfort and ease with which principals can use reflection as a means to engage staff in intentional, focused, pedagogical discussions as well as on the principal’s ability to assess professional development needs and find expertise to help support the growth. Thus, principals’ training, rather than focussing on information such as regulations and rules that can be easily found in texts, should put the emphasis on the principal’s capacity building role. This may imply the review of principal qualifications programs to ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the topic of instructional leadership, more specifically as the role relates to staff professional development and school capacity building in general. Principal training programs should also acknowledge the implications of leading learning in an elementary setting as opposed to a secondary setting and differentiate principals’ training accordingly.
Principals’ practices have to be refocussed on learning for all. For the principals in this study, it implies being given the flexibility and the time to establish a true culture of teacher inquiry based learning. It begins by streamlining administrative duties and paper work to free principals in order for them to actively be involved, whether directly or indirectly, in teachers’ and students’ learning and instructional matters in the continuous promotion of student achievement.

5.7 Implications for Future Research

This study although wishing to focus on the role of the school principal as capacity builder has uncovered factors, not immediately related to instructional leadership, that considerably impede the principal’s ability to establish genuine professional learning communities within their school and for which more research is needed. There appears to be a need to gain a better understanding of what this research has termed “standardization” or a systemic wide approach to professional development and assess the impact of system wide initiatives on the professional growth of teachers. An interesting comparison could be established between boards where teachers’ professional development is largely mandated and boards where school principals make most decisions governing teachers’ learning.

The role of what may appear as extraneous factors such as the impact of collective agreements in unionized school environments or other types of collective associations that are part of the school community such as Parents’ Councils in the capacity building of schools should also be examined more thoroughly.

Given the limited scope of this study which involved a small number of participants, all of them principals from the same education system i.e. Ontario publicly funded boards, the vast majority employed by the largest public school board and working primarily in the context of elementary city schools, there is a need to further explore the reality of school principals as it pertains to their role as capacity builders. Future research should look at gathering data, both qualitative and quantitative, using larger samples of participants from a wider variety of contexts such as city, rural, religious and private schools, and eventually possibly establishing comparisons with different education systems around the world. Research involving the same settings and participants should also be conducted over a certain period of time. Longitudinal data may give practitioners some insights into influences on the sustainability, or lack thereof, of high
achievement results by looking specifically at factors preventing sound and innovative teaching practices from taking roots regardless of the leadership in place.

This study also confirms the need to examine more deeply the capacity building of high schools. By looking at the specific reality of secondary principals and the influence of “balkanisation” on the professional development and growth of secondary school teachers, research may provide some answers to the challenge of building professional communities more specifically as it relates to promote collective responsibility for the success of all students.

5.7.1 Limitations of Study

While acknowledging that these are the views of only 14 principals, this study employs a qualitative design and therefore does not seek to generalize findings. The study recognizes the similar context of participants which limits data to a particular type of setting. All 14 principals in the study were from publicly-funded boards in the province of Ontario, Canada, and half (7) of them are presently employed by the same largest school board in Ontario and are administrators in schools located in one of the largest cities in Canada. It is also relevant to note that most of them have a strong instructional leadership background having made their way through the education system by occupying various leadership positions that in one way or another involved capacity building. Therefore, the data are limited to the views of knowledgeable, experienced, and passionate instructional leaders. Furthermore, only four principals came from a secondary background, which implies that the majority of data were collected based on the elementary context.

As the present study used only interviews for collecting data and as each participant was only interviewed once, methods and data triangulations such as survey, observations, multiple interviews, and use of documents were not used, limiting the internal validity of the study to one type of data (Edmonson & Irby, 2008, p. 84).

5.7.2 Significance of Study

While educational research continues to explore the multiple facets of instructional leadership as it pertains to building school capacity and findings are slowly making their way into the classroom, principals’ efforts in implementing innovative strategies to promote collaborative
cultures of inquiry within their schools are not changing teaching practices. One could easily conclude that vast sums of money used to fund teacher professional growth are being wasted as the reliance on external expertise or quick solutions have not proven to be sustainable in the long run.

I would argue that the numerous challenges experienced by school leaders in establishing and sustaining genuine professional learning communities are not so much the result of a lack of willingness or even knowledge, but rather stem from trying to instil 21st-century competencies and skills in an educational system in which basic structures have not changed much in the past 200 years. This study indicates that attempting to use collaborative inquiry as a means to resolve problems of practice in a system that, by and large, still uses the same school year calendar and day timetable and continues to view instructional time as teacher/student contacts may be comparable to the fabled attempt to fit a square peg in a round hole.

