FROM TEACHER TO LEARNER AND BACK AGAIN: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO TEACHER VOICE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

by

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Abstract

My research investigates how four experienced Ontario elementary teachers use their personal and professional knowledge to define what they consider to be personal, purposeful and relevant professional learning, or authentic professional learning (Mockler, 2013; Webster-Wright, 2009). Authentic learning is here understood to represent what the teachers themselves described as their lived experiences of ongoing professional learning, and what they identified as relevant and purposeful for their continued professional, as well as personal learning.

I used a narrative approach, which takes a situated, holistic perspective in examining teachers’ lived experience and motivation for engaging in professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). The primary rationale for using narrative inquiry is to construct narratives of how experienced teachers describe authentic learning in the test-driven environment that dominates the Ontario educational climate today. It is important to cultivate a trust in what the teachers express. In honouring their voices, we may develop a deeper understanding of their perspective, as teachers’ professional learning is an important element of how teachers merge new knowledge with their professional practice for the purpose of improving student learning.

I found that these experienced teachers seek out learning opportunities that honour their professional knowledge, integrity, and identity. While looking for a sense of autonomy in their learning they also expressed a desire to work with other experienced teachers in order to collaborate, communicate and construct new learning. As experienced teachers are a rich
resource, capable of building up the educational profession in Ontario, it is vital for the educational system to capitalize on the professional capital, wisdom, and knowledge of experienced teachers. This method of understanding professional learning through the lens of experienced teachers proffers an alternative approach to gaining a deeper understanding that constitutes authentic professional learning for them.
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

In this study, I examine how experienced elementary teachers in Ontario use their personal and professional experiences to describe what they consider to be beneficial to their own professional learning, or what I refer to as authentic professional learning (Freire, 2005; Mockler, 2013; Webster-Wright, 2009). The professional phase for teachers who have worked between eight and fifteen years, and sometimes beyond, has been described as one of transitions and tensions (Day, 1999, 2012). During this time in their profession, teachers manage the tension and pressures of their work and their own personal lives and often look for professional learning that will support both (Borko, 2004; Day & Leitch, 2001; hooks, 1994; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Postholm, 2012). Authentic professional learning, being both a complex and multilayered term, draws from Dewey’s concept of learning understood as a continuous process grounded in experience (Dewey, 1938). Within the field of teacher professional learning, authenticity is connected to a democratic discourse where the teachers’ professionalism is closely interrelated to teacher identity and professional judgment (Mockler, 2013). Authentic professional learning viewed through this lens comes to rest on what teachers consider to be relevant and authentic for their own growth as professionals. Authenticity comes from the merging of the private and the public realities of the teachers’ lives and should include elements that truly engage them in their own learning (Mockler, 2013; Palmer, 2007). Specifically, this approach to authentic professional learning emphasizing a holistic focus is situated in the teachers’ milieu and is constructed by the teachers themselves. Authentic learning is based in their lived practice and connected to their perspectives of teaching and learning. It rejects the interpretation of knowledge as a commodity
(Webster-Wright, 2009). Instead, authentic learning is intimately connected to the thinking and reflection that teachers do as part of their daily practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Authentic and generative teacher professional learning grows out of an understanding that good professional learning supports the formation of robust teacher identities, supporting teachers to develop their skills and capacities in relation to their contexts rather than to create ‘carbon copies’ of ‘best practice exemplars’. (Webster-Wright, 2009, p.45)

In this research, authentic learning is understood to represent what the teachers themselves describe as their lived experiences of ongoing professional learning, and what they identify as relevant and purposeful for their continued professional, as well as personal learning. My research takes a situated, holistic perspective in examining these teachers’ lived experiences and motivations for engaging in professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). My research, through the stories told by experienced teachers, constructs a current understanding of what they themselves define as authentic learning, based on their experiences teaching within the results-driven, educational environment in Ontario. As narrative inquiry is intertwined with Dewey’s theory of experience and situations, it is important that I situate myself within the research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). I thus begin by telling my own personal journey of understanding professional learning. I further provide a frame in which to contextualize the current educational culture in Ontario, as situated within the larger international educational climate. Finally, I position my research question within the current educational environment of professional learning in Ontario today.
1.1 The Researcher – My Personal Journey

I come to this research as a reflective and collaborative educator who has worked in different capacities in public education for well over twenty years. My desire to conduct this research in the field of teacher professional learning was initially influenced by the philosophy of teaching and learning expressed by Palmer (2007) in his classic book, *The Courage to Teach*. It was through reading his book that I became convinced that the divide between what teachers want to learn and what they, through school board and provincial directives are mandated to do, is detrimental to both teachers and the schools they work in. Palmer (2007), said that “teaching always takes place at the crossroads of the personal and the public” (p. 66), and when professional learning is mandated, we ignore the importance of the personal in how teachers grow their personal practical knowledge (Beattie, 1995; Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). In the current educational environment of results-driven agendas for teacher professional learning (Day, 2012), teachers’ choice and their personal and professional needs have been sent to the background of the debate about professional learning. Through my own personal experiences, as I will reflect on later in my narrative, I increasingly felt the need to explore further how elementary teachers, especially those who have been teaching for more than a decade in Ontario, use their personal and professional knowledge to define and negotiate opportunities for what they consider to be authentic professional learning (Freire, 2005; Webster-Wright, 2009).

My teaching philosophy has been strongly influenced by my early educational experience in the Swedish public-school system in the late sixties and early seventies, where relationships were integral to learning as teachers followed a cohort of learners for three years. I began my schooling in Sweden at the age of seven, in what is known as *Grundskolan*. This school structure
of mandatory, public education was introduced as part of the reforms undertaken by the Social Democratic governing party in the early 1960s (Lärarförbundet et al., n.d). The centralized school curriculum for this new school structure was explicitly based on a democratic education approach and the role of the school was “to foster democratic persons” (Drakenberg, 1995, p. 9). Swedish educational policy was highly influenced by the concept of progressive education. This philosophy, as represented by the theories of Dewey (1929), had helped shape Swedish educational thinking since the end of the Second World War and became the dominant influence on curriculum policy in Sweden as first expressed in the seminal document Läroplan 62 (Drakenberg, 1995). The Läroplan is the official Swedish state curriculum document, and in 1962, when I began grade one, this text explicitly stated that one of the mandates of school was not only for the students to be taught democratic values but moreover a sense of responsibility for those members in society in need of support (Drakenberg, 2001; Vestergren & Willner, 2012).

I can see that it is not a coincidence that I have spent a large part of my teaching career in the field of special education. In my professional practice, I approach teaching with the belief that all students can succeed when we create “classroom learning communities where everyone’s voice can be heard” (hooks, 1994, p. 185). I can clearly see the link between the philosophy of the education system in which I was educated and the values I hold as a teacher today. I wrote the following as my personal belief statement, part of my portfolio when I applied to become a vice principal:

It is imperative that schools ensure equity for all students at all levels. This is a belief that I hold strongly and that guides my daily practice. All students can, and have the right to learn and become valued, contributing members of our Canadian and world society. In
my work in special education, I have personally seen what students can do when provided with support to reach their goals. All students have the right to an education that values their diverse needs and personal history. I believe it is our mandate as educators and administrators to provide an environment that supports meaningful learning.

(Author’s personal writing, 2007)

I do believe that my strong stance on promoting fairness and equity within both classrooms and schools was indeed shaped by the democratic principles that guided my schooling.

I began my career as a teacher after having been a stay-home parent for several years. My initial work in education was as an educational assistant, working with students with special needs. During that time, I decided to become a teacher and applied for, and was accepted, at the Faculty of Education at York University. After teaching in Ontario for 15 years, I was assigned a role as Literacy and Numeracy facilitator with my current school board. This position was created as part of the Ministry of Education’s reforms in early 2000 in Ontario. Focused on bringing standardization by providing provincially produced resources to all teachers in the province, this was part of a response to the 1995 Royal Commission for Learning recommendation: “that professional development be mandatory to all educators” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Royal Commission of Learning Report: Short version, 1995, The third engine: Teachers section, para. 14).

In my role as Literacy and Numeracy facilitator, I participated in a wide variety of professional development opportunities (most were directly from the Ministry of Education) in order to be able to provide professional development to teachers including whole group, school-based and even individual coaching and support. I worked with a team of seven other facilitators in creating presentations to teachers and developing agendas for leading school-based
Professional Learning Community (PLC) activities. As facilitators, we were led by a school board education officer, who worked directly under the Superintendent for Education. All initiatives, directives and professional learning had to be cleared first by them. As I was facilitating the implementation of these initiatives, I noticed a disconnect between what was being delivered and teachers’ responses to it. I found that teachers could clearly articulate what they felt they needed for their own professional learning and how this was connected to both their personal and professional realities. When talking to teachers who had been teaching long before these reforms, I found that they expressed frustration with how much of what was being taught in these workshops was professional knowledge and skills they already had. Others talked about the disconnect between what was happening in their classrooms, the needs of their students, and what they were being mandated to do. Those who were long past the initial years of teaching spoke against the standardized approach to teaching, as they felt they had developed a personal style over the years that they knew worked well with students with a variety of needs whom they had taught. Many spoke about wanting to have a mentor with whom they could spend extended time learning, reflecting, and dialoguing.

After some time in this role, I became concerned about this clear disconnect between what was being taught and the teachers’ responses to it. Thus, I began to question the model itself (top-down, led by an expert, which in this case was me and my facilitator colleagues) and observed the impact that teachers’ personal choice, the importance of personal identity, as well as the role that relevance and connectedness had in the process of integrating new professional learning. I began reflecting on what truly counts as professional learning for educators, and how it may be different for more experienced teachers. I often found that teachers who had been teaching for over ten years were not only skeptical of what was being asked of them to do, but
many of them found the assumption that they did not have this knowledge already insulting to their professionalism. New teachers expressed frustration with the amount of information given and expectations placed upon them. The timelines for implementation of mandated assessments and structures of teaching were simply not realistic for most teachers. The experienced teachers often expressed that they felt their professional judgment and knowledge of both pedagogy and child development was being ignored. Some of the professional learning opportunities that were offered fit teacher’s expectations for their personal professional learning, but I consistently heard teachers voicing their concerns that the “one-size-fits-all” model did not meet their need for authentic professional learning.

In my observations of what was taking place during this time, it appeared that there was a divide between the personal and professional; a gap between professional learning policy and classroom practice. One such example is of a teacher who felt she needed to develop her understanding of how cultural context influences reading comprehension, but instead was required to attend workshops on running records, something in which she was already competent. I see this as a barrier to relevant and authentic professional learning. The need to consider individual teachers needs should be balanced against the needs of the schools and school boards (Borko, 2004). I believe that those personal connections to learning are as important for teachers as they are for the students they teach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Palmer, 2007). After all, it is the teachers who are the constructors of the curriculum on a daily basis in our classrooms and in our schools, and therefore, have the greatest impact on students’ learning (Hattie, 2003). If we leave teachers out of the decision-making process for their own professional learning, we are in effect, omitting the most important element of curriculum, teaching, and learning (Goodson, 1989).
The opportunity to participate in an SSHRC study led by Professor Mary Kooy (SSHRC, 2011-2015) on creating technology-mediated Professional Learning Communities (PLC) afforded me an opportunity to meet my need for meaningful, personal professional learning in social contexts. After my experience as a facilitator, I was searching for a way to both participate in and create differentiated professional learning. I knew, from my own experiences, that more experienced teachers needed more choice in professional learning within this restricted reform-driven, top-down educational environment. Listening to the voices of the participants made me recognize that my own reflections and concerns around professional development were indeed shared by others. The issue of trust, and more specifically, relational trust, (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Leana, 2011), was a recurring theme in our discussions and the idea that teachers can be trusted to know what they need was clearly expressed by one of the participants:

I think what teachers need to be in charge of their own learning is the belief that embracing this power will make a difference / be respected…. So, the starting point in building confidence in teachers to define their own learning is building trust… Giving us all a choice of how and what we learn really easily solves this problem and ensures invested learners don't walk away from PD feeling demoralized and insulted. (Participant in the online Virtual Professional Learning Community discussion, 2013)

My personal experiences, and what I learned from listening to the narratives of my colleagues, further motivated me to engage in this inquiry into gaining a deeper understanding of what experienced teachers in Ontario consider to be authentic, both formal and informal, professional learning (Avalos, 2011; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007).
1.2 Research Context: Professional Standards and Accountability in Ontario

To understand teacher learning, we must study it within these multiple contexts, taking into account both the individual teacher-learners and the social systems in which they are participants. (Borko, 2004, p. 4)

In order to inquire into what experienced teachers perceive as authentic professional learning, it is important to recognize the role of teacher identity through a holistic and situated lens (Borko, 2004; Day, 1999; King, 2014). Thus, it is important to understand the broader educational context within which teachers in Ontario work. The current educational climate in Ontario is in many ways shaped and influenced by the recommendations that were made by the Royal Commission on Learning in 1995. The commission was created in 1993 and its final report, named For the Love of Learning, was released to the public in 1995 (Government of Ontario, 1995). This 550-page report was explicitly advertised as a blueprint for changing Ontario schools and is enacted in educational policy in Ontario today. Three of the main recommendations that have had a major impact on teacher professional learning were the creation of a governing body of the teaching profession, the establishment of an arms-length assessment agency and the government’s commitment to providing continuous professional development for all teachers.

As a result of the call for establishing and monitoring of professional standards, the Ontario College of Teacher (OCT) has regulated the teaching profession since 1997. This agency was created to inspire public confidence in the teaching profession (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.). The main mandates of the OCT are to certify teachers, to regulate professional development, and to accredit teacher education programs in the province; as stated within Ontario Regulations 347/02 (Government of Ontario, 1996). A rather unique aspect of this accreditation is how, through The Qualification Evaluation Council of Ontario (QECO),
evaluation of professional learning courses for salary purposes has been negotiated by the teachers’ unions and the school boards for inclusion in local collective agreements (QECO/COEC, n.d.). This formal process allows teachers to increase their salary by taking Ontario College of Teacher accredited courses known as Additional Qualification course (AQ). These courses are delivered through Ontario universities, colleges, school boards, teachers unions and other organization such as Indigenous Education Coalition (IEC), and are all approved by the Ontario College of Teachers. In contrast to other teacher professional learning, the AQ system is directly linked to the salary structure of teachers’ contracts, and successful completion of these courses can move individuals up the salary grid.

Another major influence on the direction of teacher professional development and learning in Ontario has been the establishing of the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). This independent Crown agency was established in 1996 in order to deliver large-scale assessments. The Royal Commission of Learning had made this recommendation, as it had through its consultation process, ascertained that a “province-wide assessment of all students would contribute to greater quality and accountability in the publicly funded school system” (EQAO, 2017, para. 1). The publication of the school boards and individual school results have moreover, become an influential component of school improvement as these results are used to “develop systems for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education” (EQAO, 2017, Strategic Plan).

The creation of this agency in Ontario is not in itself unique as it is consistent with larger international trends within the last decade, where a focus on measurable goals and accountability within education systems is evident (Sahlberg, 2011). As such, EQAO conducts yearly mandated Ontario-wide testing for all students in grade 3, 6, 9 and 10. The government’s review of the
initial results after the implementation of this testing body, led to a province-wide initiative in 2003 focused on providing professional development and resources to all teachers throughout Ontario. The underlying belief of this initiative was that by providing the same resources and professional development to all teachers in Ontario, student achievement would improve and thereby meet the goals set by the Ontario government. This whole-system educational reform focusing on raising the bar of, and closing the gaps in student achievement, can be directly traced to recommendations by The Royal Commission for Learning:

on-going professional learning must become part and parcel of a teaching career. It seems impossible to do the job effectively otherwise. We feel so strongly about this that we are recommending that participation in professional development be mandatory for all educators, and that continuing certification be contingent on such participation. (Ontario Ministry of Education, Royal Commission of Learning, Third Engine: Teachers, para. 14, 2011)

Therefore, a focus for the last decade in Ontario schools has been on such mandated and centralized professional development, with the stated emphasis on improving student scores on standardized tests, and by association, teacher competence and student achievements. EQAO testing continues to drive initiatives, teacher development and learning opportunities in Ontario today (EQAO, 2017).

We know that Ontario is not alone in this results-driven approach to education, as other provinces and countries are engaged in similar approaches to teacher learning (Fullan, 2007; Sahlberg, 2011). Since the 1990s the rising influence of institutions such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), the education systems in the thirty OECD (Organization for Economic
Cooperation and Development) countries have found themselves compared to each other by standards set by the above institutions. These tests grew out of a call for universal standards of education in an increasingly globalized economy (King, 2014). The publication of such test scores have further reinforced a business approach to measuring student achievement, school success and by extension, teacher professional learning. As countries are ranked against each other, the pressure to perform well and improve has prompted governments to look at teacher professional development as a way of increasing the scores. Professional development is viewed as an approach to improve teachers’ skills and is delivered within a hierarchical structure where teachers are often mandated to attend (Judah, 2006; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). Often these professional development programs contain an objectivist approach to learning as training and take the shape of a traditional method of using an outside expert to guide and train teachers (Borko, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Even with the introduction of more collaborative approaches to learning, the top down transmission model of professional learning (Avalos, 2011; Pitsoe & Maila, 2012; Postholm, 2012) persists in being a trend in professional development within the public-school system in Ontario. More specifically, the lack of choice of whether to participate in these board and Ministry of Education mandated initiatives, such as PLCs (Professional learning communities) and BCIs (Building collaborative inquiry), severely limits teachers’ decisions in finding personal relevance in their professional learning. This often leads to a disconnect between what they want and what they are mandated to do (Day, 1999; Judah, 2006; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014).

Even when professional learning focuses on creating collaborative practices, public schools and educators often find themselves operating in a milieu of high pressure to perform to the level of imposed standards. Schools are ranked and often shamed in the media for their lack
of improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). While teachers may still find value in participating in mandated in-services and workshops, it has been well documented that working conditions for teachers in this kind of environment are not conducive to reflection or choice. The lack of these, as well as trust, is unlikely to promote either teacher collaboration or the willingness to engage in sustained professional learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Jensen & Sonnemann, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011). Instead of building opportunities for collaboration, schools and boards are often creating what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to as contrived collegiality.

In a learning culture influenced by “marketisation, managerialism and performativity” (Cain & Harris, 2013, p. 343), it is important to recognize how teacher professional learning can take many different forms and that different types of learning activities influence how teachers construct new professional learning. The terms formal and informal learning are concepts relevant to the research context on teacher professional learning as they represent these different forms (Hostetler, 2005; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). In order to examine the impact of teachers' uptake of formal and informal learning, I will define and clarify these terms further.