If the ultimate goal of school systems is to improve student achievement and because we recognize that the teacher remains the primary factor of student success—with the principal being the second—it stands to reason that ensuring that teachers have both the knowledge and skills to respond to all students’ needs should be the top priority. In other words, improving student achievement should not be about merely buying computer tablets or investing in a reading program, but rather be about using money to promote the development of the internal expertise within each school. This is because ultimately student learning is not about having the best technology or the best instructional coach, it is about each teacher possessing a clear understanding of each student’s needs and student’s metacognitive processes in order to determine the best course of action. Considering the multitude of needs found in a single classroom, the task is enormous and will not be accomplished by mandating teachers to attend professional development activities that have little to do with their own problems of practices.

While the work of DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), and Venables (2011) has highlighted the beneficial effects of professional learning communities, studies such as that of Seashore-Louis (2008) has painted quite a different picture of the reality and argues that the implementation of professional learning communities has, by and large, failed to fulfil its promises. Seashore-Louis’ study (2008) of professional learning communities in different school settings would appear to echo the results of this study as it pertains to the participants comments on the use and
efficacy of professional learning communities within their school or within their board. Similar to Seashore-Louis’ findings, the principals in this study indicated that PLCs were primarily seen by teachers as a tool for accountability, as sessions were, more often than not, about EQAO data, and generally PLCs were perceived as an added task to an already very busy day.

As previously stated, it is imperative that school systems adapt to a new reality of adult learning not only by ensuring the relevance of professional development (PD) through job-embedded practices but equally by reformulating teacher professional development within the context of a culture of continuous learning for teachers. Just as advocated by Bredeson (2003), teacher learning has to go hand-in-hand with the teaching, principals have to devote as much time to the learning of teachers as to the learning of students. Only when building capacity becomes an intricate part of teachers’ duties and is understood by all educators as “the work” will the practice of continuously reviewing and adapting evidenced-based teaching practices to students’ needs be sustained. Schools possess the collective expertise to address most issues of problems of practices and have to tap daily into that knowledge and those skills that will benefit all students. Teachers have to truly and genuinely assume collective responsibility for the success of all students.

The findings of this study substantiate the work of Bredeson (2003) when he posits that professional development as it stands, is not conducive to teachers’ deep learning and should be redesigned to become the work, happen at work, become entrenched in the work, as well as to consider outside opportunities for development and be pursued beyond work. In Bredeson’s words:

The central message in professional development as, in, at, outside of and beyond work is that the experience is centered in learning. Professional development that focuses on learning also conveys the message that the learner and his or her needs are primary considerations in the design, delivery, content and assessment of professional learning experiences. (Bredeson, 2003, pp. 159-160)

I would argue that adopting Bredeson’s design of professional development would eliminate many of the barriers faced by the participants in this study. If learning became the work for teachers, constraints such as time, engagement in collaborative endeavours, lack of trust between
educators, mandated professional development format and topic, school leadership turnover, logistical difficulties, and sustainability of results may be removed. The findings remind us that theory and practice are not always cohesive and that despite the knowledge and skills gained from the literature on school capacity building, principals still face profound challenges when attempting to mobilize knowledge.

5.8 Concluding Comments

The findings of this study reveal a will to move away from the traditional in-service professional development format. A genuine effort to establish a collaborative culture of sustained professional growth is evidenced by the data. However, a lack of cohesion between stakeholders, mandates and contexts renders the principal’s task of capacity building, if not impossible, at the very least very challenging.

While more research into the reality of principals as staff developers is needed, the data suggest the importance, for educational stakeholders, of rethinking the role of principals as capacity builders by giving school leaders genuine autonomy in designing efficient professional development that will respond to individual classroom needs while eliminating tasks that distract them from anything not directly related to the teaching and learning of students.

At all levels of educational structures, from government (e.g. provincial/state education ministries/departments), to school boards and local school principals, it would seem valuable that more thought and study be put into how principals can influence and assist teachers to provide best teaching practices. Although, for the purposes of the present study, capacity building was broadly defined in terms of the principal’s role in supporting the professional development and growth of teachers for the benefit of student achievement, the results indicate that to confine school capacity building to the instructional leadership role of the principal is a far too simplistic view of capacity building. If anything the data clearly demonstrate that other critical factors are at play; more specifically the data substantiate the findings of Beaver and Weinbaum (2012) on capacity building for school improvement, whose 3-year qualitative study of 11 elementary and secondary schools in Pennsylvania concluded that capacity building was better understood in terms of human capital, social capital program coherence, and resources. The results of the present study appear to confirm the inexorability of a school’s teachers’ skills and knowledge
(human capital) with the level of professional collaboration (social capital) and the alignment of a school’s needs, goals, professional development planning, allocation of resources (both human and materials), and funds (programme coherence and resources). Furthermore the notion that professional development is not about programs but about people is well articulated by what Mitchell & Sackney term the “ecological perspective,” which they situate as follows:

In institutions, the ecological perspective takes into consideration the dynamics and reciprocal relationships among people, values, principles, assumptions, goals, expectations, resources, structures, functions, processes, practices, artefacts and a host of other elements that shape and are shaped by human activity. (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011, p. 3)

As, in the province of Ontario, ministerial policies dictate much of what is happening in publicly-funded schools, the implication for policy aimed at building the capacity of Ontario schools for the maximization of student learning is clear. It cannot be mandated, induced or system changed (Anderson and Togneri in Bascia, Cumming, Datnow, Leithwood & Livingstone, 2005), but rather any initiatives put forth have to recognize and facilitate the living nature of school systems to give school principals the means to build and sustain their school capacity and maximize the potential of each and every student in their charge.
References


Day, C., Leithwood, K., & Sammons, P. (2008). What we have learned, what we need to know more about. School Leadership and management, 28 (1), 83-96.


Neumerski, C. M. (2012). Rethinking instructional leadership, a review: What do we know about principal, teacher, and coach instructional leadership, and where should we go from here? *Educational Administration Quarterly, 49 (2),* 310-347.


Appendices

6.1 Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

OISE
ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Invitation to Participate

Dear Principal:

I am a Doctorate of Education student at OISE, researching the topic of instructional leadership by principals. Specifically, I am interested in how principals support continuous learning of teaching staff. As a former principal myself, I seek a better understanding of your perspectives. Through my own experience as a principal, I know only too well the multiple tasks required of principals on a daily basis. Instructional leadership may end up as a low priority when compared to more pressing matters. In other words, I want to explore the practical realities you face regarding instructional leadership.

I am fully cognizant of the time demands faced by working principals. Consequently I am asking for a maximum of one hour of your time, at your convenience, to conduct an interview. The interview can be by phone or in person, at a time (and/or location) of your choice.

Should you choose to assist in this research, you will be provided with written assurances regarding confidentiality.

I would very much appreciate an e-mail response indicating your interest. Please indicate how long you have been a principal at your current school and whether your school is elementary, middle or secondary. Feel free to raise questions or concerns at any time.

Responses can be sent to mhlandry@rogers.com. Please indicate the contact e-mail address at which you prefer to be reached.

Thank you in advance.

Huguette Landry
Doctoral Candidate
Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
OISE/UT
Hello Sarah Morrison!

**PREPARING FOR YOUR VICE-PRINCIPAL PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL**

This workshop outlines the Vice - Principal Performance Appraisal process and the relevant legislation. The workshop is intended to support and promote professional development within the context of the vice-principal performance appraisal and the role that the vice-principal assumes when preparing for the PPA. Further, changes in the requirements will be identified and discussed.

$60 plus HST per participant

**April 21 – 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm**

Click [here](http://example.com) for more information or to register.

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**Quick Links**

- [OPC Calendar of Upcoming Events](http://example.com)
- [Principal’s Qualification Program (PQP)](http://example.com)
- [Supervisory Officer’s Qualification Program (SOQP)](http://example.com)
- [Special Education for Administrators (SEA)](http://example.com)
- [Education Law Qualification Program (ELQP)](http://example.com)
- [Mentoring Qualification Program (MQP)](http://example.com)
- [International School Leadership Program](http://example.com)
- [Charles Sturt University, Australia, M. Ed. and M.I.Ed (School Leadership)](http://example.com)
ONLINE INSTRUCTOR-DIRECTED WORKSHOPS - REGISTER TODAY!

These highly interactive online workshops are conducted by 'expert' instructors using Adobe Connect. The workshops are one and a half hours in length with a limited registration to ensure effective delivery.

**All workshops run: 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm.**

Workshop titles and dates currently offered:

- Challenging Conversations - May 7, June 4
- Understanding and Planning for Role Transition: Teacher to Vice-Principal - May 14, June 11
- Managing Your Emotions and the Emotions of Others in Difficult Situations - May 28
- Communication Skills for School Leaders - April 30
- The Good, The Bad and The Ugly – Managing Challenging People - May 21

Click [here](#) for more information or to register.

SUPERVISORY OFFICER'S QUALIFICATION PROGRAM (SOQP)

The OPC, partnered with OPSOA, is accepting applications for the SOQP Summer Session. We
are offering modules A, B, C and D in Toronto on
**July 5 - 10.** The deadline to register is **May 29.**
Click [here](#) for more information and to register.

**PRINCIPALS QUALIFICATION PROGRAM (PQP)**

For your teaching staff who may be considering the PQP, we are currently accepting applications for Part I and Part II of the Summer session. The application deadline is **June 12.**

Part I & II Standard Location Dates: **July 6 – 23.**

Click [here](#) for more information or email [PQP@principals.ca](mailto:PQP@principals.ca).

**YOU MAY BE CLOSER TO COMPLETING YOUR MASTERS THAN YOU THINK!**

Charles Sturt University’s (CSU) Master of International Education (School Leadership) is a flexible and profession-oriented degree. It provides a coursework or research pathway which can be tailored to individual needs. The program is offered by distance education and supported by a strong learning community. The program is administered from our Burlington Ontario Campus. CSU is currently accepting applications to begin
studying **July 13**. The Program Director, Dr Zeffie Nicholas, can be contacted by email znicholas@csu.edu.au or by phone 905 333 4955, extension 55137. Click [here](#) for more information.

**CPCO ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

**SUPPORTING MENTAL WELL-BEING**

**FOR STUDENTS, ADULTS AND SELF**

*April 23-25, Westin Harbour Castle, Toronto, ON*

Hear from a panel of health and education experts including Annie Kidder as they discuss issues that you want to know about. Build and share knowledge, strategies and ideas about how, as Catholic leaders, we support mentally healthy learning communities for students and adults, through large and small group conversation. Leave the conference feeling recharged, renewed and reconnected with colleagues, knowing that we are never alone in our work, and together our Catholic leadership is stronger. For more information and to register click [here](#).

**THE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION LEADERSHIP (IEL) COMMUNIQUE**

The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) is pleased to share with you the IEL Communiqué,
which highlights the Leading Safe and Accepting Schools Project 2014 Survey Results and Views from the Field. We encourage you to share this information with your school and system leaders. To view the communiqué, please click here.

EDUCATION LAW QUALIFICATION PROGRAM (ELQP)

PUBLIC SESSION - TORONTO

This course will provide participants with exposure to the statutes that inform education in Ontario, with a particular emphasis on the laws, regulations and policies from a federal level to a board and school level that inform a principal's accountability.

Module 1: Legal Contexts, August 21 and 22

Module 2: Management of Schools, September 18 and 19

Module 3: Rights of Students and Employees, October 23 and 24

Module 4: Safety and Health, November 13 and 14

The program will take place at the OPC office and the deadline to register is July 31. Click here for more information and to register.
SCHOOL LEADERS SHADOW EXCHANGE FROM CHINA - PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITY!

The Ontario Principals Council is hosting a partnership with the Jiangsu Education Services for International Exchange (JESIE) to establish and sustain international partnerships. The goal of this project is to introduce Chinese principals to our leadership programs in Ontario and to build international networks. The first delegation arrives October 30 and leaves November 5.

We are hoping to have primary, middle and secondary OPC Members who would be willing to invite these leaders to 'shadow' them for two days and to be involved in presentations that will help build understanding about the role of school leaders in Ontario. The JESIE delegation will consist of approximately 25 people principals who have been granted the opportunity to travel abroad and return to China and inform leadership development in Jiangsu, China. The goal is to establish sustainable partnerships that, in the future, may be expanded to teachers and potentially students.

If you are interested in participating in this project, send your information to cheron@principals.ca with your contact information.
SPEAKER SERIES - LEADERSHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE WITH DR. MICHAEL FULLAN O.C.

November 15-16 - Delta Ottawa City Centre

Based on the latest knowledge in Fullan’s newest book, Freedom to Change: Be careful what you ask for; and on the work in new pedagogies for deep learning, this institute will narrow in on the dilemmas of change: That the new digital age has provided us with free rein to change and with that comes new challenges and problems. Please click here for more information and to register.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

A Doctorate of Education student at OISE is conducting research on the topic of instructional leadership by principals. Specifically, how principals support continuous learning of teaching staff. Please click here for more information and to participate in this study.

SUON COLLEGE PRINCIPAL POSITION

SuOn College is seeking a full time high school
principal in the GTA who is familiar with the Ontario curriculum and interested in working with international students. The position will start immediately. The High School at SuOn, located in Toronto, is comprised of students mainly from China in grade, 10, 11 or 12. For more information on the position or to apply, please contact Gary Chen at g_chen4@yahoo.com.