1.2.1 Formal and Informal Professional Learning

The use of a traditional, sometimes referred to as formal, approach to professional development focuses on the deficit model, or training approach, where skill and knowledge is delivered to teachers to fill a perceived need of the system (Avalos, 2011; Borko, 2004; Elbaz, 1991; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). Formal professional development is an aspect of teacher learning that can be found on all of the different levels within our educational system. Structured, or formal, professional learning thus takes various forms in meeting the different
needs of the systems, schools, and teachers. It is generally understood by those who create such learning opportunities that by providing teachers with the chance to participate in them, the teachers will improve their skills and knowledge, which in turn is believed to have an impact on student learning (Desimone, 2009; Timperley et al, 2007). The structured approach to professional learning has the potential to bring new ideas, skills, knowledge, and strategies to the teachers while at the same time provide coherence across a school board or province (Beck & Kosnik, 2014). The most common purposes of formal professional development are to provide a deeper understanding of subject knowledge and to keep teachers updated on new curriculum changes or pedagogical practices (Campbell et al., 2016). By engaging with experts from different fields, the teachers attending these sessions will learn new information, that they may not otherwise have received, as well as be given an opportunity to explore new approaches to implementing them in their professional practice. Without the support of external expertise, the discussions and learning may not otherwise be able to move beyond the collective knowledge of the group (Timperley et al., 2007). In light of the findings from the Truth and Reconciliation committee, there is currently a desire to support teachers in developing their pedagogical knowledge and understanding of the culture of our Indigenous peoples—formal professional development is one strategy for how this can be realized in Ontario (Campbell et al., 2016). However, formal PD must be guided by sound goals, for it is not merely the involvement of experts that is the key to such formal learning, but rather the design and execution of the professional development, as well as the approach that the instructors or experts take in promoting new learning (Beck & Kosnik, 2014; Timperley & Alton Lee, 2008). The focus in formal PD, however, is often on a type of knowledge transfer which ignores the social constructivist belief that all learning must be constructed (Dewey, 1929; Pitsoe & Maila, 2012).
Too often professional development has been viewed as an event; the one-stop workshop, or a completion of a course. A significant problem with the traditional top-down approach to professional learning is that it ignores the situated aspect of learning. How a person learns new knowledge or skills, as well as the social and physical situation in which this learning takes place are essential parts of learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000). International studies have shown that workshops, conferences and more traditional types of teacher development may create an interest or awareness of new concepts for teachers. Yet, these studies have not been able to conclude that formal professional development actually changes teaching practices in classrooms (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004). While this approach is now widely regarded as an inefficient way to improve teachers’ professional knowledge and skills, it is still commonly used and continues to be identified as one form of teacher development (Desimone, 2009; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Timperley et al., 2007).

Informal opportunities also exist for teachers to engage in learning on their own terms (Desimone, 2009; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richter et al., 2011). Informal learning can be classified as anything from reading a professional article to engaging in conversation with a colleague in the hallway, to collaborating with a critical friend (Beck & Kosnik, 2014). The main element of this kind of professional learning is that it is directed by the teachers themselves, who set their own goals for learning (Day, 1999). Teachers engaging in informal learning are typically not relying on an outside expert but are instead constructing new learning either on their own or in collaboration with other teachers. These informal professional learning formats have been less studied and understood as part of teacher professional learning. However, it would be misguided to view formal and informal learning as opposites; rather the two often work in tandem with each other and are better understood as elements of a continuum of teacher
professional learning (Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016). Thus, understanding the impact of both and how they interact in creating new knowledge is essential in painting a more holistic picture of authentic learning.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

Professional development must be concerned with teachers’ whole selves since it is these which bring significance to the meaning of the teaching act and the learning which results. (Day, 1999, p. 206)

Teacher professional learning is a complex, contextual and dynamic process for all of us who engage in this learning process. The purpose of this study is to examine how experienced Ontario elementary teachers use their personal and professional knowledge to describe what they consider to be authentic professional learning (Freire, 2005; Webster-Wright, 2009). Through the use of narrative inquiry, I conducted several interviews with four elementary school teachers who have been teaching for more than eight years in Ontario. Experienced teachers often have different expectations of professional learning (Borko, 2004; Day, 2012; Day & Leitch, 2001; Guskey, 1990; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Postholm, 2012; West, 2011), as they often “retain their ability to be self-conscious about their teaching and are constantly aware of and responsive to the learning possibilities inherent in each teaching episode and individual interaction’’ (Day, 2012, p. 14). To this extent, I employed the teachers’ individual stories and understanding of their own learning in order to construct and examine the relationship between experienced teachers and their professional learning. Developing a deeper understanding of what teachers themselves view as beneficial, what aligns with their theories, beliefs, and interests, is best arrived at through their own stories. Both my own experiences and the literature reviewed on teacher professional learning guided me towards using narrative inquiry as a qualitative method,
grounded in a social constructivist viewpoint. Narrative inquiry is further suitable for this research as it takes a holistic stance and invites teachers to tell their stories which “serve to explain and order” their experiences as “located in social communities” (Kooy, 2006, p. 17).

Early on in my research, I made the decision not to focus on formal professional learning such as accredited courses, university-based courses, or faculty of education programs while being open to the participants discussing them per se. The emphasis of my research is on teachers working, or having worked, in the field of public education and as such, I did not directly examine research pertaining to initial teacher education learning. While the literature around the role of principals in creating and supporting teacher learning is plentiful (eg. Fullan, 2007; Hattie, 2015; McIntyre, 2011), my focus was on the perspectives of the teachers themselves. Again, I was open to the participants discussing this, but my focus remained on the teachers themselves. In order to better understand authentic professional learning, I firmly believe that there is a need to delve deeper into what constitutes personalized and relevant teacher learning in a results-driven educational environment, from the perspective of teachers who have been teaching for close to a decade and have established their professional identity (Mockler, 2013). In order to reframe professional learning (both formal and informal) as personalized, purposeful and relevant we need to engage these experienced teachers in defining their own professional learning (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Freire, 2005; Nodding, 2005). While in narrative research, the research question “carries more of sense of continual reformulation” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p.125), I began my research with this overarching question:

*What constitutes personalized, purposeful and relevant professional learning for experienced teachers in Ontario?*
To develop a deeper understanding of this concept, the following questions were considered as well:

- **What are the barriers, as identified by the participants, to authentic professional learning?**
- **What do the teachers describe as elements of a learning environment that supports authentic professional learning?**

Thus, recognizing that questions in qualitative research may change over time and that new questions may arise from the interaction through the interviews, my initial question used in the interviews was used mainly to guide the discussion rather than steer it (Creswell, 2013). The importance of the telling of the stories by the participants is that they contain an organic quality that, moreover, resists pre-determined questions. Instead, the questions worked more as guideposts that may or may not be used to construct the experiences of the participants.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the educational community for several reasons. First, my research will add to the current research on professional learning and teachers’ understanding of what they conceptualize as authentic to their professional, practical knowledge. What is not currently being addressed by researchers in the field of teacher learning is the aspect of personalized relevance and motivation and how this affects teachers’ knowledge construction and practice (Timperley et al., 2007). This study investigates professional learning with the understanding that it is essential to conceptualize it as a complex and integrated system that includes the environment as well as the personal efficacy, identity, and motivation that teachers bring to it (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Secondly, this research explores in depth the interconnectivity of the teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional, in a community of learners. Professional learning, in order to
be effective and relevant, must further take into account the knowledge that already is held by the teachers themselves (Zehetmeier, Andreitz, Erlacher, & Rauch, 2015). Seeking to create an initial concept of how the teachers’ professional and personal knowledge influences teacher motivation when it comes to professional learning, my research will focus on the connection of the personal and professional. The majority of the teachers I have worked with during my over 20 years of education are open to engaging in professional learning. However, I have also found an expressed frustration with the disconnect between their own need for professional learning and the choices available to them. I have heard teachers express that as teachers, in their professional role, they have too often been viewed as separate from the persons they are as individuals (Green, 1973; hooks 1994; Palmer, 2007).

Finally, reframing professional learning through a holistic lens means recognizing teacher voices and the choices they make and will further provide an opportunity to enhance the understanding of the intersection of personal and professional in the field of teacher professional learning. The findings of this inquiry will enhance the perspective on how personally relevant professional learning can be interpreted and envisioned in a results-driven educational environment.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I offer a literature review on research in the area of teacher professional learning. As my research is based on narrative inquiry, I position my study on authentic teacher professional learning knowledge, emphasizing its personalized, purposeful and relevant nature within the larger body of literature on professional learning. In narrative research, the literature review typically develops as the researcher finds and follows the leads of the participants in the study (Creswell, 2013). My review explores the research in the field of teacher professional learning, with the main objective to be illustrative of both learning in the area of experienced teachers, and the elements that have been found to be critical of professional learning (Desimone, 2009).

As the nature of professional learning varies not only by the diverse approaches undertaken, but further by the teachers’ years of teaching as well as the locations where they work, many researchers seek instead to identify similarities and differences towards the view of comparing and evaluating professional learning opportunities (Kennedy, 2016). One concern with such comparisons is that they often focus on visible processes or end products rather than the process of learning itself (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). It further tends to disregard, or minimize the importance of the theories of teacher learning underlying various approaches used. Instead, the emphasis is commonly on what the teachers do rather than on how they develop theoretical and practical knowledge (Kennedy, 2016). Commonly accepted as an important criterion or requirement, especially within formal professional learning, the focus is often on content knowledge and collective collaboration (Campbell, 2016; Desimone, 2009). However, the mere presence of these components has not been proven to guarantee effectiveness on either the teachers’ nor the students’ learning (Kennedy, 2016). The motivational factors behind why
teachers learn are often missing in much of the research done to date as it is indeed challenging to examine motivation in traditional research (Day & Leitch, 2001; Kennedy, 2016; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Timperley et al., 2007)

My review of the literature was guided by the questions and responses I anticipated might arise in the narratives that the participants told, based on the conversations I had had with teachers over the last decade of talking about professional learning. During these dialogues, I found myself engaged in the stories that the teachers told and the understanding that I gained from reflecting on their narratives. Narrative inquiry is focused on the stories of the individuals, who often reveal in their words motivations for engaging in professional learning which may offer insight into the direction for an examination of the literature.

I begin this section by clarifying the terms professional development, professional learning, and social constructivism as many of the terms used are interpreted in various ways in the literature on professional learning. This is followed by an initial examination of the research on professional learning for experienced teachers, the literature as it relates to the elements that influence teacher professional learning, and the ways in which these are implemented in professional learning communities and action research. This chapter ends by initiating a discussion on the importance of teachers’ voice and choice.

2.1 Use of terms: Professional Development and Professional Learning

The terms professional development and professional learning are often used interchangeably when discussing the formal and informal learning that teachers undertake in their profession. Even in the recent report on The State of Educators’ Professional Learning in Canada conducted by a team lead by Carol Campbell (2016), the two terms are sometimes used to represent the same concept. However, the term development implies within itself a deficit model, while terms
such as continuous professional learning are used to avoid the dichotomy between formal learning, such as workshops and courses, and everyday professional learning and growth (Webster-Wright, 2009). As Timperley et al. (2007) point out:

> Over time, the term ‘professional development’ has taken on connotations of delivering some kind of information to teachers in order to influence practice whereas ‘professional learning’ implies an internal process through which individuals create professional knowledge. (p. 3)

The term development contains an implication of deficiency with an atomistic view of learning and places emphasis on specific results. Embedded within the word development are suggestions of a positivistic, patriarchal structure in which the teacher is the recipient of knowledge that has been deemed valuable by university academics and researchers, rather than the professionals themselves. The term professional development further indicates that in an atomistic view, the learning that takes place as part of teachers’ daily practical work is often considered as separate from the learning that takes place at a workshop, in-service, or course. The focus is therefore on the activity rather than the learner. Sometimes the term is used synonymously with teacher training (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Mockler, 2013). The intersectionality of the learner and the learning is often not considered or is viewed as a minor component of professional development (Biesta, 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009). While researchers such as Borko (2004) have attempted to redefine the term by focusing on the aspect of situated learning and acknowledging that such learning contains “both individual and sociocultural features” (p. 4), the term professional development continues to challenge the notion of the knowledge of the participants as important. Finally, research on professional development commonly centers on the results of the activity itself and how this can be measured in order to establish if it has changed teacher practice...
While in order to avoid some of these connotations of *professional development* being short-term activities such as workshops, in-services, or conferences, several researchers use the term *continuous professional development* (Day, 2012; Pedder & Offer, 2012). This term is, however, not interpreted in the same way by everyone in the field. The term *continuous professional development* can also, in some countries, refer to any professional learning done by experienced teachers, while *professional development* in then is connected to initial teacher education (King, 2014; Louws, van Veen, Meirink, & van Driel, 2017). Both terms continue to be criticized as being disconnected from active teacher input both in creation and application of the learning opportunities (Louws, et al., 2017). Some researchers have even attempted to create new terms, such as PLD: *professional learning and development* (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016), perhaps, in order to avoid some of the previous associations made with the term *professional development*.

In contrast, the term *professional learning* frames learning as active, situated, social in nature and constructed by the participants (Webster-Wright, 2009). More importantly, this active engagement of teachers in their learning takes into consideration the knowledge they bring to their learning, their motivation for learning, as well as their beliefs and theories of learning (Campbell, 2017; Timperley et al., 2007). Being active in their learning recognizes the importance of teacher agency; of being able to make choices even within the structure of some of the system requirements (Biesta, Priestly, & Robinson, 2015). Likewise, the concept of *professional learning* is situated refering to the important intersection of such learning with teachers’ daily practice (Borko, 2004; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Korthagen (2016) reminds us that even Dewey highlighted the gap between theory and practice and the importance of connecting the two (p. 387). *Professional learning* provides the chance to realize this as it
represents learning as inherently social. Here, learning comes out of dialogue and interaction with colleagues and encourages both mutual and collective reflection as part of the process. The learning environment further becomes an important aspect of how new knowledge and skills are constructed by teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Webster-Wright, 2009). Professional learning is thus viewed as contextually mediated and constructed (Day, 1999; Webster-Wright, 2009).

In this study I use the term professional development when referring to the traditional structured and more laid-on or top-down approach, with teachers as passive receivers of knowledge, and I apply the term professional learning when discussing teacher initiated, or teacher-led, learning. I further apply the description of professional development as implying a deficit model whereby teachers require transmission of knowledge to be effective, and professional learning as the construction and reconstruction of knowledge within a relational context (Beattie, 2001, p. 18). However, it is important to point out that many of the works reviewed, such as the one mentioned above, continue to use these terms interchangeably, and that the teachers I interviewed at times used both terms interchangeably as well. Additionally, professional learning, which in my study is meaning-making by teachers, means that understanding authentic learning cannot be completely understood or captured in binary terms. Teachers personalize and find purpose and relevance in learning that connects to their students, work, colleagues, and selves.

2.2 Social Constructivism and Teacher Professional Learning

Within a social constructivist paradigm, the construction of knowledge is grounded in social interaction with others in an environment where we can trust and be trusted, and where knowing at its deepest level is communal (Palmer, 2007). Teacher professional learning is situated in the
physical and social context where it takes place. Drawing on Vygotsky’s (1986) theory that learning is social in nature and distributed across both the individual teacher and the people in the learning environment, social constructivist theorists (Avalos, 2011; Borko, 2004; Postholm, 2012; Putnam & Borko, 2000), assume that learning is situated in society and that knowledge construction takes place through the interaction with others. The individual learner and the environment work in an interrelated fashion to construct new learning and understanding. Thus learning, for both adults and children is shaped by the social environment and interactions within it (Dewey, 1938). As such, the social constructivist paradigm has increasingly become the main lens used for understanding today’s teacher professional learning reality.

Social constructivism is grounded in the notion that all learning is constructed by each individual within a social and cultural context (Dewey, 1929; Freire, 2005; Goodson, 1990; Vygotsky, 1986). It recognizes learning as an active, collaborative process whereby we construct, rather than assimilate, knowledge through the interactive method of evaluating new information through the lens of our previous knowledge and experiences. Within this theoretical framework, learning is viewed as taking place in a similar fashion to the cognitive function of the human brain: through an integrated system of networks. In receiving new thinking and merging it with our current understanding, new understanding, wisdom, and knowledge are constructed. While we construct this new learning seemingly by ourselves, the social constructivist paradigm emphasizes that this always occurs within the context of the culture and time in history where we exist. Learning is conceived as an ongoing reconstruction of our experiences, where the process itself and the end goal of learning are deeply interconnected (Dewey, 1929). A social constructivist standpoint rejects the positivist belief that there is one objective, unbiased truth to
be found. Instead, it invites us to take a critical stance towards ourselves and our worldviews, and to be open to new possible interpretations.

My inquiry is grounded in the social constructivist tradition and aims to describe and analyze teachers’ understanding of how they construct their professional knowledge through the lens of their stories; their narratives. Teacher professional learning here is viewed as a holistic, relational journey of constructing wisdom. The epistemological stance of social constructivism is well suited to this research, as it embodies both context, community, and is based in the understanding that our personal consciousness is constructed through our relations with others (Vygotsky, 1986). The dual nature of personal and social of knowledge construction moreover emphasizes the vital importance of the role of language in this process (Vygotsky, 1986). Within a social constructivism paradigm, dialogue becomes the main instrument for negotiating, creating and re-creating new understandings (Freire, 2005). Consequently, the language of the personal narratives of the teachers in this inquiry can be used to interpret and construct what the participants consider to be authentic learning. Recognizing the intersectionality of learning and doing, the actual language of personal narratives becomes, in essence, the tool for both constructing and examining their wisdom. Teachers’ knowledge resides neither in the knower nor outside the knower; instead knowledge emerges from the recursive actions of the learner and the social environment (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). For this research study, the paradigm of social constructivism is appropriate as it contains this dialectical relationship of the teachers and the society in which they live and work.

2.2.1 Teacher Professional Learning and Education-as-a-Business Paradigm

In contrast to the social constructivist paradigm, the education-as-a-business model is focused on accountability and measurability which set up demands for a systematic comparison of teaching quality. The question of what constitutes improvement is moreover, closely linked to
societal expectations and constructs of what is considered valuable in the culture within which it is situated. The narrow focus on refining teachers’ teaching techniques or subject knowledge, fails to recognize the importance of reflection, metacognition or motivation in constructing professional knowledge that can be applied and sustained over time (Postholm, 2012). As teacher learning is a complex, interactive and dynamic process that does not lend itself easily to quantification, researchers have come to recognize that teacher learning “may be the most difficult aspect to measure in professional development” (Desimone, 2009, p. 191). While recognizing the crucial impact of teacher professional learning on student learning, professional development approaches continue to commonly be measured as effective only in reference to raised student achievement scores (Barrett, Butler, & Toma, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

This positivistic framework works on the assumption that learning can be measured in order to be improved upon. This view of education is not a new one; Bobbitt (1918) introduced, and Tyler (1949) further expanded, this scientific-management methodology, with an emphasis on efficiency and the elimination of waste, at the beginning of the last century. Their theories focused on the technical expertise of the teacher and moreover contained the inherent belief in the curriculum expert as being different from the teacher. The interpretation of teacher learning here represents a deficit model where the development of teachers’ skills and knowledge are viewed as goals for teachers, school boards and educational systems (Guskey, 2010). These are also the underlying assumptions of educational reforms in Ontario since the Royal Commission of Learning report (1995). Professional development is viewed as a tool for enhancing the quality of teacher performance, leading to improved student achievement that can be objectively measured through standardized testing.
The importance placed on measurable evidence influences both the kind of professional learning available to teachers within this test-driven environment as well as the research conducted (e.g. Barrett et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2004; Desimone, 2009). Research on how to measure teacher learning is a developing, as well as debated field in education (Borko, 2004; L. M. Desimone, 2009; Webster-Wright, 2009). The essential question of what and how to measure teacher learning is based on a positivistic assumption. Even researchers who gather qualitative data (Barrett et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2004), acknowledge that teacher learning is only partially measurable through observation or self-reporting.

2.3 Teacher Professional Learning for Experienced Teachers

While recognizing that measuring teacher learning is challenging, it is not uncommon for researchers to instead attempt to categorize teacher learning, and especially the learning needs of the teachers, in light of how many years they have been teaching. The different stages of teacher learning may vary from study to study, though most agree that teachers within the first few years of teaching, or novice teachers, have different professional learning needs in comparison to their more experienced peers (Day, 2012; Ebesole & Barrett, 2013; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009). Career stages or Professional Life Phases, as Day (2012) refers to them, are ways of examining the professional learning needs of the teachers during their careers. Day designates the phase where teachers have been practising their professions for 8-15 years as the middle phases of professional life and names it “Managing Changes in Role and Identity: Growing Tensions and Transitions” (p. 12). However, it is important to remember that regardless of career length or life stage, experienced teachers have varied and distinct professional needs which include both personal and professional realities as well as their learning environments and history. As with any learning, teacher professional
learning is never a simple linear process and therefore an overreliance on artificial sorting of teachers into life stages in creating professional learning may disregard important factors beyond the years they have taught (Broad & Evans, 2006). Their respective experiences, both in professional proficiency and personal life knowledge, need to be taken into consideration when making decisions about which professional learning will best allow them to grow as teachers. At this “middle” stage in their profession, many teachers are familiar with what works best for them by having reflected on their preferred ways of learning (Day, 2012). They are often open to explorations on how to deepen their pedagogical and practical knowledge as well as improving their practice. “Experienced teachers do not approach professional learning situations as empty vessels, but as people who have rich theories about how students learn, how best to teach them, and what comprises desired content and outcomes” (Timperley et al., 2007, p. 9). The ability to share their learning and examine the relevance of professional learning in relation to their daily practice becomes even more important to teachers as they deepen their professional practical knowledge. The chance for sustained learning opportunities and the opportunity to participate in authentic inquiries that connect to their own learning are components of what makes professional learning successful for experienced teachers (Borko, 2004; Broad & Evans, 2006; Day, 2012; Day & Leitch, 2001; Guskey, 1990; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Postholm, 2012; West, 2011).

As teachers with more than a decade of experience in their profession, they engage more frequently in the informal sharing of knowledge with other teachers as part of their practice, and they value this as an important element of their professional learning (Broad & Evans, 2006). Many experienced teachers have moved beyond the individualism, where you close your classroom door and teach, and are at this stage in their careers interested in collaborating, mostly as part of informal professional learning. They are willing to abandon the “egg-crate structure of
schooling” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 161) and seek connections in order to share and collaborate. These teachers look to examine their own practices and reflect on how to improve student learning. In this process, the importance of experimenting with different approaches and discussing ideas and activities with their colleagues become essential parts of their personal professional growth. As experienced teachers, they need to connect to the learning of others as well as to the unique needs of their own classrooms (Cooper, Peterson & Broad, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). The connection with others could be with one or two colleagues or can be part of a larger collaborative group (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Therefore, creating opportunities for teachers to conduct this kind of sharing and collective reflecting needs to be considered in both the design and implementation of professional learning models. (Postholm, 2012, Richer et al., 2011).

The need for self-direction and the chance to identify relevance and purpose of their professional learning is important when it comes to the motivation and engagement of mid-career teachers. Motivation here is closely connected to the sense of autonomy that comes from being consulted about their professional learning. While this may seem self-evident, the story of the teacher who exclaimed that, “in 22 years of teaching, no one has ever asked me what I wanted to learn” (Flint, Zisook & Fisher, 2011, p. 1) reflects this need for wanting to exert independent responsibility and have some autonomy regarding their learning (Campbell et al., 2016; Korthagen, 2016; Postholm, 2012; Timperley et al. 2007). While motivation is a multi-layered and complex expression, and researchers may differ on how it can be interpreted in teacher professional learning, most recognize the role it plays in teacher praxis (Avidor-Ungar, 2016; Bleichner, 2014; Korthagen, 2016; McIntyre, 2011; Richter et al., 2011). One path toward creating teacher autonomy includes asking experienced teachers to identify their personal
learning and considering these learning goals within the construct of such collaborative processes as reflecting together (Postholm, 2012).

This means that a more varied and mixed approach to learning professional practices that considers some of the interests and needs expressed by experienced teachers is required. Instead of viewing the needs of the experienced teachers as important, it is not unusual to regard their expertise mostly as a resource for others. An example of a common practice, which is still used with regularity today, is the practice of assigning an experienced teacher the role of mentor for beginning teachers (Boyle et al., 2004; Campbell, 2017; Jensen & Sonneman, 2016). While mentorship is a staple in teacher learning, a relatively under-researched area is examining how this process works to enhance the professional knowledge of the more experienced teachers (Leshem, 2014). Even as experienced teachers are often open to taking on a mentoring role, it is also interesting to note that teachers in this career stage are more focussed on theories than those teachers at the beginning of their teaching careers. Experienced teachers spend more time reading about research on teaching as well as delving deeper into the theories of learning (Richter et al., 2011; Postholm, 2012). It is therefore important to consider how to incorporate both inquiry and collaboration that includes research and theories in professional learning for mid-career teachers. Rather than being the overt focus on best practice, these teachers need to have an active part in creating the definition of best practice drawing on their professional knowledge (Biesta, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

The elements that are essential for authentic professional learning, in general, are found in the professional learning for experienced teachers as well. In the following section, I describe these characteristics of professional learning that are, mainly, grounded in social constructivism theory, the underlying framework for my research.
2.4 Characteristics of Professional Learning

We are only beginning to learn, however, about exactly what and how teachers learn from professional development, or about the impact of teacher change on student outcomes. (Borko, 2004, p. 3)

Most professional development programs are not effective, as they fail to consider teachers’ motivation for engaging in them as well as the elements involved in teacher change and growth (Guskey, 2010). Today, trends are emerging in research on the complexity of teacher professional learning, and the characteristics presented here are those most often mentioned and agreed upon in recent research published in this field. While accepting that measuring the impact of professional learning remains a challenging concept (Barrett et al., 2012), the literature reviewed here reveals recurring elements of what has been deemed successful in teacher professional learning. These characteristics are situated learning, duration of professional learning, collaboration, reflection, the creation of relational trust, and teacher choice and agency.

2.4.1 Situated Learning and Duration

The notion that learning itself is situated, is grounded in the social constructivist theories of Vygotsky (1986) and Dewey (1938). The situated learning methodology of teacher learning is built on the concept that what and how we learn is constructed by the individual within a social, cultural, and temporal context (Korthagen, 2010). Situated learning theorists consider and value the knowledge that the learner brings to the learning situation. Thus, within this paradigm, learning cannot be directly transferred from an expert to the learner. The individual teacher’s beliefs, values, and attitudes are important elements in this knowledge construction process. Job-embedded teacher professional learning represents an active learning model of teacher learning that has become an oversimplified interpretation of situated learning theories (Desimone, 2009;
Zehetmeier et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that situated does not always mean job-embedded or school-based learning (Campbell et al., 2016). A situated approach in teacher professional learning is reflected in activities such as collaborative action research and the creation of professional learning communities focused on collectively examining authentic problems within teachers’ professional practice (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Webster-Wright, 2009).

In order for intellectual and pedagogical change and growth, professional learning also requires adequate duration (Desimone, 2009). Professional learning activities and opportunities that stretch over an extended time have been shown to be preferred by teachers. They lead to sustainability in changed teacher learning and practice (Avalos, 2011; King, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007). While there is no agreed upon optimal duration that is viewed as most effective and beneficial, it is clear that when teachers are given time to collaborate, dialogue and reflect, they are growing their personal, practical knowledge.

2.4.2 Collaboration and reflection

Teacher collaboration is another characteristic deemed important in the knowledge construction of teachers’ professional wisdom. Working collectively and having the opportunity to belong to a network of learners promote the learning of the individual teacher and extend support for teachers (Webster-Wright, 2009; Zehetmeier et al., 2015). One such example is the practice of collaborative conversations, while working together on lesson plans or collaborating on a larger project, that takes place with or without outside facilitators (such as researchers). In these arrangements, the collaboration takes many and varied shapes, but the key component to learning is the interaction, action, and reflection inherent in these professional learning opportunities. These practices provide “the experience of acting in complex practical situations” (Zehetmeier et al., 2015. p. 163).
Reflection is yet another essential part of learning and may occur when individuals examine their own practice, or as part of a structured learning element of a collaborative learning opportunity. Reflective practice (Schön, 1987), links the act of reflection with continuous learning. Schön (1987) introduced the terminology of *reflection-in-action*, where the reflection takes place while the teacher is engaged in the activity of teaching, and *reflection-on-action*, which is when teachers look back and reflect on that activity. This concept was further expanded on by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), who introduced the term, *knowing-in-action* to represent the knowledge that is generated through the process of *reflection-in-action*. While Schön (1987) argued for the importance of a facilitator or guide during the reflective process, both of these types of reflection activities can be done individually (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Many teachers do this as part of their practice, either by examining their practice in their minds or by engaging in reflective writing activities.

Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) describe a systematic, or structured, reflection where the reflection while participating in a collaborative learning situation is core to the growth of professional knowledge. Learning with others, moreover, emphasizes the social aspect of knowledge construction as well as the possibility for practical application of what is learned and reflected upon. This structured reflection can be found in both professional learning communities and action research projects.

### 2.4.3 Relational trust

The notion of relational trust “is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 41). Trust among members of a learning community has been proven to be an essential component of successful professional learning (Borko, 2004; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Koo,
The culture within which the professional learning takes place has been shown to play a vital role in how teachers perceive their ability to engage in their own learning. One important aspect of this culture is the creation and sustention of relational trust. Relational trust is comprised of several factors operating in an interdependent fashion. The main one is the ability for teachers to make choices in their practice and learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The creation of this type of an environment requires both collaboration and dialogue among the people within a school. A residual effect of such collaborative professional learning is the development of relational trust in each other (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Kitchen, 2009; Postholm, 2012).

Relational trust is complicated and therefore difficult to identify (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). It is often easier to recognize the lack of trust than the presence of it in a school or learning community. A supportive environment is created through day-to-day social interactions focusing on respect and integrity. This takes time and commitment of all members of a school or learning community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The interpersonal and social interactions between the members of any learning organization are the levers in the creation of relational trust. A climate of trust and respect that exists between teachers extends to the interactions with students in the school, as well (Leana, 2011). The interactions and dialogue between teachers, as well as between teachers and students, are dependent on the respect they have for each other. The “sense of belonging in a relational sense and of accepting and confirming the other … is … essential in allowing us the freedom to explore, to challenge and to grow and re-construct our understanding of each other” (Beattie, 1995, p. 64).
2.4.4 Teacher choice and agency

For many teachers, professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives and rarely improves professional practice. (Calvert, 2016 p. 52).

The impact that teacher choice and agency have on the effectiveness and value of professional learning is often challenging to prove. While researchers describe teacher agency as a positive driver in education (Beattie, Dobson, Thornton, & Hegge, 2007; Calvert, 2016; Day, 2012; Kooy & Colarusso, 2014; Latta & Kim, 2009; Mockler, 2013; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008), the direct link between choice in professional learning and the influence it has on teachers’ learning is a relatively new area of research for the field. However, when teachers participate in professional learning that does not align with, or engender change in their beliefs, they are known to revert back to old practices (Avalos, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Timperley et al., 2007). Professional learning needs to be relevant to the learner in order to have an impact. Choice in participation is an important aspect for the application and integration of new learning (Calvert, 2016; Cooper, Peterson, & Broad, 2003). As such, “imposed participation in professional development activities calls into question the intended results” (Judah, 2006 p. 66) and the assumption that mandatory professional development is effective in transferring knowledge into improved practice is problematic and should therefore not be mistaken for authentic learning (Webster-Wright, 2009).

2.5 Examining the Characteristics of Teacher Professional Learning through Two Models

While acknowledging the importance of some of the core features of what makes teacher professional learning successful, it is also important to recognize that the focus of identifying
such features by researchers has mostly been through the lens of reform and school improvement (Desimone, 2009). Again, the distinction between professional development and professional learning becomes essential in understanding how research conducted in this field interprets success and growth. Many of the types of professional learning, such as action research and teacher inquiry within professional learning communities, are dependent on how they are implemented and to what degree teachers have a voice in the process.

Teacher professional learning takes many different shapes and forms. I have chosen to look more closely at two such models, as they contain many of the characteristics of effective teacher learning: professional learning communities and action research. Both models have been adopted and promoted by the Ontario Ministry of Education as professional learning processes for teachers and are currently common practice in most Ontario school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). Using the characteristics explored earlier, I examine the potential and the challenges of each as authentic professional learning.

2.5.1 Professional Learning Communities

The idea of learning together in communities of practice is not a new concept and has grown it was first introduced by Lave & Wenger (1991). Their stance that learning is both social and based on our daily experiences means that they are not only referring to teachers, but instead see this type of learning as occurring both at work and in our social life. It is this kind of learning, seen as situated and as part of collaboration within a group, that is often referred to when speaking about professional learning communities. Teachers in professional learning communities learn together in both formal and informal groups through inquiry, dialogue, and reflection (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). Professional learning communities are thus based on teachers working in a culture of collaboration of shared norms and a focus on improved student
learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). These communities vary in size and make up and could be comprised of teachers in the same division, school, or of teachers who share a concern, passion or interest in a topic from other schools (Timperley et al., 2007). Learning communities often include outside “experts” or facilitators, but not all of them do. There is also research pointing to the problem of teacher learning without a facilitator which maintains the status quo. The learning in such groups is limited to the collective understanding of the group itself (Timperley et al., 2007). Informal professional learning communities are those initiated and created by teachers themselves, where the focus for discussions and reflection is based on a shared interest in classroom practice. In both formal and informal learning communities, reflection is a key element of the development of new, practical, professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). Reflection, as a component of learning in the context with other colleagues, then becomes part of the professional discourse and learning that takes place within a professional learning community. As professional learning communities take the form of job-embedded inquiry into student learning, this form of professional learning is both situated in the schools and takes place over an extended period of time (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). These teachers work together in a shared inquiry over time. The collaborations between the teachers are conducive to building the relational trust needed to make sustainable changes in knowledge and practice (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the idea behind professional learning communities is not a new one, given Lave and Wegner’s (1991) construct of communities of practice, with its roots in both Dewey and Schön’s emphasises on reflection as instrumental to knowledge construction (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). The term has, in the last few decades, however, become synonymous with a type of school improvement approach that focusses on the creation of school-based inquiry. The concept was first introduced
by DuFour and Eaker (1998) in their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Their formula of basing their learning communities around a shared problem of practice has been adopted by many, including school boards in southern Ontario.

Government reforms, as well as school board mandates play a large part in creating and supporting professional learning initiatives, such as professional learning communities (Campbell, 2017). Moreover, in Ontario there has been a recent emphasis placed on coherence in the creation and implementation of all professional learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, Report to the Partnership Table, p. 6). One criticism of this focus on coherence, in the actualization of PLCs, is that the PLCs can be interpreted to serve as vehicles for implementation of agendas set by governments, boards, and even individual administrators (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). Campbell (2017), found that the balance between system coherence and teacher voice was indeed contentious and she refers to a national survey conducted by CTF in 2014, which “indicated that teacher autonomy existed, to some extent, over selecting professional development, but this was perceived to have eroded over time” (p. 12). The implementation of professional learning communities in schools still contains the possibility for collaboration, problem-solving, and the breaking down of teacher isolation through the building of learning communities (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). However, when teacher agency and choice are not considered as important elements of the learning process, the collaboration can quickly descend into *contrived collegiality* instead of authentic learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Campbell (2017), likewise found in her study of Canadian professional learning that there existed concerns regarding how school and board leaders conceptualized and implemented collaborative practices. “For some teachers, formal leaders’ attempts in provinces, districts,
and/or schools to create coherence and coordination could be perceived as controlling and undermining teachers’ own professional judgement” (p. 19).

### 2.5.2 Action Research

Action research is another approach to situated learning that includes the vital elements of both reflection and collaboration. The involvement in action research has been interpreted as a vehicle for self-improvement: a lived practice where teachers’ professional and personal identity are closely interrelated, leading to a more authentic version of teacher professional learning (Judah, 2006; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008). The collaboration with others could take the form of working with university researchers and/or with other teachers, in what is often referred to as collaborative action research (Bleicher, 2014; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Jaipal & Figg, 2011). Within the collaborative action research genre (where researchers are often part of facilitating the inquiry), teachers may be researching the same topic or theme of learning, or they could all be focusing on the same problem of practice (West, 2011). Action research in both these versions implies a participatory democratic process that focusses on improving teachers’ understanding of their practice (Cain & Harris, 2013). Teacher self-assessment tools indicate a positive impact of this kind of collaboration. Surveys show teachers assessing themselves as more competent in their teaching, especially when they have had a choice over the topic of their action research (Judah, 2006; West, 2011; Zehetmeier et al., 2015). As with formal learning, the addition of an outside expert or guide creates the possibility of expanding knowledge beyond what exists within the group during the beginning of action research. Action research can lead to both new learning and a sense of empowerment when teachers are given the opportunity to shape their research and work with topics that are relevant to their classroom practice, through the creation of trusting relationships developed with the university researcher. Through collaborative conversations, the
An university researcher shares the power with the teachers in uncovering different understandings together. The elements of reciprocity and respect between the researcher and the teachers are essential in order for action research to be seen as positive learning experiences for the teacher involved (Peterson, McIntyre, & Glaéz-Coutts, 2017).

As with professional learning communities, the element of reflection is a central part of the learning. The recursive process of planning learning activities for the classroom, implementing them and reflecting on the results are key components in any action research undertaken by teachers, either in groups or on their own. The act of reflection is a way of connecting teachers’ experience with their ideas and beliefs: “Reflection is a mental activity that allows careful consideration of a personal belief or a new piece of knowledge and enables one to decide whether they (the teachers) should accept the new idea or not” (Bleicher, 2014, p. 813). Action research is based on the notions of teacher-initiated change, and the systematic reflection on their practice to improve practice and clearly articulate their own knowledge and expertise (Pine, 2009).

When action research is externally mandated, the teachers who participate in it are working within parameters that have been set by others. Their research is not necessarily driven by their own problem of practice or interest. Teachers may be interested in improving their practice, however negotiating authentic participation with external obligations severely effects the outcome of their professional growth (Judah, 2006). The potential for professional learning may be limited by the tensions arising from the search for authentic collaboration, the need for belonging and alignment with the group along with the mandated goals of said research project. Goodnough (2010) identifies three modes of belonging in action research inquiry: engagement, alignment, and imagination. Instead of leading to mutual engagement and a process where
teachers can critically examine their practices and view themselves in new ways, mandated action research mostly leads to alignment with the goals set by the external agencies. As a result, action research that does not include teacher agency in choice and collaboration often becomes focused on the technical aspects of teaching (Cain & Harris, 2013; Day, 2012; Kooy, 2015; Mockler, 2013; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). Cain and Harris (2013) observed that, “When action research turned out to be technical, it was probably because external agencies co-opted teachers for their own purposes” (p. 357). While this type of research can bring about changes in teacher practice and understanding, it tends to instead focus on improved effectiveness and has not demonstrated sustained changes in practice or belief (Avalos, 2011).

For professional learning to be successful for teachers, the students in their classrooms, and the school in which they teach, it becomes important to consider the teachers’ own voices in implementation (Zeichner, 2006). As discussed above, even the most evidence-proven practices depend on teacher agency and a respect for the participants’ choices. Current research shows that when teachers are given autonomy and choice, their professional learning is more effectively utilized for both the participants and the students in their schools (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). In the research on teacher learning, teacher voice is often seen as closely linked with personal agency but can also be viewed as arising from participation with others in community (Palmer, 2007). Cultivating voice within a community can take many shapes, and collaboration within PLCs and action research holds the possibility of doing this. However, in considering the element of voice in teacher professional learning, it is possible to also take the position of attentively listening to the respective teacher voices with an ear to understanding and possibility; perhaps, even to a degree of understanding the possibilities that teachers’ voices bring to the research? While there are many ways of gaining access to teachers’ voices, narrative inquiry is
one method of tapping into this important element of choice in teacher professional learning (Beattie et al., 2007; Bullough, 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Day & Leitch, 2001; Shank, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009).
Chapter Three: Methodology

In this section, I outline how I gathered and analyzed the data in order to examine in what way experienced elementary teachers in Ontario use their personal and professional knowledge to describe what they consider to be authentic professional learning (Freire, 2005; Webster-Wright, 2009). In order to best capture the voices of the teachers, this study is in the form of a narrative inquiry, taking a situated, holistic perspective in examining teachers’ lived experiences and motivation for engaging in professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009).

This qualitative study is situated within the social constructivist paradigm and I begin by justifying the use of narrative inquiry as methodology for this research. I further describe the research design chosen for this study and elaborate on the research questions that have guided this study. Concluding this section, I discuss how I collected and analyzed the data.

3.1 Narrative Inquiry

At the beginning of this century, Dewey wrote that education is a form of social life. Narrative inquiry is one way of translating this Dewey conception into practical methods of educational research and reform. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, in Beattie, 1995, p. 53)

Narrative inquiry is based on the assumption of the interpretivist paradigm that our understanding is both complex and continuously constructed through the interaction of the individual and society (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 1999). As such, it recognizes that there are multiple ways of knowing. Narrative research seeks to create depth of understanding, rather than width, with an emphasis on comprehensive understanding in its findings. By choosing to use a qualitative method, I am acknowledging that the intent of my study will not be to generalize but rather to explore in depth the participants’ understandings of teacher professional learning.
(Beattie et al., 2007; Conle, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Creswell, 2013). The power of qualitative research is not in the volume of data collected but rather in the power of the human consciousness as reflected in the words of one person, just as the sun is reflected in one drop of water (Vygotsky, 1986).

One of the main features of narrative research is the dialogical and reiterative nature of constructing knowledge. From this perspective, I am interested in the individual ontology of the participants by exploring the first-hand account of the teachers. As the study uses narrative inquiry to examine the participants’ experiences in both their personal and professional lives, it is “situated in a matrix of qualitative research” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Using the interpretive framework of narrative inquiry places the participants’ professional learning stories at the forefront of this study.

My own experiences and the literature reviewed on teacher professional learning have guided me towards using a narrative inquiry as a qualitative method grounded in a social constructivist viewpoint. My research focused on the experiences of the individuals as constructed within social, temporal and cultural contexts. I draw on Dewey’s (1938) Experience and Education, and like Dewey, I believe that all human experiences as inherently social, which can be understood through narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to all humans as “storytelling organisms” (p. 2) and the constructing and sharing of narratives as inherent to all human beings. We are storytelling beings in that every one of us live storied lives (Beattie, 1995). Within a narrative inquiry framework, the telling and sharing of the teachers’ stories can support the development of teachers’ professional identities as they reflect on their stories when sharing their narratives with the researcher (Bullough, 2008).
The stories, when analyzed, became the vehicle for examining a way of thinking and learning in the field of education. From the beginning to the end of my research journey, my belief has been that it is by listening to the teachers’ voices we will get a clearer understanding of what kind of professional learning they need in order to grow and be successful personally and professionally (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mockler & Sachs, 2011). I view experienced educators as the “expert teachers” (Hattie, 2003), instead of technical practitioners implementing prescribed practices (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). In the valuing of teachers’ narratives, and by listening to their tales and acknowledging their personal and professional selves, there exists a possibility of envisioning personally relevant and effective professional learning. Through honouring their wisdom, and truly listening, I can understand and learn (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster-Wright, 2009).

When I focus on teachers’ voices to understand their experiences, I use Britzman’s definition of voice as learning: “meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community” (as cited in Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 4). Teachers’ professional lives and identities are mediated through their personal, situated and professional experiences and are constructed and re-constructed through the flow of action and reflection. The dialectic and iterative nature of narrative inquiry in itself serves to honour their voices and the meaning they bring to this process of communicating and creating accounts of their experiences. Through these narratives, I re-storied and reconstructed their personal professional learning experiences and closely examined their views of professional learning. The method of narrative inquiry also inherently honours the existing knowledge that teachers bring to their work (Avalos, 2011; Timperley et al., 2007; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008), and allows for the exploration of
what teachers consider to be authentic professional learning through a social constructivist framework.

3.2 Research Design

As narrative inquiry centers on the human experience, the stories of the participating teachers were the data source used to construct and analyze their personal and professional lives (Bruner, 1990). By inviting four experienced teachers to share their individual narratives around this topic, the learning of both the researcher and the participants was enhanced. The invitational aspect led to building trust as needed to share comprehensive stories of experiences. Researchers employing narrative inquiry value everyday classroom practice and focus on the knowledge teachers already possess, rather than working from a deficit standpoint where teachers are the least consulted in their own learning (Kooy, 2015).

When using a narrative inquiry design, it is important to consider the complex role of the researcher. At the center of narrative inquiry is the relationship between the researcher and the participant and thus creating and sustaining relational trust is essential in writing narratives that reflect the reality of the participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). As the process is an intimate one, personal narratives reported by researchers are reflected through the lens of the researchers’ own experience and worldview. The knowledge, and recognition of the existence of this lens made me continuously reflect on, not only my own views, but on how my previous perspectives and experiences might indeed flavor the interpretations of the teachers’ stories. To facilitate this process, I kept a reflective research journal throughout the process of conducting and writing about the research. This journal was used when crafting the re-storied narratives in collaboration with the participants. As the focus is on the teachers’ stories, I have sparingly used my own
words in the re-storied narratives, while remaining aware of my role as the writer in this reconstruction of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

One important aspect of truly hearing the stories was the creation of rapport and a safe space; where a level of trust allowed the teachers to tell the story. Trust was vital for a true account of their narrative to emerge. I was most aware of the impact of trust between the participant and the researcher and strove at all times to be conscious of the respective power positions during interviews. Relational trust is grounded in mutual respect (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and such trust is an important element in narrative inquiry. Both the invitation to, and the acceptance by, the participants contains within it some of the elements of the trust that is the foundation upon which the shared narratives would be negotiated. Being sensitive to the complex role of researcher and the intersubjective nature of narrative research, I took great care to remain self-reflective and cognizant of my role. I tried to avoid the tendency to either minimize or expand on the information in an attempt to meet assumed conclusions of myself as the interviewer; or to even create the happy ending or “Hollywood plot” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10).

3.3 Participants

Four experienced Ontario elementary school teachers were invited to share their individual narratives on how they perceive authentic professional learning. The research participants have 11-19 years of teaching experience. Using a smaller sample of participants ensured enough depth for a thorough analysis of their stories, as the power of narrative research is not in the volume of data collected but rather in the power of the holistic analysis that allows the researcher to interpret the lived experiences of the participants (Ollershaw & Creswell, 2002). The invitational aspect helped to build the trusting environment that is needed in order to share
comprehensive stories of experiences. Moreover, the trust needed to tell personal stories can be provided by striving for a collaborative relationship rather than attempting to take an objective stance. Hence, the teachers invited were teachers who have had a previous relationship with me, either through working together in the same school board, or participating together in professional learning projects. I made this choice deliberately in order to create a safe and collaborative environment for this research. The participants and I knew each other prior to this inquiry, but more importantly, we had a history of sharing stories with each other as well. In sharing our stories about our professional learning and other subjects, we had in essence begun creating the trust and respect that would become the foundations for the experiences they would share with me in this inquiry and the narratives that we would construct together. In a narrative study such as this project, there is no attempt to generalize any findings to a group. Instead, the focus is on the individual stories as they are nested within a larger educational environment.

While not attempting to be representative of a specific group, my sample is, however, diverse in numerous ways. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants, and while their experiences are reported as they told them to me, details such as names of institutions and schools have been protected as well. All participants are teachers in Ontario and have taught for more than 10 years within the school system in Ontario and they have experienced a variety of professional development and learning experiences in their careers. While two of them have also worked in independent schools as part of their employment, all of them have the majority of their teaching experiences within public education. Scott and Mimi work for the same school board, Jackie works for a different GTA school board and Nadine has many years of experience working for yet another Ontario school board. One is male and three are women. Scott and Mimi are parents with children of their own in the public-school system, while Nadine and Jackie are
not. All of them are Canadian born and two identified as visible minorities. Mimi has
international experience in the educational field while the others have worked solely in Ontario.
Three of the participants have taken a variety of additional qualification courses (AQ) over their
years in teaching and three of them have gone on to take a Masters as well; Scott and Jackie
pursued a M.Ed. and Nadine completed a M.A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher - participant (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Master</th>
<th>Permission granted for access writing by the participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Primary/ Junior/ Intermediate</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Published article Teachers share Twitter Blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimi</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Primary/ Junior/ Intermediate Music Visual Arts</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Primary/ Junior/ Intermediate Reading Specialist Special Education -part 1 ESL – part 1 Guidance and Career Education- part 1 Principal’s Qualifications I&amp; II</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Portfolio completed for Principals Qualification course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadine</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Primary/ Junior/ Intermediate Library Specialist Drama Specialist Special Education – part 1</td>
<td>M.A</td>
<td>Twitter Blog</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table with participant information.

3.4 Data Collection

To capture the individual stories of the teachers’ experiences of professional learning, I
conducted two semi-structured narrative interviews which I recorded and transcribed. Interviews
with participants and researchers are a common tool in narrative inquiry and there are many
variations on ways to use this tool (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The interviews in my research
were conducted in order to find the stories of the participants’ lived experience of professional learning. Being part of their professional learning experiences was not possible, so instead their reflections and retelling of their experiences became a way of accessing this knowledge, a kind of “reconstruction of experience” (Conle, 2000, p. 190). I recall hearing that the word interview has its roots in old French words meaning something like “to see one another.” The choice of using interviews was thus based on how “the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed” by the participants and the researcher (Mishler, 1986, p. 52). The negotiation of meaning between the researcher and the participants, which is a key feature of narrative research, can be found within this use of interviews as well.

The interviews were to be one hour in length to honour the teachers’ time, but all of them took longer, varying from 75–90 minutes as our conversations continued while we explored the varied landscapes of their professional learning experiences. The initial transcripts, used for analysis were between 11 and 15 pages long; but when re-storying their accounts using the reflective journal of the writing done by the participants, along with my notes made the narratives closer to 20 pages long. For the first interview, I used semi-structured questions designed to ask the participant to tell their stories, rather than answer questions that focused on my interest. The creation of the questions arose out of a desire to enable the teachers to tell their stories in their own unique way. The questions had grown out of the dialogues around professional learning I have had with teachers over the last ten years or so. It has been my experience that asking teachers what kind of professional learning they would pursue if there were no restrictions, has been a gateway into learning more about their views on what learning is relevant and authentic to them. In the interview protocol, I asked them to tell stories about the explorations of their descriptions of professional learning, their introduction to professional
development, their feelings towards professional development as well as their reflection on various kinds of teacher professional learning they have experienced. As I knew the participants before, the entry into the interviews was friendly and casual, and we began our time together by revisiting some of the things we had shared in the past, with the focus on teaching as well as teacher learning. As relationships are at the center of narrative research, there is a close link in the creation of the narrative during the collaboration between researcher and participants (Beattie et al., 2007, p. 122). The establishment of a safe and trusting interview environment was thus greatly enhanced by our previous professional relationship.

I further kept careful notes of my interactions with the teachers as part of the interview process and kept a reflecting journal throughout the process of interviewing, transcribing and analyzing the data. Those notes became part of understanding the transcript and served the function of forming some of the follow-up discussions that took place during the second interview. The reflections and the notes are embedded in the narratives that were re-storied. In dialogue with the participants during the re-storying process, those notes assisted me in interpreting and creating narratives that they felt were reflective of their stories. The second interview varied from teacher to teacher, as some wanted to go back to areas they felt they had not mentioned, while others wanted to expand on what they had discussed the first time. One of the participants initially expressed uncertainty about having time for a formal second interview. We continued the conversation via email (which became part of the data as well), but when we later met informally at an event we both attended, and we found ourselves discussing the topic of authentic professional learning. I wrote down the conversation, which we both found to free-flowing and reflective, in my notes afterwards. The follow up again was done mainly through
email where I confirmed what we had talked about. Once more, that member checking took place as we negotiated the re-storied narrative.

Part of my data collection moreover, included participant’s writing on the subject of professional learning. I used these texts to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers’ lived experiences. Some of the texts became a direct part of the narrative when re-storied, while others worked to create depth and texture to the stories. The choice of which sections of texts to use was again negotiated with the participants, but in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, direct references were not used. Some of the participants referred to these texts in their interviews when expanding their descriptions of their beliefs of what personal and professional learning meant to them. I used these texts to invite further analysis and reflection during the second interviews. The texts, when available, helped triangulate what was said in the interviews in order to create richness and depth in the narratives. However, the creation of the narratives was not dependent on these texts but rather supplemented the teachers’ voices in the interviews. I viewed the research interviews as field text rather than merely data collected, as there was a deliberate emphasis on dialogue based on the intimacy that comes from having an established relationship before the interviews. Both the teachers’ stories as told in the interviews and their writing comprise my field texts (Connelly, & Clandinin, 2000).

The interview protocol provided guiding questions; but as mentioned, it was important to let the participants share their own account without restrictive guidelines. The importance of listening to the stories guided me in my probing questions instead of following scripted questions. At times, I engaged in dialogue with the participants as we all know each other from other parts of our professional lives. This happened naturally as part of the research process.
Throughout the process, I took a learner’s stance aiming to be both nondirective and analytical (Glesne, 1999).

After the first interviews with the teachers were recorded, I listened to them several times before moving on to transcription. Oral stories, such as these told by the participants are autobiographical in the sense that they contain the memories they recall while creating their personal narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Often such stories can be used to make tacit understanding and knowledge visible and explicit (Beattie, Dobson, Thornton et al., 2007). During the interview, my questions from the protocol did attempt to guide the participants towards describing a chronology of their experiences, beginning with their journey into becoming a teacher, discussing their early teaching experiences and reflecting on their professional learning experiences over the years. In order to link the experiences that were shared in each of the two interviews conducted with each teacher, in a continuum of learning, a first coding was part of the re-storying process, in which I further ordered their stories into a narrative plot structure of past, present, and future. I used the writing that had been provided as well to flesh out their narratives and confirm or add to the stories that emerged from their interviews. The re-storying was made challenging by discovering how easy it was to want to preserve every word they had spoken or written. I found that, as Connelly and Clandinin (2000) state, the process of re-storying “is all made more complex when we realize that we may have fallen in love not only with our participants but also with our field texts. Sometimes, our field texts are so compelling that we want to stop and let them speak for themselves” (p.130). During this process, I worked on finding the balance among the re-telling, synthesizing and keeping their voices authentic.
When the stories were re-storied, I then presented them to the participants for feedback on accuracy and interpretation. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) however, emphasize that the kind of questions we need to be asking our participants when we are re-storying their narratives is not whether we got all the facts right, but rather questions about identity. In my request for feedback, I did form my questions to reflect the need for authenticity and identity. Once the first re-storying was completed I sent it out via email to the participants asking them to consider the following:

- Is this you?
- Do you see yourself here?
- Is this the character you want to be when this is read by others? (p. 148)

The email correspondence, as well as notes from conversations around their first re-storied narratives, now also became part of my field texts. Overwhelmingly, the feedback was positive. Scott wrote back “Wow Lena! I’m honoured and emotional reading this. This is incredible. I’d love to meet with you again—mostly because I’d love to talk!”

The second interview served as an opportunity for further feedback and expansion of aspects covered in the re-storied narrative. The feedback from the teachers during this interview was included in a new re-storying and guided the re-writing of the narratives. My own notes from the interview added to the data and I used it mostly for reflection purposes in analyzing the field texts collected. As mentioned, some of the teachers allowed me access to their own writing about professional learning; some had formally published documents, some wrote on Twitter, and others had personal reflections, which they were willing to share. I had previously secured their permission to access this writing in order to create a deeper portrait of the teacher’s professional learning experiences. As with all parts of the re-storied narratives, the teachers were
active in responding to the writing of their stories. Their responses helped me avoid generalizations or interpretations that did not honour the voices of the teachers.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis of narrative research is closely interwoven within the process of data collection itself.

The holistic-content analysis of field texts (e.g., transcripts, documents, and observational field notes) includes more than description and thematic development as found in many qualitative studies. (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002 p.330)

Throughout the process, the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and once re-storied, returned to the participants for their feedback and reflection as part of the member checking process. As Connelly and Clandinin (2000) so aptly state, “Negotiation occurs from beginning to end” (p. 132). The careful and multiple readings of the transcribed scripts formed the basis for coding in order to re-story the narratives using a chronicled frame to re-tell the teachers’ experiences. During the forming of the story into a narrative frame of past, present, and future, I used an iterative coding process in creating the narratives, as well as my own notes and the writings provided by the participants. The participants had multiple opportunities to read, edit and add to these accounts throughout the process. Carefully separating description from final analysis (Patton, 2015), the four storied narratives then became the thick description from which my analysis could take place. While wanting to ensure that the participants’ voices were at the forefront of the narrative, it is important to remember that narrative research falls within the heuristic tradition. The interpretation required for the re-storying of the narratives is a collaborative enterprise. This act of collaboration holds that, within the iterative process, some of the checks for validity and reliability of the narratives emerge as the end result of this collaboration. While attending to the chronological sequence in writing the narrative, I used a
thematic approach in the analysis, both in the creating of the re-storied narrative and in the analysis of the stories across the participants.

Through the multiple readings, I identified codes, which were recurring concepts found within the stories. The codes were organized into categories that allowed me to begin seeing themes and patterns across the different cases. The themes were used to identify similarities and differences in the four narratives, but as I kept reading and re-reading, new categories would sometimes become evident necessitating the creation of a new theme, or a subtheme. Aware that the broad questions asked were part of the similarities found, there were many others that only came to light after the analysis and re-storying process. While identifying the elements that support, or create barriers to professional learning, it was equally important to “burrow” into the teachers’ narratives in order to understand how they determined authentic professional learning.

While it is common to use software for coding, my preference was to hand-analyze them for coding purposes. Narrative inquiry implies the personal, and I prefer to use the hand-analysis as I wanted to be close to the data and I wanted to kinesthetically explore patterns, themes, and trends that I might not have anticipated in the responses. Additionally, this need is further reflected as the reason I chose to transcribe them myself rather than hiring someone for this task. As reflection is an essential part of all qualitative analysis throughout the process, coding the texts by hand further invited ongoing reflection as I worked with the different texts. The lined texts in the transcripts were numbered, which made it easier when identifying the issues, similarities, differences, and topics that the participants talked about. I made notes using the comment application in Microsoft Word. I further began colour coding similarities, first in each transcript and later across the different narratives. This allowed me to begin coding the texts which in part facilitated making connections between the different transcripts. As with much
narrative research, the themes helped structure and add depth to the narratives in order to better understand the experiences of the four teachers and further allowed me to analyze them against each other as well (Creswell, 2013).

Narrative stories have a three-dimensional structure of interaction, continuation and situational aspects that are important for re-storying and analyzing the field texts. These, along with the narrative plot structure, were included in the re-storying narrative which was presented to the participants. Ensuring that the participants had several opportunities to read, edit and/or add to the stories recorded was an essential part of ensuring validity. As narrative research deals with “the complex and changing characteristics of the human realm” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 477), the claim of validity is more complex with this approach than in other types of quantitative and qualitative research. Instead of claiming to aim for the kind of validity, reliability or generalization that is available in quantitative research, it is even more important to avoid creating an illusion of validity. This language of validity, which originally is found in qualitative research, does not lend itself to the holistic approach that is represented by narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Instead, it is the intimacy, in my case that fact that I knew the participants previously, the reflective stance taken throughout the research, and the attentive listening to their stories that supports validity, or trustworthiness. I took other steps towards ensuring validity within the research including the use of member checking, triangulation with my research journal and notes as well as other writings produced by the participants. Member checking further added to the analysis (likewise iterative in nature). The use of my research journal was important both for reflective purposes as well as when providing triangulation of the data. The collaboration with participants throughout the process sought to minimize “the potential gap between the narrative told and the” narrative reported” (Creswell, 2013, p. 512). In
the end, the fact that I had invited participants whom I knew from before, and therefore had the chance of getting not merely authentic reflections and stories, but also direct and honest feedback from, became one element of creating validity in this research. The relationship that existed beforehand in many ways overcame the common issue of participants being hesitant in revealing themselves to the researcher, who in most traditional interviews is someone they do know from before (Polkinghorne, 2007). While not striving for objectivity, my intention was to serve as a sympathetic co-creator who could observe, tell, and interpret the narratives of the participants. Using their words and engaging in collaboration towards the creation of rich narratives, further emphasizes Polkinghorne’s (2007) point that “the validity of the story is attested to by its rich detail and revealing descriptions” (p. 483).
**Chapter Four: Their Stories**

This section contains the re-storied narratives of the participants. As mentioned, I had sought out teachers who knew me in order to take advantage of a previous relationship to engender an atmosphere of trust that is needed for sharing of personal thinking and reflection. They were teachers with which I had previously worked or had engaged in different professional activities before. Mimi and I worked together for just one year, but we quickly developed a rapport and had many deep conversations around professional learning. With Scott, I had also been the vice principal in a school where he taught, and further, previously we had a connection when I was working as a facilitator with the Board. Jackie and I have worked together for many years on the editing board of an on-line peer-reviewed journal and we have also belonged to the same professional book club for just as many years. Nadine and I are members of a professional book club as well. As relationships are the key to narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), my previous relationships with the participants became a positive aspect in the creation of an environment in which they could share their stories.

In re-storying their narratives, I used of the idea of the three-dimensional space, that Connelly and Clandinin apply in their narrative research. This three-dimensional space means viewing the teachers’ stories as looking forward, backward, inwards and outwards (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Beginning with their past experiences, the narratives developed in a chronological dimension and the themes and headlines grew out of stories they told. The structure of their stories vary as each narrative is individual, but I am aware that as the inquirer, I do have a hand in creating the structure as well. Reflecting on this, I paid close attention to the feedback that the teachers gave me as they read the narratives as I had structured them. As my
study is focussed on teacher voice, I made the decision to infuse their narratives with their own words in order to bring their voices to the forefront. The citations used reflect the words that the participants expressed in the interviews and were used to give a clear voice to each of the teachers’ lived experiences and to imbue their narratives with their own language.

My own voice is present in the introduction of the participants as well as in reflections added to their re-storied narratives which allowed me to highlight some of the knowledge of my previous relationship with them and how this has enriched their stories. These reflections and additions were taken from my reflective journal and my observational notes from the interviews.

4.1 Mimi

Mimi is a teacher who firmly believes in the power of collaborating and reflecting with other teachers. During her 16 years, within the natural rhythms of teaching and maternity leaves, of teaching in different countries, schools and classes, Mimi describes herself as a teacher who is always trying to find good collaborative, working relationships. She views her ability to seek out and engage teachers in collaboration as one of her strengths: “reaching out to teachers and always trying to have that collaborative approach is something that I am definitely strong at.”

I first got to know Mimi when I was transferred to work as a vice principal at her school a few years ago. One of the first things I noticed about her was her stance as a team player and a professional; a leader within her division who shared her knowledge with her colleagues on a regular basis. She co-planned with her same-grade colleagues, but even went beyond that and often worked collaboratively with other teachers in planning and assessment as well. I saw her as a thoughtful and caring person who readily volunteers to assist with anything and help anybody. Her classroom environment was well thought out and the expectations for learning were clear to all students. It was obvious that she expected much from her students, but they also demonstrated
great respect for her as it was clear to them that she also took the time to support them and cared for them.

4.1.2 The journey of becoming a teacher
Teaching was not something that Mimi had envisioned to be a career for her when she was younger. Her experience of teaching consisted of an elementary school co-op placement, and of teaching piano during her high school years. While she enjoyed teaching, she never expected to actually enter into the profession. Education always felt like something she could fall back on if needed, but it was definitely NOT a calling for her. One of the main reasons was that she never imagined she would be able to stomach, what she considered to be, an environment so strictly governed by rules.

After the completion of her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Mimi applied to go into a Master of Fine Arts program, but at this time she also felt like she needed a change. It just so happened that one day she walked into the student-help office and saw an ad for teaching in Japan and decided to apply. She says: “it was, to be honest, a spur-of-the-moment idea,” but it would lead to major changes in her life.

4.1.2.1 Japan
She took the job teaching English in Japan and ended up loving it. She discovered that she was adept at teaching and within a short time she was promoted to assistant manager of the educational company for which she was working. She still didn't take teaching too seriously. While she learned a lot from it, she really did not see herself as someone who could teach. Her image of what a teacher was, included many things; how to set up a program of literacy, math or science, to be able to plan for the students and not just execute lessons. She ended up leaving Japan because she struggled with crippling morning sickness being pregnant with her first child. Mimi later returned to Japan with her young son when he was only 4 months old, primarily to
join her husband who was working there. However, he soon afterward lost his job so they
decided to head back to her husband’s native country in South America.

4.2.1.2 South America
Mimi’s next experience of teaching was working in an American school in South America. In
South America, her husband felt that being so far away from her own country, she would be
happier if she had a job. Her husband knew many people in the city they were living in and used
a contact of his at the American School to help her get a position there. It was while teaching
there, working with some fantastic staff, and beginning her Masters in Education, that she really
started to think about making a career out of teaching. She took a kindergarten job during her
second year there but left the school when it didn't work out. She tells the story of this time when
she was teaching and how this experience affected her. The class assignment itself was
challenging; scary, but also disappointing to her. When Mimi tells this story, she interjects it with
laughter and jokes about her own lack of experience, but as the narrative unfolds, it becomes
clear that this was a difficult situation for many other reasons. In the end, her moral compass
gave her no choice but to resign from this position.

I had a brief stint as a kindergarten teacher in the American school. I actually quit that
job. I actually quit. I am not much of a quitter, but I gave them my notice at Christmas
and I said I couldn’t do it anymore. It was 28 kids, and we were doing play-based
learning, play-based discovery learning is what we called it then. Discovery learning. So,
it ended up being inquiry without the word inquiry. The kids had to go through what was
a kind of inquiry process. Even though the teachers didn’t use that terminology—they
called it discovery learning—it was indeed inquiry-based learning. The students had to go
through this inquiry or discovery process and you as a teacher would meet with them at
certain check-in points. Here they would tell you what they were doing and then it was my job as the teacher to help them establish their plan for discovery and learning. The class consisted of 28 young children of junior kindergarten age, and even though I had an assistant and an aide, the job was really hard. I had a teacher, who worked as my assistant and we also had what was referred to as an aide. I was in charge of both of them. I hired both of them and then I had to fire my aide due to parent[al] pressure and that’s why I quit. I believe it was because in the mind of the parents, within this social system, she was lower class. I felt that her education was incredible. She was dynamic, well read, she was phenomenal, and in my opinion, she was much better than my assistant. My assistant was from what was known as the upper class. She was a socialite kind of girl…you know, very preoccupied with what she looked like and marrying well, and you know that whole sphere that is there. She felt threatened by this other woman who worked as the aide and she basically got the parents to turn against the woman who was working as the classroom aide. She was incredible, she could never make headway, and she could never progress in her profession because she was considered, you know, “campo Chica”, and she was like a country person. She dressed a certain way that was like a maid, she was of the class of a maid. The maids would talk to her, but not the parents. So, I had to fire her- I had this pressure and I…it was right after 9/11 and I just said: I am done. This is not worth it, so that’s why I left. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

Perhaps this is where her interest in social justice and equity began to grow? Having lived in a country usually referred to as a developing or third world nation, anti-oppression and social justice have become subjects that she continues to be interested in learning more about.
Professional learning during this time mainly consisted of learning on the job. Her experience had an emotional and lasting impact on Mimi as a teacher. Has it also been an influential part of forming her view of professional learning as being much more about simply understanding subject knowledge and pedagogy? To her, an important part of learning to become a teacher is learning how to manage the workload and how to create and maintain professional relationships. She sees herself as proficient in these skills that are an integral part of her professional identity. Mimi came to understand the importance of professional relationships as integral to being and becoming a teacher: “those are the things that we don’t learn at school, but they are really important because it impacts how you can function in your classroom and how you are as a professional.”

Soon afterward, she got a position with another international school teaching music and art for a year. For the rest of her time in South America, Mimi worked mostly as a grade six teacher. As teachers don’t get paid very well in South America, she worked two more jobs; one at a local university and also as a private tutor to children from an Asian country whose parents worked at the Embassy. She did not have access to many resources in her jobs. Working with a lack of resources may have been a challenge, but Mimi saw it as a positive challenge. She explains that teachers in South America have to be both creative and flexible in order to be successful. Not too many people who are in education are there just for the money, “because there isn't any.” Teaching in conditions like these also showed her the value of collaboration and the importance of PD, when it was available.

Mimi’s best professional learning experience was during her time as a grade six teacher. At this time, she was working with a more experienced teacher and entered into a phase of collaborative teaching which was based on mutual respect and a desire to improve student
achievement. What she learned during this time shaped her teaching philosophy and carved the path to her strong belief in the power of collaboration among educators. She identifies this approach to professional learning as one focused on teamwork, action research, and collaboration. Through the backdrop of the culture of the American International School in South America, Mimi tells the story of how she experienced this collaboration.

I truly enjoyed working with a teacher in South America where we co-taught grade six and that was really interesting. At the time, I was pretty young, and I felt in so many ways that I didn’t know what I was doing because I hadn’t gone to the faculty of education. This was also a time when we were doing our action research. We would co-teach, we would moderate student work together and we would observe each other teach. I feel that this positive experience had much to do with her and what she taught me. She was so calm and laid-back and had a lot of international experience and she was also able to share that international experience with me. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

What I learned from her was about the diversity of learners and how it is much greater than you think it is. We worked closely together, and I didn’t feel threatened by her at all, even though she had so much more experience. Looking back at it I realize that she was only probably 29 but it felt like she was so much older than me. The reality was that she had actually been teaching since she was 22, because in the States, you can do a three-year undergraduate degree in education. In order to be a teacher, you only need to have an undergraduate degree. Their system allows you to actually do your undergraduate in education and then you do your Master on top of that. At the time we were working together, she was doing her Master with me. In the American system, a Master degree would lead to a higher salary and would allow you to teach at better
schools; like the Charter schools. Charter schools are closely aligned with business; they are basically corporate schools. Charter schools are funded by businesses which in my opinion is a little scary actually. But they are quite la-di-da. They are considered to be the best schools. She was just so forgiving and understanding of all my flaws and of my ignorance of…you know. She had so much research too, she was a reader; she read, and she passed me stuff and “you need to read this, and …” so she was great. That was a great experience…because it really helped launch me into understanding. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

The collaboration was the key component of this professional learning and Mimi talks about how the two of them developed a nice relationship. Relational trust was a key component in why this was a positive and successful experience. She expressed thankfulness for how much she learned from this teacher, but at the same time, she knew that the relationship was not one-sided. Instead, it was one of mutual respect where Mimi knew that the other teacher always listened to what she said, which was confirmed in their dialogue. Mimi describes herself as “pretty direct,” and as a person with strong opinions and beliefs. Consequently, when they engaged in discussion and dialogue, she knew that her opinion mattered and would not resort to platitudes such as: “oh, that’s wonderful.” Instead, she engaged in actively questioning the process by asking how they would know what would work or not. Mimi would add to the discussion and reflection by asking: “But does that really show that? Does that really tell, you know, what we are seeing? Is that seeing that, or are you just wanting it to say that?” A large part of their reflective process focused on looking at the data they had collected and describing to each other what they saw and then trying to draw conclusions from it. The analysis of the data
was a large part of the action research they were doing as part of their Master courses, and they would also formalize their findings by writing papers on their findings.

The learning came from their close collaboration and dialogue, and even though the other teacher had more teaching experience, Mimi knew that this teacher liked working with her and that she gained something from their collaboration as well. After all, the two teachers were well suited to each other and enjoyed working together. As a matter of fact, Mimi states that she felt that this teacher would not have worked with her if this had not been the case. As an example, she emphasizes the fact that this teacher explicitly chose to work with Mimi and not the other grade six teachers in this capacity.

Teaching in South America, Mimi came to understand how to integrate different subjects when planning her program. Through this hands-on experience, she was also learning to navigate inquiry-based learning—something that is the current teaching approach promoted by the Ontario Ministry of Education today. Once again, professional learning was situated, and the format used was often based on practical necessity. Integration was a large part of teaching at both the schools where she worked. One of the main reasons for this approach was simply that they did not have enough time to teach the English program otherwise. They only had the morning to teach and they had to teach everything in that morning, in English. Then the students got the same thing in the afternoon in Spanish. Mimi calls it “a tall order,” as it even included the teaching of World History, so therefore integration was the only appropriate approach.

4.1.2.3 Canada
Mimi and her family moved back to Canada at the end of 2004. She now knew that teaching was the profession for her and she applied to a faculty of education and got accepted for the following year. She took her teacher training in 2005-2006 and then got hired right after. She did some LTOs (long-term occasional contracts), took time off to have another baby and then was
hired full time in 2009. To secure a full-time job, she explains that she had to knock on a lot of doors. Even though she had international experience, she felt that it was her additional qualification in music, in an environment where everyone wanted an instrumental music teacher, that landed her a job. Mimi was hired as an instrumental music teacher at a high-need school but ended up not teaching music at all. She worked there just for one year, but during this time she took part of an incredible PD opportunity. Some of the teachers complained about the amount of PD they had because they had been doing it for years, but Mimi found these opportunities both helpful and engaging.

We had the facilitator come in once a month because we were obviously an OFIP (Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership) school; very high needs. We had two PDs a month and I learned so much in that time. When I moved to my next school, I had all the knowledge of Fountas and Pinnell, and all this knowledge of what we had been learning. We were doing the three-part math lesson already, which wasn’t happening at all in the school I moved to the following year. I learned about guided groups back then, and even though it wasn’t that long ago, it is just now trickling into other areas and schools. So, the PD there was incredible and the community…those teachers you know… when you are in a school like that, you have to have each other’s back, so you just bond. Like- you love those people. We felt safe with each other and there’s the feeling that there was a lot of risk taking, or willingness to take risks: “Ok- Let’s do it! What is the worst thing that is going to happen?” Because the worst thing that is going to happen is that it is not going to work, so you might as well try something new. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

Mimi has always found PD interesting supporting the opportunities saying, “we talk about the actual learning of how to teach.” But she is attracted to professional learning that helps
her be a more effective teacher. She is interested in learning about, creating and sharing, what she refers to as “systems”; the practical application of theory into practice. “Curriculum can be actually looking at the curriculum and looking at students and their learning, but it is also about practicality, about how do you do it, the system of how it works.” In her current school, all teachers are participating in the board mandated professional development sessions called BCI (Building Collaborative Inquiry).

This year she has experienced a lot of frustration around how the BCIs are implemented and knows that this sentiment is shared by many other teachers with which she has spoken. The format of the BCI had changed since the previous year, where Mimi felt that the teachers had much more autonomy and where she truly enjoyed collaborating with the division colleagues in creating integrated units that they all taught and assessed together. I remember, from working with her, that her expertise from the international school was seen an asset to the team, as she led the other intermediate teachers in creating an inquiry-based unit. She deliberately engaged the other teachers in dialogue and seemed to know the strength that each teacher brought to the project. Mimi talks about how the collaboration felt natural and they had “a neat way of working together” where their strengths and weaknesses worked, balanced with each other. The team members were all invested in the learning: “Everybody was gung-ho.” What contributed to this feeling of empowerment was that they had input into what they wanted to explore, that they all collaborated and shared their knowledge. These were the key components of what made it successful to Mimi.

This year, the sentiment is that the teachers are not treated as professionals and this is reflected in their self-esteem as teachers. Mimi describes this year’s BCIs as not being safe spaces for learning and instead refers to them as “non-examples” of authentic professional
learning. The topics for the sessions are mandated, and the teachers’ input into the discussions are viewed as a kind of test: “When you answer a question, when you talk to the group, the feeling is that the people that are there, that represent the Board, are taking your words and saying, ‘oh well,’ you know, kind of turn it around at you.” She describes the actions of the Board representatives as wanting to “catch us out on something” and is aware that “Big Brother watches.” Mimi knows that as teachers they need to be critical of this process, as it is not working, and felt she needed to speak up. This feeling of not being heard, or appreciated, made her truly angry and frustrated and she found that she would also carry this frustration home. But speaking up in the BCI sessions and giving input had not been working; instead, it had simply added to her frustration. So, she came to a decision where she determined that she would remain quiet instead of actively participating. While she herself knew that when she was speaking up she was not being negative, she recognized that it did not bring positive results, and may be interpreted as challenging the facilitator professionally. She was keenly aware of the fact that she might have made other people in the room, uncomfortable as well. So, she silenced her voice: “I thought what I am going to do? The system is a little bit broken, I can’t change a piece of it. I am going to take positivity from the part that I like, and I am going to push aside the others as opposed to challenging it.”

Even though she decided to be silent, her frustrations did not disappear and neither did her quest for professional learning.

We all believe that what the Board is asking us to do with guided practice and, you know, interventions- those are good practices. We are not saying that they are not, but we just need to be able to talk about it in a way that doesn’t feel like we are being tested all the time. The idea is that you want to be able to learn. If we are using the business model, in
the Board, which we are, then we would think that because we understand that good practices say that children need to be taught in a certain way, then good practices would also say that adults also have the same needs. They are slightly different needs, but we understand that everyone is different in their learning journey and that we learn differently, and at different rates, and we need to be in a safe space to do it. But that is not happening, so then if you don’t have that then you are going to have an ineffective system. Your assembly line won’t work. If the members are not content, if the members do not feel like they are being successful, then you are not going to have a successful system. And it will not trickle down to the kids. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

Instead, she sought out collaboration with a few other teachers who wanted to learn together. They created a private, safe space with no judgement, where they could collaborate and learn together by sharing their diverse and unique experiences with each other. Using the reading from the BCIs they deconstructed and reconstructed what theory would look like in their classes. While some resources were difficult to find, and others were readily available to them, Mimi still finds that even then, she needs to work through them to make them applicable to the needs of her students. She works with her colleagues to interpret theory into practice. They meet in person after school; but more importantly, they share their ideas online through OneNote. This allows for flexibility that is important to them, as some of them have young families and many responsibilities outside their professional duties. It is a format with which they are comfortable and emphasizes the shared responsibility for their learning. This collaboration has become a place to talk about organization, a place to share resources, a forum to figure out programming, and what works and what does not. It is a place to create systems that function well, and it is a place for them to talk about that continuum of learning. Together, they discuss resources to plan
lessons, plan units, plan systems of doing things and work to address all the varied needs in their classrooms. They are trying new approaches and giving each other feedback. Mimi values professional learning that involves collaboration, as she knows that when she is working in isolation, she is always reflecting and doubting if she is doing the right thing for the students. Through collaboration, she can bounce ideas off her colleagues, dialogue around classroom praxis, and in the end, it actually creates less work for all members of the group.

4.1.3 “Subversive” Professional Learning

When the formal and mandated PD did not work for them, they found a way to circumvent it, partly by using technology. They meet on their own time, after school, but most of their sharing takes place online. While their group is not secret per se, Mimi is aware that if their group was formally recognized, it might cause conflict with other teachers, so they are not advertising that they are collaborating as part of their own professional learning. “It is not something we are telling everyone either. We are just friends, and we are just meeting, and we are sharing ideas. But we are doing more than that. If anyone wanted to join us they could, but they would have to commit, and they would have to follow our idea and the norms that we set down before.”

Early on, the group established clear norms for their collaboration. They were all friends or became friends through the process of collaborating, but they felt strongly that they needed to set intentions and norms. They would focus only on the positive solutions—there would be no gossiping or complaining about what had taken place at the BCI meetings. They would speak in plain language, avoid “pedagogical speak” and always ask for clarification when something was not clear. They all agreed that they wanted honesty and that they didn’t want to waste time. This process of sharing and collaborating is ongoing and while committed to meeting, much of the collaboration takes place online:
We often will just email each other and say; “Hey, I put something up, go look.” And then we are commenting on it. It gives us the forum to be able to have that conversation without having to actually be sitting together because we don’t have time. Time is something that teachers never have enough of - time is challenging. Having a structure to be able to share like that is really good. I think we found a way to circumvent it (the Board mandated PD). That is what technology has done for us. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

This approach to learning aligns with what I came to know of her as a reflective educator; always looking to improve her practice through dialogue with others. Mimi classifies this collaboration as teacher professional learning and she is excited by this process as it meets many different professional needs that she and her colleagues have. Mimi also sees value in some of the traditional professional development that is offered to her as well. She has participated in anti-oppression workshops and found great value in attending a course on emotional intelligence. “I am interested in PD that helps me be a more effective teacher, so the idea of talking about how you deal with people makes you a better educator.” The key to these opportunities is that she chose them herself, as she wanted to learn more, improve her skill set and enhance her knowledge in these areas. She knows that “if you are sent to a workshop, you are not invested in it. You may get great things out of it, but it is not something where you said, ‘Oh, I would like to do this.’” She draws parallels to her own classroom teaching where she knows how important choice is and how the students always get a lot more out of it, than if she mandates their learning. Mimi wishes that this wisdom could guide teacher professional learning as well. Sometimes, it comes down to being treated as a professional rather than just having a choice in itself.

If your administrator says to you, “I saw this opportunity—I think you would like this.” Then you are already approaching it with the mindset of, “Oh, this is something that
would benefit me. This is something that I would enjoy, and I would get something from’ and so you go into it that way. But if the admin says to you “I’ve signed you up for this PD, right—you and this other teacher are going.” You say: “Ok. Yes, sir, no sir.” And you go. Sometimes you find that it is actually really good. But most of the time you are like “Ok—when is lunch?” (Mimi, interview, 2017)

Besides having a choice in what formal professional learning you take, the expertise and knowledge of the instructors presenting the information are of utmost importance to Mimi. She needs to be able to respect the instructors and believe that they are speaking from a position of wisdom and knowledge and that they have something worth sharing. Once again, they need to respect the teachers who come here and treat them as professionals, partly by being well prepared themselves. Mimi describes a situation where she had signed up for a technology workshop, but when she arrived she found that the instructors were ill prepared. The end result was that they ended up crashing the entire server of the Board and the workshop was cancelled.

While they offered another PD session later on, Mimi never went back: “I never went and that particular facilitator, I never went to a SINGLE one of their PD sessions ever again.” The lack of respect she had for this particular instructor was so deep that if she saw a PD opportunity, but that instructor was teaching it, she chose not to go. “I know that is a judgement call, but I am not going to waste my time with someone who obviously has been ill-prepared. If you are going to be at that level, then I am expecting that you will have the professionalism to not make that kind of mistake.”

4.1.4 The Future

Having choice, being treated as a professional, and the professionalism of the instructor, are important elements to Mimi when it comes to learning as an educator and professional. To Mimi,
teaching can’t just be reduced to technique and procedures but emerges from her identity and integrity. Thus, her personal life is as important to her as is her professional one: “I am a parent, I have my own children. I don’t live to work. I love my job, I love what I’m doing. But my family comes first.” Balancing her need for professional learning with the needs of her family means that some professional learning opportunities are not available to her at this stage in her life. In the past, she had not been able to take formal Additional Qualification courses as her financial situation had not allowed for it. While she thrives on the collaborative learning with a capacity for connectedness, she is now looking forward to taking AQ courses this summer both to learn new skills and to have her knowledge officially recognized, and “move up the grid” of the teacher salary scale. These courses are offered in the summer which suits her life, where she does not have to balance work, studies and family, but can rather enjoy spending time with her family and at the same time focus on her professional learning. This balancing does not work for many of the opportunities offered by the school board as the timing of the workshops are prohibitive for her. She feels there is pressure to attend them, as many of them include resources to take back to the school, but even if she finds them interesting, she simply cannot go due to family obligations. The timing and structuring of such opportunities do not appear to consider the life of a working parent.

I can’t do the after-school thing. A lot of PD now done at the Board is done on our own time. It used to be that we would have time out of the classroom to do it, but now they are really pushing for after-school book clubs. And the principal saying, “we need that book for the school, so someone has to go to the after-school club.” Then the younger teachers are the ones who are going, the really young teachers, because they don’t have families yet. So, then they’re getting the books for “the school.” But then we don’t see books. It is
a vicious little cycle. I can’t commit…it is very difficult for me to go to an after-school book club, because they start at four, so really bad time for me. Even if it started a little bit later in a way it would be easier. I think their thinking is “oh, it is right after school, it would be good.” But you see I have my own children who have come home from school. I need to get them settled at home, I need them to eat dinner…I mean, and there are all these routines. By then it is like 5:30, 6 o’clock, so I could go (to PD sessions offered by the Board) at 6:30 but not at 4 o’clock! (Mimi, interview, 2017)

Mimi considers herself as a master teacher in the area of Intermediate literacy but admits to needing much more professional learning in the area of mathematics. She knows her strengths and recognizes that there are many things she excels at, including creating and maintaining the professional relationships. Mimi craves learning that involves working in collaborative, trusting relationships that dig deeper into the merging of theory and practice. Being treated as a professional is as essential as the opportunity for choice in her learning. Her learning journey has led her to recognize how the collaboration with her division colleagues last year, containing both of these elements, led to both deep learning and profound understanding:

It is interesting, it is almost like two bookends then, right? We have one of my favourite times of professional learning when I was starting, and then the other one that I enjoyed so much was when I felt that I really understood what I was doing, in that area. And then I felt like I could move on almost; I can explore something different now. (Mimi, interview, 2017)

4.2 Scott

“I am a teacher. I am a teacher who believes that being an educator today is very exciting”
Scott is an elementary teacher for whom engagement, by both the student and teacher is of the utmost importance when it comes to learning. Engagement is indeed what he seeks when it comes to his own personal, practical professional learning as well. In an article that he wrote for an online journal, he discussed the four elements he sees as essential for students to be able to construct new knowledge: engagement, authenticity, collaboration, and metacognition. While participating in professional learning, Scott pursues the same components for learning and growth. Scott took time out of his busy life as a classroom teacher, blogger, and parent and responded right away to my request for participation in my research. I knew Scott as a workshop participant during my time as facilitator with the Board. During the PD sessions, he was always engaged, asked questions and shared his own experiences. In many ways, he was a dream audience member for me at the time. But I truly got to know him as a classroom teacher when we worked at the same school; he taught grade six and I was then new vice principal. When he came to the interview, he brought the same excitement for learning that I have witnessed previously. It had been some time since we last met in person and it was great to meet. We quickly got down to the interview and even though it was later in the evening, there was a feeling of excitement as well as some nervousness on my part. I really wanted it to be a positive experience as his was the first interview of my study. Scott had clearly spent time reflecting on the guiding interview questions I had emailed him ahead of time and when I asked him to provide me with his journey to becoming a teacher, he responded that he had spent some time reflecting on it.

4.2.1 Becoming a teacher

Scott’s passion for both teaching and learning was clear to him even at a young age; he knew early on that he wanted to be a teacher. He vividly remembers being in grade two and deciding
he wanted to become a teacher. “Thought it would be the best job in the world. I always had a
great connection with my teachers. It was the thing that I wanted to do.” This connection was
important to him and later he would experience the same kind of connection to his teachers when
he was at the faculty of education. Knowing that he wanted to become a teacher, he recognized
that his path to this goal was through attending university. Looking back, he reflects on how
during his time as an undergraduate student, he was actually not truly engaged in his learning. He
laments not being fully present for the learning and, wishes he had known how to be an active
learner right from his first year. The regret comes from knowing that there were more than a few
courses he simply sat through, where he did not really know that it was possible to engage and be
involved in his own education. During the last few years of his undergraduate program, he
discovered how he could actually become an agent in his own education: “This is where I started
to make things work for myself, where I started going off in different directions with my essays,
and the things I wanted to write really empowered me.”

After having completed his BA, Scott immediately applied to a teacher education
program and was surprised to find that his application was denied. This setback lit a fire
underneath him and he became determined to beef up his resume by adding more experience to
it. The result was a success: he was accepted into the continuing education program at the faculty
of education and it turned out to be a truly positive experience for him. In reflecting on this time,
he now appreciates the fact that he didn’t get in the first time and became fired up. Having to
work hard to get in, improved his understanding of why he wanted to be a teacher and helped
him find his place in teaching. He speaks passionately about how he enjoyed his time at the
faculty; he had great experiences and again found that connection with the teachers there.
Recognizing this connection once again, Scott noticed that a new goal began to evolve for him:
“I really became enamored with the teachers at teachers’ college. And that is still a goal for me; I would love to go to teachers’ college and teach teachers. I really connected with those people and really thought that that was an amazing place to be.” This desire to want to instruct teachers has varied in strength during his professional life throughout the years but has in many ways guided the professional learning decisions he has made.

4.2.2 Teaching and learning

After completing his Bachelor of Education, he was fortunate to be pool hired by an Ontario school board right after graduation and quickly landed a job in a grade one class. Over his seventeen-year career in education, Scott has taught in primary, junior and now intermediate classrooms, as well as worked in the role of Literacy coach for his school board. He values the time to collaborate with others and reflect on his practice. Sometimes this is a challenge for him, as he feels he needs to find what uniquely works for him and the classroom he is teaching at the time. He appreciates any professional learning opportunity that provides him with time to critically reflect on his own practice and to work to problem solve issues he encounters in his daily practice. Throughout his career, he has sought new avenues to become a better practitioner through writing and reflecting on his practice. It is through this writing process that he continues to explore his own position and role within his teaching: “In writing about my thinking, I can more deeply understand my own thinking. Then, when I understand my own thinking, I am better able to share my thinking.”

4.2.3 Master of Education

Scott was only in his second year of teaching when he made the decision to begin his Master in Education. Motivated in large part by his long-term goal of becoming an instructor of teachers, he began studies which would then in many ways influence and define, not only his philosophy
and approach to teaching, but also how he views professional learning: “Yes, that set the stage for being really self-driven and the PD that I chose… if it wasn’t for my Master, I would not be as engaged in education as I am now. My Master’s degree taught me how to think critically and analyze and constantly engage with what’s happening here, so that’s why I have my hand up during PD sessions.” His Master qualified him to teach AQ (Additional Qualification for teachers) courses in Reading, which he did for several years. He explains that he has aspirations to one day begin his studies toward his Ph.D. as well.

During his Master’s studies, he initially aimed to explore critical literacy and the work of Alan Luke. Quite quickly, however, critical literacy merged into critical theory, and Scott found himself captivated by Jack Whitehead’s Living Educational Theory approach to research and human existence. This theory examines teachers’ educational influences in their own learning and the learning of others. Scott explained Living Education Theory to me as a form of self-study where teachers, through methods such as action research, reflect on how questions that are important to them have an influence, not only on their own learning, but also the learning of others. He explained how this has influenced his practice: “that set the stage for being really self-driven and the PD that I chose. I really latched onto…Jack Whitehead’s action/reflection.” As a teacher, this was important to Scott, and the habit of reflecting on his own impact has indeed played a role to search for authentic professional learning at this stage in his career. During this time Scott developed his habit of continually reflecting on how he could be improving his teaching. Scott’s Master’s thesis was a self-inquiry done through narrative.

But then I switched and changed it halfway through my thesis. I wanted my students to critically analyze; reflect on me as a text, me and my teaching style, and getting to be more self-reflecting on me, not being a neutral text, not me being an unbiased teacher, but
me having a definite lens that I am looking through and teaching through. Within that, I brought out ideas of race and ideas of gender and things, really self-examining text on that. What do they call it? Letting go. Looking at ideas and ideologies that I had entrenched and looking at how to let these go and be even more critical of my teaching. Oh, I loved that time! That was really good. (Scott, interview, 2016)

4.2.4 Seeking to Engage

This excitement created by engaging in research and learning through reflection continues to influence his approach to teaching and learning. His focus on the impact of his teaching on his students’ learning is still evident in how he approaches teaching, and how he perceives his own role in the classroom. Scott reveals how he continuously seeks new and better ways to ignite the passion for learning in his students, and he always begins his thinking and planning with the students in mind. He actively seeks out what engages them, finds their interests, builds his teaching upon it, and relentlessly reflects on how to improve their learning experience. “It is not the kids’ fault that they are not learning. So, what can we change, what can we enact?” Scott feels a deep responsibility to ensure that he is reaching each and every one of his students. The metaphor he uses to represent this sense of deep connection with his students is one of “carrying the kids on my back.” He strives to engage them in dialogue and continuously seeks positive solutions and connections that will draw the students into the learning. For him, reflecting on his teaching is an ongoing practice that takes place both at school and outside of school; on the weekend, during holidays, and while doing day-to-day things like running and walking the dogs. As a writer, he also reflects in writing and uses the blog he has been writing for several years for this purpose as well. He admits that it can be exhausting to always be thinking and reflecting and that he struggles to balance family and work, as he spends so much of his time outside of school.
thinking about his work. This iterative process of action and reflection is, however, what
motivates him to engage his students in deeper learning.

Paying attention to that voice at the back of your head about what’s not going on, what’s
not right here, so what’s going on? Constantly engaging and in that critical self-
reflection/ action in that cycle. Did this lesson work? No, it did not. What needs to
happen? What is not working right now? How can I continue to work on that? Which is
why I keep trying to explain to my wife why year after year is totally different because I
have a totally different group of kids in front of me. So, then I need to change and deal
with things on the spot as the kids meet my needs and reflect that. What they need. I love
it. It is exhausting! (Scott, interview, 2016)

4.2.5 The Personal and the Professional

Scott comfortably embraces the mantle of master teacher, of being an expert, while he at the
same time makes it clear that this does not mean that he knows everything; part of being a master
teacher is being willing to engage with new learning and trying new things. For him, the merging
of the personal and the professional is inevitable. As a writer, he loves teaching writing: “I want
to share my passion—which is to teach readers and writers.” He readily admits that some of his
favourite moments in teaching are when he engages the students as writers and participates with
them in talk and dialogue about their writing and what they are they creating. He also
acknowledges that he is working harder now than he ever did, but that does not stop him from
continuing to seek out new ways of engaging his students in their learning: “I find teaching
intensely personal and intensely draining for a lack of a better word. It is a thing that you live and
breathe, right. And it is hard to shut it down and let it go sometimes.”
4.2.6 The Swinging Pendulum of PD

Scott talks about how he has seen the pendulum’s shift over the last seventeen years of his career when it comes to his own professional development. From having initially been rather passive, he has grown to become actively engaged in pursuing his own professional learning. He has also seen the profession change into a job with a demanding and time-consuming focus on prescribed formulas for teaching. He finds that the often-mandated professional learning of today reflects a focus away from trust in teachers’ ability to construct their own learning.

I vividly remember a hastily photocopied article that came across my table at a staff meeting. There was hardly any mention of it at the meeting; no “Thou Shalt” that came with it. What it was about was a simple way to set kids up into groups and rotations while the teacher met with students in guided reading sessions. I often laugh at this first attempt, having no resources to support this, randomly putting kids together (I had no idea of reading levels!), but I tried it and have been working to perfect this structure ever since. In that day if you wanted to engage with pedagogical thinking (the process of teaching) you had to go to the journals of teaching and learning which were restricted and very hard to get. You could get an expensive subscription for these professional journals or you could make your way to a university library and read them there – you couldn’t even check out these journals! (Scott, interview, 2016)

In his blog, he reflects on his own view on professional learning and how it evolved over time:

School improvement has fascinated me lately. I think there needs to be a space within my annual learning for both my own passions and the school/board goals. I’m determined to find myself something in each PD session I attend. But I think there needs to be
something that finds me within these PD sessions. (participant’s blog entry. March 2017; source not revealed to protect the anonymity of the participant)

4.2.7 Teaching Others as Professional Learning

Over the years, Scott has been a receiver of teacher professional learning, as well as having been an instructor of professional learning. As an instructor of AQ courses, he was in the role of “giver” of PD, and when he was seconded to work as a literacy coach with his school board he was charged with providing PD to other teachers. Both of these experiences served as professional learning for him and he came to recognize how his professional knowledge had grown. He admits to feeling privileged to have gained what he calls a system view from his work as a literacy coach and recognized that not many teachers have had that opportunity to move beyond what is going on at their own schools. At the same time, he struggled with the aspect of this role wherein he was expected to “move teachers along” according to the Board mandate and working with his peers required him to sometimes ignore the strengths of his colleagues in the name of school improvement.

He knows what he considers to be good professional learning and what is not. In particular, he expresses frustration with the passive “Sit-n’ Git” model, where the presenter is talking while the participants stare at the carefully prepared PowerPoint presentation. Scott speculates that this passive approach to professional development may be why he finds that many teachers are passive about their own professional learning. This transmission model where teachers bring back a copy of the PowerPoint and regurgitate what they have heard, as a way of spreading knowledge is, in his opinion, both ineffective and expensive. This standardized approach does not allow for the fact that many teachers are on different paths in their learning journey and that they need a differentiated and personalized approach. Scott yearns for
professional learning that will allow him space to share his voice and find his own space within it.

Even with all his misgivings about this type of professional development, he is determined to find something of value in each PD session he attends to get something out of it, whether it is minor or major. He claims to be “relentlessly positive” about any type of professional development, despite all the concerns he has about the model of learning itself. However, he admits that it is not enough to be positive and he makes an appeal to be recognized for what he brings as well.

4.2.8 Technology and Professional Learning

When I worked with Scott, he was always doing innovative teaching involving technology with his class. I recall visiting his classroom whenever I could and remember thinking that you could literally feel the excitement in the classroom when the students were working. The setup of the room was deliberately designed to encourage students’ collaboration and independence. The appeal of technology drew Scott onward quite early on in his career; partly because he found that many innovators, designers, pioneers and risk-takers that were also drawn to technology, and partly because of the connections he envisioned he would make through the use of technology. He came to see technology as a tool for critical thinking for both teachers and students.

I began my journey of integrating technology into my program almost 10 years ago when I first taught Grade 6. I knew that technology needed to be important to my teaching. However, I started off with a bit of a misstep. I believed that technology was the key to motivating my students. I felt that I needed to use technology so that I could motivate my students to learn because I believed that technology is inherently motivating. Perhaps, at that time, I was right. However, now I realize that technology is much more powerful
than that. Technology can transform the way that we learn and teach! (Scott, interview, 2017)

This excitement about technology led him to begin to try different ways to set up his classroom to maximize student engagement and learning, with purposed effect on how he planned and structured his teaching. He admits to doing all sort of things that he probably shouldn’t have been doing, like finding ways to get more laptops in this classroom at a time when no one had laptops and plugging things into the network when he probably shouldn’t have been plugging things into the network. He was motivated by the students’ engagement and supported by the school administrator who allowed him to explore these new ideas. He has been both excited and disappointed by the path that his school board has taken when it comes to technology: “I believe our board has been guilty of islands of awesome-ness for quite some time, most obvious with our technology use. There are many people separately doing amazing things, and this exists in all areas and levels.” He continues to attend the yearly tech conference offered by his school board but fears that he might be getting somewhat cynical about how they have evolved. Initially, he found them to be exciting, because the other teachers attending were sharing how they were trying innovative things, taking risks, and trying all kinds of amazing things.

However, the last tech conference he attended he came away disappointed with how the focus has shifted to become exclusively product oriented. Instead, he increasingly does more of his own research in this area: “I did a lot of investigating, of personal learning this summer.” One of the approaches he used was the Moodle online learning platform, that was promoted within his school board, to engage his students in writing. As mentioned, being a writer himself, he continuously looked for ways to encourage the writer in each of his students. He used his
experience with the Moodle to write a paper which was published in an online peer-reviewed journal:

A MOODLE is an Open Source Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It has become very popular among educators around the world as a tool for creating online dynamic web sites for their students. Within my MOODLE, my students can blog, create wikis and webpages, answer questionnaires and surveys, and they can collaborate, publish, create and innovate! It is not an extension of my classroom, rather it IS my classroom!” (source not reported to protect the anonymity of the participant).

Scott is motivated to share his learning with other educators, and publishing his experience is part of this way of thinking. A mentor of his had challenged him to give back to education. Scott expressed that” too often teachers take ideas, resources, lesson plans – rarely are we asked to share back.” By doing so, he hopes to inspire others to reflect on what he has written. After returning from working as a literacy coach, Scott also created and published a document where he shares how to teach reading and writing using a technological approach of the workshop model of teaching. In it, he discusses his move to using technology within the restraints of, and defined by, the provincial curriculum, and how he sees technology as a way to adapt the curriculum to teaching for a 21st Century world. He hopes that others will find value in what he has shared and that they can begin their own investigation incorporating technology in teaching.

For Scott, technology offers an avenue for teachers’ own professional learning beyond his school or school board as well. He has found that networking with other teachers through Twitter an excellent opportunity for teachers to engage in professional learning in a different
way. Through this forum he has developed, what is often referred to as PLN, a personal learning network. Out of the different people he follows, Scott highlights George Couros as one the main educators he follows on Twitter. The excitement of dialogue on this site led him to read Couros’ book, *The Innovator’s Mindset* (2015), which Scott considers to be the best book he ever read. Part of the excitement about this type of learning is that the information he finds through Twitter reflects current thinking and findings by other educators throughout the world. However, he cautions that the vast amount of information found can easily become overwhelming for the readers. While being thirsty for knowledge, the danger is that learning from Twitter can often become more like “drinking from the fire hose.”

There is a constant flow of information coming from my Personal Learning Network (PLN) that often it is difficult to find focus here. I often dip into my PLN when I am feeling open to trying something new. In fact, I can negatively correlate my level of exhaustion to how often I engage in Twitter. Currently, I seem to be almost in triage mode, completely avoiding Twitter as I can barely keep up with the demands of my class.

(Scott, interview, 2016)

4.2.9 The Impact of School Leadership in Professional Learning

When it comes to balancing the demands of his work and trying out new innovative practices, Scott views the role of the school administrator as key in creating an environment that encourages and recognizes teachers’ willingness to learn and explore new approaches. He values being able to actively engage in such new practices and talks about getting “permission” from his administrator to explore different methods. “I was allowed to do that, which I really, really value. I was given permission, I guess, to go out on a limb and try new things. And I don’t think that is often encouraged enough.” He talks about the importance of this kind of relational trust in
creating a safe environment where teachers can find ways to collaborate and implement new approaches. For him, the pivotal role of the school administrator in professional learning is in recognizing the strengths within the school team and highlighting and supporting those. Scott wants to share his passion for teaching and add to the conversation about pedagogy. He knows that this cannot take place in the space of what he calls “packaged PD” highlighting a need for differentiation of the types of learning in traditional PD. He acknowledges that sometimes there is a need to produce products in order to prove that the PD has been worthwhile. But administrators, while still being accountable to the school board, need to find ways of being more flexible when justifying the time or the money spent on professional learning. Rather than filling out standardized forms for learning, Scott asks to be allowed to prove in his own way what he has learned. He speculates that perhaps traditional PD is delivered en mass because there is a perception among leaders that this is what the masses need. Ever the optimist, he still finds his own way in making it work for him. He does value the release time given at his school because it allows time to critically reflect on his own practice. But to do so successfully, he needs a school culture where teaching and learning is active, where he can take risks, fail, come back and try again, and work through the issues.

4.2.10 Authentic Professional Learning

Scott describes two examples of when he felt that his professional learning was authentic and stood out as positive and engaging for him. The first story he tells is where he is in the role of the participant. At the time, he was searching for something outside of the traditional professional development that was being offered by his school board, and beyond formal university courses. Since Scott had been engaged with technology in teaching for some time, it was no accident that it was through his Twitter community that he found this opportunity:
A few years ago, I was just flipping through Twitter and I found an EdCamp just out of XXX. I signed up and went, and hands-down, I think that was the best decision I made. It was amazing! Went to a school on a Saturday. There were totally like-minded people there, who are really engaged and innovative and always pushing the envelope. There was no agenda, everyone asked questions and put them up on sticky notes. We all voted about the ones we thought were most interesting and engaging and then the moderator established a bunch of workshops, I guess, or places where if you are interested in this you can go here. I got to choose my own places to talk to and it was just an open and honest discussion about education. I met so many amazing people there that were all fired up and passionate about education, and I follow them still on Twitter. It was a good passion exciter- ignitor, for lack of a better word. It was really, really awesome. Having choice was a huge aspect of what made it successful for me, but more importantly, I could see myself in it. I could see myself doing things with it. See it speaking to me. But I know that because I participated in it and I was able to add my voice and share my thoughts and drive the conversation. It wasn’t necessarily the prescribed “thou shalt to”. I am always looking to hack education and make it work a little differently. I find that I am much more interested in pedagogy, really interested in the things that provide the foundation of learning…That I am not that excited about products and programs and things to make. I am excited about the process that goes into the thinking, so that is all the fundamental theoretical stuff that goes on behind what we want the kids to learn. Where should they be heading- those big things that drive the kids, drive the learning. It was just… it was really, really good. (Scott, interview, 2016)
This interactive way of learning was deeply attractive to Scott. He could see himself as part of a dialogue, as an integral part of creating new learning. By valuing choice and respecting everyone’s expertise they created an environment of passion and excitement among the participants. From his own experiences, Scott has come to believe that the structure of professional learning influences what he learns and that a passive model, begets passive reactions from the participants. The emphasis in some of these sessions has often shifted to focus on products, rather than the process of learning and “PD has been so boxed that people are just trained to be boxed,” in their teaching as well. He finds this focus on product sometimes overshadows opportunities that have the potential to become authentic professional learning. Even sessions focusing on technology he has attended he found had “just devolved into ‘use this program, use this program…’ kind of thing. I fear that this is the state of education is right now. I think it is all product. Which just makes me sad.”

In the second story, he tells of authentic professional learning, Scott is the teacher and provider of PL. While this time he is the leader of the professional learning opportunity, he is a learner in this process as well. The recurring theme of dialogue and collective sharing serve as hallmarks of valuable adult learning models to him. He expresses frustration that professional learning has not moved on, that we are still using a structure that is still focused on training and transmission.

One of the best courses I taught was a Reading part 2 out of X University. And it was just this magical group of people. That we got together, and it was … Face-to-face… time in the summer. And we just sat and talked the day away about… and here is our topic, here is what we are learning about. Let’s gather some resources and work that way - and it was really amazing acknowledging the different stories that were in the room and the different
experiences people have and it became a very safe place of “this is the problem I am having,” and “this is what I am wondering about” and “let’s work on it together and work through the problem together.” It was really participatory. Which was great. And everyone was engaged, and it wasn’t a passive “let’s fill out all these responses and then check, check, check and be done.” It was really an engaging experience. And I try to find that ...I didn’t find that too often in my coach role, instead, it became “I have all the knowledge and I give you all the knowledge”- model. Which is a one-room schoolhouse model that we have been using for hundreds of years now. (Scott, interview, 2016)

This construction of new knowledge involved discussing and asking questions about issues that they then struggled through together. He compares it to teaching through problem-solving where you get to tangle with it, work with it and find your way and gather your resources while finding new information. The process of working through solutions was the key to learning, even while the class still used resources. Scott describes an iterative process of taking risks, being willing to fail and come back and try again and work their way through the problems. He compares it to the action-reflection cycle that he learned to use during his Master’s studies and has found to be a large component of what he values as professional learning: “This is why I find teaching so exciting, because it is never done. It is never finished!”

4.2.1 Product versus Process

While Scott continues to define the process of learning as the key to new knowledge construction, he at the same time expresses his frustration with what he sees as this overemphasis on the product as evidence of learning. He is interested in the pedagogy behind the learning and when he tries to discuss it with other teachers, he sometimes finds that they want to focus instead on the fun things that the kids are doing rather than the deeper engagement with the thinking that
we want them to do. While he can see the appeal of products, he is concerned that it does not necessarily deeply engaging with the thinking needed for sustainable learning. Scott refers to this as the *Pinterest version* of teaching and learning and believes that it might have morphed into a mirage of real learning.

You know, let’s get on *Pinterest* and find a reading activity that the kids do and it’s on this really nice paper with the chevrons all around on the outside and they fold it in a special way and it becomes “awesome.” But it is not really inferencing, or that’s not really making connections or extending our understanding. It is not…. we are losing…. Well, we are losing sight of the curriculum that’s definitively for sure. (Scott, interview, 2016)

One of the things that have connected Scott and me over the years is his passion for the curriculum. We always had such great discussions, and still have whenever we meet, about the curriculum and its practical implications. Scott values his knowledge of the curriculum and his understanding of how it comes to life in his classroom. After reflecting on just how important this is to him, he arrived at the understanding that he has “an *exquisite* understanding of the curriculum,” and wonders aloud how often we as teachers ponder how to teach, as well as why. Instead looking at teaching as “doing a novel study,” he prefers to view the product as something to celebrate after all the work that goes into it, all the thinking, is finished. The product, to Scott, is almost like dessert; “in that it is amazing, we can dress it up, but it is all the thinking and engagement that went into that, that was really, really exciting.”

### 4.2.12 Challenges with Board and Ministry Directions

He admits to having struggled with how his school board is executing their collaborative learning through school-based BCI. When these sessions were first introduced, Scott had high hopes for
this model of professional learning, as it promised to give time to reflection and dialogue which he values in his own professional practice. He was excited to be collaborating with others in the action-reflection cycle. But lately he has been grappling with a format that he finds does not differentiate among his experiences, nor does it recognize the problems he is dealing with in his classroom.

He reflects on how some of the directives from the Board on how to teach can lead to what he calls “siloing”, especially in math and language. While explicitly teaching the different components or strands, he finds it challenging to provide a more holistic and integrated approach to his students.

I think that we are stuck in the silos right now actually. More math. I am stuck in my math silo…I am not sure that I have the creativity at this point yet to do it justice. I’ll do it really well, what we are doing. But, now we are doing number sense, that’s what we’ll all do and we’ll build in the process expectations. We will do learning goals and success criteria, a gap close and exit tickets, data, data, data… We will do all the things well, but it is not natural! It is the fear that I keep at the back of my mind because I don’t silo my language. And I think that is the conflict that I am going through right now... I know I shouldn’t be siloing my math, but I don’t have the energy or the creativity to do it well. (Scott, interview, 2016)

Currently Scott is mentoring a new teacher in his school affording him the opportunity to see how some of what is being discussed in the BCIs is beneficial to someone just starting out. Scott knows that a new teacher may need to dig deeper into how to do guided practice; however, at the same time he asks that there be recognition for the fact that teachers like himself have been doing this successfully for a long time. While he enjoys the role of mentor and the conversations
they have, he also needs a partner that will challenge him as well. He yearns for a collaborative partner, someone he can plan and reflect with, as he has a few times in the past. “Like I always said I want somebody who would either say ‘yeah that’s great’ or ‘no that’s awful- let’s try something else.’ I need that. I need that sort of engagement with a partner.” Scott recognizes how teaching can be an isolated profession in many ways where teachers work in their own space, with their doors shut. The importance of collaboration has been well discussed, yet there is not enough talk about how hard it is to really collaborate. Especially challenging is being able to find a person with which you could truly work well. In the BCI structure, collaboration is often mandated, which to Scott simply “doesn’t really quite work.” He fears he is now in a space where he often feels that he knows and has done what is being presented at the BCIs. While he increasingly finds that he leaves the team behind and does his own thing, he regrets this as he knows it does not build collaboration: “I’ve often felt like I’ve been on an island, and the longer I teach, I fear the less I am willing to swim off that island—and I don’t know why.”

4.2.13 Engaging the Voices at the Table

To Scott, a large component of professional learning is about engaging all the voices at the table; about stories and inquiry. For some time now, he has been reflecting on the practical aspect of getting everyone, all the teachers at his school and school board, actively engaged in professional learning. He encourages his colleagues by telling them to get on Twitter, and he shares who he is following there and the excitement and new ideas that come from engaging in these conversations. He recognizes that teachers are overwhelmed by what they are asked to do in the name of accountability and vigorously rejects the idea of learning that needs to be filled out in “templates.” Instead, he advocates for a system that would allow teachers the time and space to try new ideas in their practice. When teachers are engaged in new learning, there will be an
implementation dip, a type of lull, where teachers need to be given patience and time before they can then actively engage. He wishes that there were more teachers fired up and willing to consider their education, their teaching and practice, to change and constantly work away at it. While he is puzzled by how many teachers are passive, he recognizes that a top-down system may lead to passivity around their own professional learning. He wonders if the system will ever explore a down-up structure, where he could give feedback to his principal or superintendent, or even director, and it would be valued as part of growing professionally.

So, my thoughts on PD? It is all about engagement. We need to get teachers to actively engage with PD opportunities. To do this, we need to free up their time to allow the deep thinking necessary to improve practice. I find it funny that the method of PD hasn’t changed much – though we know so much more about teaching and learning. Why am I still attending “Sit ‘n Git” sessions, complete with PowerPoint? Is this still how teaching looks? Some of the best PD I’ve attended devolved into deep and rich conversations. How do we get there? I’m not sure! (Scott, interview, 2016)

4.3 Jackie

Jackie works in a large school board in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) and her experiences of working in different schools have helped shape her view of teacher professional learning. She is an experienced classroom teacher who continues to seek out opportunities for deep dialogue in her professional learning. In her eleven years as a teacher in elementary schools, she has come to see the lack of time and space to have these professional discussions with her colleagues as barriers to meaningful teacher development and learning. My own connection with Jackie is twofold; as an active member in a local chapter of the International Literacy Association, and
from our editing work at a peer-reviewed online journal where we often worked together as editor partners. The two of us work well together and I always enjoy the great discussions about education we have during the process of editing work that has been submitted for publication. Over the years, our chats have consisted of many deep conversations not only about the submissions we were editing but also around the concept of professional learning and the role of leadership in schools. Jackie is a person who is not afraid to speak her mind and share her opinions on education, but at the same time, she is always considerate of other people’s feelings and reactions. We have also had discussions around leadership and learning as she had taken her PQP courses, not necessary to move into administration, but to deepen her understanding of leadership in general and the impact of it on professional learning in particular. It was a challenging process for her with starts and stops as she was herself dealing with a new administration who held different philosophies on teaching and learning from herself. When asked how she sees herself, she describes humility as a trait she identifies with even as she speaks passionately about empowering other teachers through the use of professional dialogue:

Humility seems an odd trait to have as a leader, but I think in some ways I am a humble leader. I am aware of my capabilities, but I am also cognizant of my limitations. I believe in highlighting the accomplishments of others and empowering others through leading by example. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

4.3.1 Becoming a Teacher

Teaching was not Jackie’s first choice out of high school, where she had a co-op placement at a rehabilitation center for which she continued volunteering for several years. She had worked in the classroom setting, one on one, and as an intervenor being assigned one client in respite care in a day camp setting, where she supported the client with washroom and eating tasks. Jackie
asked for and had the opportunity to observe the different jobs while at the rehabilitation centre and her first choice initially was working in physiotherapy, in particular, the area of pediatrics. However, after seeing the high turnover of staff and the lack of funding for this field, she instead opted for teaching.

I enjoyed working with students one on one, and I enjoyed the interaction because it had the special education piece to it as well…so that is what got me thinking about teaching. I don’t think I had a passion for it in the beginning, it was just, like, an option. And the passion developed. In my first school, I realized the impact teachers can have, especially in communities where their home life isn’t ideal…. and where teachers can have a real impact and help with encouraging them to look at things differently and make better choices. To break the cycle of poverty… it just takes a lot of effort and devotion. So, there is where I found my passion really developed. Teaching in the first school, where I was hired… because of its population. To be in intermediate helped because the conversations are different. I still draw some of my beliefs about learning (from that experience). Helping kids to create paths for themselves that are positive. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

Jackie completed her teacher education through the concurrent program at a GTA university and has now been teaching for eleven years. She has worked at two different schools and began her teaching career as a junior-intermediate teacher in a French immersion school. Her teachable was Science and she taught both the French Immersion students (as immersion students only get French for only 50% of the day) as well as the regular stream students. She taught ESL for a year, and for the last three years, her teaching assignment has consisted of a combination of the homeschool program and Special Education as a SERT. At the start of her
career, she was very eager to take Additional Qualification courses, as at that time in her career, she viewed these courses as helpful in her work as a teacher. “In the beginning of my career, I was eager to because I didn’t know anything. So, I wanted the AQs, not so much to get jobs, but to learn and grow.” She found that at the beginning of her career, everything felt new and she longed to explore as much as she could and implement what she had learned, at AQs and workshops, in her classroom. So, she strove to grow her professional knowledge and practice as quickly as possible. Over the years, she has taken AQ courses in Special education, English as a Second language and Guidance, and she has also completed a Master of Education degree at OISE. Her original qualification was Junior/Intermediate, and when she began looking into leadership possibilities, she decided to take her Primary qualifications in order to be eligible to apply to the Principal’s qualification courses (PQP) and she has now completed both part one and part two of the PQP.

4.3.2 Professional Learning

Professional learning is an essential part of teaching for her, as she views the opportunity to reflect on her practice with others and dialogue with her colleagues as a vital element of her job. Her school board recently went through a work-to-rule situation which she found disrupted professional learning in a negative way and she feels that the effect of this action still lingers today. During that time, labour negotiations and work-to-rule, resulted in the school leadership team, along with the rest of the staff, feeling uncertain as to how to proceed with professional learning activities. Even though amicable relationships between administration and the staff were maintained during this time, the end result of the lack of time to collaborate, led to teachers working increasingly in isolation, and shying away from collaboration:
Despite wanting to believe that professional dialogue would continue informally (e.g. in the hallway, by the photocopier), more often than not, conversations centered on the negotiations and/or the media’s portrayal of the situation. The contract talks did not seem to help in creating a culture of professional learning. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

The professional climate both during and after the contract talks does not seem to have helped in creating a culture of professional learning. She has found it challenging to no longer have a forum within which to converse and collaborate with her colleagues, as she considers the current climate a lost opportunity to strengthen and develop budding teacher leadership in the schools. Because of all this disruption, Jackie now finds herself missing a professional dialogue where she can, with her colleagues, reflect on what is working, what is not and what can be done to support the students. Jackie has found that many teachers, and often teachers in the early part of their careers, do not seem to value this kind of professional dialogue the same way as she does, nor do they have a good understanding of how collaboration can support their work with students.

Yes, I find that they don’t remember the days when we used to have time to meet as a staff or time to meet in division teams and to dialogue. And so, it is very foreign to them. And because they have never had it, there is a sense of “you are wasting my time...I can go and do this on the computer and I can go and find it out on my own.” So, there is a lack of professional dialogue. And I don’t really know if people even understand what it even looks like. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

4.3.3 Professional Dialogue

Even though teachers who express these beliefs are still a part of the school community and do still dialogue with each other, Jackie describes how discussions that take place now as
superficial; product based, instead of process based. Instead of looking at student achievement, teachers focus in on what “looks pretty,” and she finds that teachers are more likely to seek out teaching ideas through *Pinterest* and other websites where the focus is all product. The discussions they tend to pursue focus on products, rather than discourse around how to move students through the different processes of learning. One of the reasons for this, Jackie reflects, might be the younger teachers’ lack of experience in collaborating; they simply have not developed the skills necessary to engage in the reflection of why some of their teaching strategies and interventions work while others do not. Perhaps they’ve never been asked the questions that lead to deep conversations and reflective practice? To Jackie, asking the questions is such a large part of reflective practice, part of talking through what teachers observe and reflecting on what is working. This kind of examination then directly leads to discussions around what the next steps may be to allow the student to move forward. Jackie considers dialogue extremely important when it comes to “pushing” teacher practice or even just to begin a process of thinking differently about what is happening in the classrooms.

It is very frustrating for teachers who feel now that they are isolated, that nobody has the same issues that they do, but it is not true actually, because we all have the same issues and we are seeing those issues progressively accumulate as they move up in the grades, and there are commonalities. There are commonalities between grades, between divisions, in terms of what you are seeing. But we are not seeing that whole, we are not seeing that as a staff…. there is no platform to share that, to talk about that and to move forward from there. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

Without this collaborative dialogue, teachers increasingly become more isolated and the learning culture within the school can lead to a different type of talk emerging, where the lack of
trust among staff fosters something she calls “complaining talk”. When teachers do not believe in the value of what is being asked of them from the board or their principal, discussions very easily move from professional dialogue to complaining. This type of talk is then perceived as negativity and as teachers not valuing what they are being asked to do, rather than constructive professional dialogue. Instead of working together on addressing student issues, it can easily lead to something that is then viewed as complaining and, instead of realizing the good things that are happening in their own classroom, teachers become disconnected from the rest of the school.

When Jackie was reading through my first re-storying of her narrative, she was concerned with how the word “complaining” was used. She wanted me to clarify that she was not trying to make it sound negative or nor judging their actions. Together we re-worked the narrative, so she felt it better reflected what she wanted to say. Her dialogue around this particular word shows not only that she is a reflective person, but again how she is considerate of other people’s feelings and reactions. Jackie feels strongly that the teachers’ intention was not actually to complain; they want to be involved in professional dialogue, to be treated as professionals and they want to collaborate with each other.

I am missing dialogue about reflective practice, not just what students need but what are we doing, and what is working. Where I am right now we don’t spend a lot of time on that. We just glaze over that and pretend that it doesn’t exist. I think there needs to be dialogue around what isn’t working and what we need to change- or to try something, so that then we can then look at data and look at student learning and then say “ok, we’ve made an impact” or we haven’t and if we haven’t- then why not? We are not talking enough, and I don’t just mean with our teaching partner- we may with our teaching
partner, but we are not talking across divisions. We are not talking as a school. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

While longing for this kind of professional learning, Jackie, at the same time recognizes that collaboration can be a challenge if teachers have not been used to it as part of their professional practice, and especially if they come from different philosophical standpoints. Instead of looking at teachers’ practices as being right or wrong, she stresses the importance of approaching dialogue with different people differentially. Recognizing that it is easy to talk to likeminded people, part of that professional dialogue is dealing with the tension of talking to each other when our experiences and our thinking are different. Jackie has come to believe that part of ensuring successful professional dialogue is to acknowledge other people’s strengths and recognize that everyone has a different lens. A collaborative environment seeks to bridge that tension and looks to find commonalities among the teachers at a school, so they can work together as a team.

**4.3.4 Professional Learning Experiences**

As an experienced teacher, Jackie has had many positive experiences with collaboration and professional dialogue, especially in her previous school. This was a school that had, what is commonly referred to as a lower SES (socioeconomic status), however, it was also a school where school staff felt it was important to collaborate and dialogue around students’ learning. As a school, they had formal committees, as well as time set aside for them to meet as divisions and groups in the schools. Here the focus was on examining student data and to reflect on what was working and then collaborate on creating new solutions to the problems they had identified. Jackie speculates that maybe in a school with higher student needs it becomes more important to meet and discuss these issues. She recognizes how much she enjoyed this kind of teamwork and
how she misses it in her current situation; she refers to it as “craving dialogue.” This lack of
collaboration becomes frustrating for many teachers like herself, and teachers may end up feeling
isolated and believing that nobody else has the same issues or challenges that they do. But the
opposite is often true; there are many commonalities that teachers cannot realize because they do
not have a platform to share this, or time set aside to discuss the issues. Instead, they only see the
snapshots of their own classroom and students, instead of understanding students’ needs in a
holistic, whole-school perspective. When this happens, the culture of a school can turn into one
of individuals working side by side rather than working together as part of a community of
learners.

You become complaisant and I think it is really easy to become complaisant in a place
where professional learning is too individual and where there is no deep dialogue. And
when we don’t go in depth, where initiatives are just that -they are just initiatives;
something you do for a year and then you move on. And so, it becomes very surface and
people decide that they are going to invest in other things. They don’t really believe in
the initiatives that we as a school are trying to do because they don’t last, they don’t seem
to have an impact. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

Rather than being comprised of isolated initiatives and mandates, Jackie views
professional learning as an iterative cycle of learning, practicing and reflecting on the practice.
She uses the term professional learning to describe this kind of learning because she feels it
reflects the idea of professional growth. In contrast to this, she sees the term professional
development as having the connotation of a one-time event; something more like a training
session. To her, professional development represents a stand-alone piece while professional
learning represents growth on a continuum. She believes that the willingness to learn something
new comes from within; it cannot be mandated or directed. In the portfolio she prepared as part of her PQP, she states that

Professional development (PD) activities are exactly that—activities. Planning and organizing PD activities and workshops do not necessarily mean any learning has occurred. In fact, even the assumption that learning occurs in PLCs is questionable. Professional learning is personal and requires a genuine interest in increasing knowledge and instructional practice for any real learning to occur. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

However, professional development like PLCs can still have a place in schools according to Jackie. Learning opportunities such as Lunch n’ Learns, in-school workshops, Board organized workshops, professional book clubs, learning walkthroughs, demonstration classrooms, and PLCs can be used to create a culture of professional learning if teachers feel they are of value to them. However, the one-time event or mandated initiatives by the Board are often not effective, as teachers end up simply going through the motions of what is asked of them without reflecting on their practice.

I think in a place where we don’t work with the strategies, and tweak and adapt it, explore it in depth, a place where we spend our time, in where it sort of doesn’t work, we are going to toss it. We move on to the next thing. Then we don’t learn, we don’t grow. It doesn’t become part of our repertoire, it doesn’t become part of our practice- because we haven’t worked with it. So, it doesn’t change how I do things. We have just done the motions of it and then say it doesn’t work… we didn’t reflect on it, we didn’t look at what could work instead. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

She finds that this type of learning fosters a certain type of attitude among teachers; it is not considered professional learning—it is just another initiative, something that the teachers are
mandated to do. And while some of the initiatives, such as inquiry-based learning and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) initiatives are indeed mandated by the school board, in her school board the PD itself is not. While they are still referred to as Board initiatives, the teachers are no longer mandated to attend the PD sessions connected with them. Jackie remembers that at one point in the past, the superintendents allocated money to such PD and the teachers were expected to be part of it as it always centered on an area that the Board focused on. The issue with the current approach to PD opportunities, whether at the Board level or at the school level, is that teachers have been inundated with them over the years now and few of them feel they are of any value. Quite often teachers are not sure why they are attending a PD session and fail to see the relevance. Jackie believes that we must work to create opportunities for professional dialogue at the school level for any professional development to become part of a culture of learning. What is needed is an environment where teachers feel safe to voice their perspectives without judgment in order for authentic discussions to occur.

4.3.5 The Role of Leadership in Professional Learning

Jackie has come to understand that leadership holds a key role in developing collaborative cultures in schools. She views the role of the principal as pivotal in setting the tone for encouraging teachers to grow and develop as professionals. Leadership is important to how well professional learning is implemented in the school. Based on her own experiences, she has come to see leadership as driving the professional learning in the schools and believes principals have the power to make professional learning either positive or negative.

I think that the direction of the school (is key) and how leaders of the school chose to structure professional learning to give opportunities for learning help to either encourage
teachers to participate and go up and do their own thing and to join the school and do something with the school – or you don’t!( Jackie, interview, 2017)

As is her experience, professionalism, and teachers’ attitudes toward professional learning can change quickly depending on the leadership of the school, to include that of the school board. The importance for administrators to listen to their staff and even more importantly, to involve teachers in creating a shared vision of learning for the school is a large part of what creates a learning culture in a school. Jackie believes that the majority of teachers do want to talk; they don’t want to complain. Given an opportunity to do so, most teachers want to collect and analyze student data. For this to take place, there needs to be time and space designated to examine and discuss this data in a collaborative, constructive and positive way. To Jackie, this means that principals must look to distribute leadership, cultivate teacher-leaders who can then maintain, tweak, and lead other teachers in the practices that improve student learning. Principals have to lead learners who can create conditions for professional learning and participate in the learning with teachers. To successfully create this culture of learning, it becomes essential to involve the teachers as part of the leadership team.

4.3.6 Authentic Professional Collaboration

Jackie had experienced this kind of professional learning leadership while working for a former administrator, and under a different superintendent, who emphasized the importance of lateral networks. During this time, teachers from her school met with teachers from other schools in the same area. The team of teachers were not necessarily the chairpersons, but instead representatives from different divisions. They would meet together as a larger team once every two or three months. While they still had to work within the perimeters of Board initiatives, they had much freedom in the application of their professional learning. They would meet with other
in same-grade teams, or divisions, from other schools. They shared student work and examined what each of the schools were doing; the issues that they were dealing with and the student needs they were trying to address. One of the things Jackie found was that what the teachers in her team truly enjoyed doing what is known as a walk-through. The teachers went to each other’s schools and walked together through the schools, examining pieces that they had been discussing in their cluster groups already. To her, this was relevant professional learning as she wanted to know what was happening in other schools beyond the sharing piece and what had been discussed in the clusters. Seeing different schools’ approaches afforded her the opportunity to reflect on how she and her team could use this information in their own school. “We are not going to be able to think about it differently if we don’t see it or experience it or know about it. Many of us who went through that found it was a great learning experience.” Her administrator supported this kind of learning partly because her team took what they had learned and then shared it all with their staff.

We shared the information, we shared the learnings, we shared some of the rubrics, for example, that other schools had developed, and some interesting ways of structuring assignments for looking at the achievement chart, in the rubric and having that reflected in the rubric…. and we were provided time under a different administration, to do that. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

While that was their experience this kind of sharing didn’t necessarily take place at other schools who were part of their clusters. When they went back to their schools, some of the teachers took the learning into their own classrooms only. The sharing at her school took place not because they were directed to do so, but because Jackie and the members of her team volunteered to share with their colleagues at school and their principal encouraged and supported
it. The teachers in her school implemented many of the strategies and skills that had been shared and when they saw success and growth in their students as well as how the students felt about their own learning, they continued the new practices. It sparked dialogue within their school and given that opportunity to dialogue, Jackie found these changes to be sustainable. Even with the changes of a new administration and various system change-overs, many of these practices have remained in place. For Jackie, such leadership created the opportunity to express her opinion of what was important to her school and how it could be implemented by sharing with others instead of being told how to proceed. Her administrator at the time knew the staff well and, she feels, selected staff who were open to the learning, open to going; teachers who were interested in what was happening in the school. “What can we learn, what can we change, and what can we do better? Because it was a group that was eager and motivated, we would dialogue—we would dialogue regardless of whether they gave us time.” The teachers in this group would request time to share at staff meetings and other collaborative times and were always given time to do so. The importance of being given this time and place to work together, to share and engage in dialogue is what made this professional learning experience stand out to Jackie as authentic and valuable. Unfortunately, once there was a change-over in priorities of the school system, and a new superintendent came in, the clusters disappeared.

Jackie believes strongly that teachers cannot, and should not, work in isolation. They need to be connected to a larger body of educators such as lateral networks with area schools and be able to tap into expertise that exists outside of their own school. This experience of working with this group was one of the best school-based professional learning opportunities of which she had been part. Before taking part in this, she had never been part of a lateral network before and had never dialogued with other schools to this extent—either before or after. The closest thing to
this kind of sharing was when, as an intermediate teacher, she took part in transition meetings with the high school teachers and they would dialogue about student data. This sharing and dialogue was similar to the experience of being part of the family of school clusters. The end result was a feeling of empowerment and professional growth.

4.3.7 Exploring a Different Role

Her best professional learning experience overall in her career has been the professional learning she experienced when taking her principal’s courses (PQP). She came back to the importance of being able to dialogue with teachers and leaders in settings outside her school. Being part of this learning community, she enjoyed seeing the bigger picture in education and learning more about what other school boards were doing. It provided her with a better sense of why things happen the way they do at the school level. She learned how the different pieces of various Ministry and school board mandates have to be fitted together to come together at the school level. It gave her a deeper understanding and provided more perspective into why schools and teachers do the things we do. She enjoyed this kind of learning, and especially the language that other teachers were using. The discussions were around addressing the various issues they encountered at their schools, instead of focusing on negativity. She found the instructors supportive of guiding her to look at school leadership and student learning through a different lens, in a holistic way. She came to recognize that the biggest resource at our schools is the people who work there and began to reflect on how to tap into people’s different strengths. She found it a positive approach, this strength-based focus, and acknowledged the importance of recognizing each other’s strengths and how this then contributes to building a positive learning environment in our schools. Even though she has been teaching for eleven years, Jackie does not consider herself to be a master teacher. Mostly because she isn’t sure what the term master teacher represents, but
also because she feels she still has so much to learn: “I may be experienced…. I don’t even think of myself as experienced. I just feel that there is a lot… a lot to learn… a lot to be stretched, because I am comfortable right now.”

4.3.8 When Professional Learning does not Work

Over the years Jackie has also experienced professional learning that has been less than helpful, and a common theme of these kind of experiences centres the approach taken by the leaders of the PD. Just like Jackie feels that school leaders are key to positive learning for teachers, she makes the same distinction when it comes to facilitators of professional development or courses. One that stands out to her is when the board was implementing a new math assessment resource. Every school got copies of the tool and teachers were asked to attend a training session. It was a half-day PD session for intermediate teachers in all the area schools, and Jackie’s first concern was that they spent a significant time “acting” in the role of a student taking this test and then discussing what it would feel like to go through the assessment.

We were the student and we had to try it and they allocated an hour to do it. Which felt like a waste of time. I understand that they wanted us to feel like what it was to feel like as a student completing it. I would have preferred that we got to look at the test itself; how to use it, where to go after we had administered it and that would have been useful. Addressing some of the concerns, such as time and acknowledging that it takes time (Jackie, interview, 2017).

There was a lack of respect for the teachers as professionals and the instructional leader came to this learning session with a view that the teachers might resist the learning, and Jackie felt that the presenter came prepared for complaints. She found the experience a real turn-off as it was not
only mandated for the schools, but the in-service itself was poorly executed. Even though they did not have to go to the training, Jackie had taken the time to do so and when she found that her time was not useful and that the facilitator was not willing to listen to the participants, she felt disrespected. There was no invitation to dialogue or give feedback so when Jackie’s principal asked if the school should bring the presenter in to speak to the staff, Jackie and her team offered a resounding “no.” In the end, Jackie felt that she honestly could not identify it as professional learning: “it was more of a sit in and take the information – almost like having a meeting.”

At this point in her career, Jackie does not think that those big, board-wide PD initiatives are useful to her anymore because “I have heard it before.” It is not beneficial to her own professional growth. She feels like she has indeed heard much of what is being presented many times before, that the material is not new, and thus she calls these learning opportunities a “waste of time” and she would rather spend time in the classroom with her students, tweaking and modifying her craft. Therefore, instead of learning something new, she is not finding value in what is being presented. While she values the practical and has enjoyed learning opportunities that focus on practical application of teaching, at this stage in her career she is interested in deepening her understanding of the theory and philosophy of education and how it applies to teaching and learning.

You just sit there, and you just listen… The biggest piece is that it is not new! Whereas at the beginning of my career, it was new, and I wanted to explore it as much as I could and then try something in the classroom. Whereas now it’s more like -done this, tried it. I might do some parts differently, but it is not exciting anymore. What I find I crave is dialogue and reading; being current and reading up on research. What’s the twist in thinking? Which I don’t really think you get through AQ either, so I am not interested in
AQ because AQs look at Ministry documents; they look at planning a lesson. I don’t want to look at planning a lesson. I want to look at theory - I don’t need to create another lesson plan. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

4.3.9 Professional Learning for Experienced Teachers

Jackie believes that professional learning for experienced teachers must look different than what is offered up today. There should be a way to stay current and to create a space where teachers can talk and reflect about their practice, as well as what they are doing. She imagines a kind of professional learning that is going to have to be more school-based, more site-based, and more specific to the needs of the teachers as well as the students in the different schools. She acknowledges this kind of professional learning will not only need space, but also time; time to engage and time to explore different approaches. Professional learning needs to start with the teachers themselves and the mindset that they want to do better for their students and to create an environment that is conducive to risk-taking and dialogue. Jackie expresses it this way:

If professional learning is personal and requires teachers to be open to learning something new or to think differently, in order for any change to occur, then it would seem that professional dialogue must be a part of the solution. (Jackie, interview, 2017)

4.4 Nadine

My connection with Nadine is as members of the same professional organization. We have known each other for over a decade and have been involved in a variety of professional events together. But more than anything, we have spent countless hours discussing books, teaching