INTERNATIONAL AND CANADIAN JOB OPPORTUNITIES

For a listing of various Canadian and international job opportunities, please visit the careers section of the OPC website here.
6.3 Appendix C: Interview Guide

- How do you perceive your role in influencing teacher professional learning in your school?

- How do you model professional learning?

- What form(s) of professional development do you lead? Do you participate in?

- Are there additional specific professional development activities that you support your staff to engage in on a regular basis (PLCs, TLCPs, Book clubs, discussions, peer observations, principal/teacher conferences, professional debriefing sessions, use of staff meetings, etc.)?

- How does the professional learning support teachers’ instructional knowledge and practices?

- What do you consider to be your role in shaping instruction in your school? What do you do?

- How much of the discussions you have with your staff is around teaching and learning?

- What are the organizational factors that, in your opinion, are necessary to promote and sustain continuous teachers’ professional growth and learning for student learning? (scheduling, staffing, team building etc.)

- What are the barriers to influencing teachers’ professional learning and growth in schools nowadays?

- How do you overcome those barriers?
6.4 Appendix D: Ethics Approval Letter

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 31666

May 11, 2015

Dr. Carol Campbell
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Ms. Huguette Landry
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Campbell and Ms. Huguette Landry,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “Instructional leadership: The principal’s perspective: The reality of leading for learning”

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<th>ETHICS APPROVAL</th>
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We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB’s delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McGillin Building, 12 Queen’s Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1SA Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3273  Fax: +1 416 946-5763  ethics.review@utoronto.ca  http://www.research.utoronto.ca/research-ethics/
6.5  Appendix E: Informed Consent Letter

OISE
ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Instructional Leadership: The Principal's Perspective
The Reality of Leading for Learning

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how school principals support continuous professional development of their teaching staff. I am interested in the perspectives of principals regarding their role in supporting professional learning for teachers in elementary and secondary schools.

I am a former principal and presently a Doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), under the supervision of Dr. Carol Campbell, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. My intention is to conduct up to 20 individual one-hour interviews with practising school principals. Each interview will be conducted by phone or in-person at a date, time (and location) convenient to the interviewee and interviewer.

The interview will be audio taped with your permission and then transcribed in written format for analysis. Following completion of the study, the audio recordings will be destroyed. None of the data will contain participants’ name or the identity of your place of work, nor any other identifier. Data will be secured in a locked office and only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data.

No risks to participants are foreseen in this research. Participation is entirely voluntary. Participants are not obliged to address any questions they find objectionable, and are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone who is in authority over them. The participants will at no time be judged nor evaluated and no value judgment will be placed on their responses. Participants are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and may request removal of all or part of the data.

This research may result in publication of various types, including journal article, professional publications, newsletters, books and instructional materials for schools. Participants name will not be attached to any form of the data provided, neither will the identity of your place of work be known to anyone tabulating or analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect participants’ identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, participants’ identity will never be disclosed.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Huguette Landry at mhlandry@rogers.com or by phone at (416) 603-9337, evenings and weekends. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Carol Campbell, phone (416) 978 1266. Participants may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.
Thank you in advance for your participation.

Huguette Landry                      Dr. Carol Campbell
Doctoral Candidate, Leadership, Higher and Adult Education (LHAE)  Professor, LHAE
OISE/University of Toronto            OISE/ University of Toronto
416 603 9337                          416 978 1266
Huguette.landry@utoronto.ca           carol.campbell@utoronto.ca
mhlandry@rogers.com
6.6 Appendix F: Consent Form

Title: Instructional Leadership: The Principal’s Perspective: The Reality of Leading for Learning (Huguette Landry, researcher)

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the study called Instructional Leadership: The Principal’s Perspective: The Reality of Leading for Learning and all questions have been sufficiently addressed. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study without any consequences to myself. I have also been told the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Huguette Landry at mhlandry@rogers.com or at (416) 603-9337, evenings and weekends; or, Dr. Carol Campbell (thesis supervisor at (416) 978 1266. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Participant’s Name_____________________________________________________

Signature_____________________

I consent to being audio taped and transcribed: _____________________________

Date______________________________________________________________________

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

If you would like a summary of the results of the study, please write down your email address here. It will be emailed to participants upon completion of the study.
### 6.7 Appendix G: Characteristics of Individual Participants

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*Table 3. Characteristics of Individual Participants*
6.8 Appendix H: Characteristics of Individual Participants

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework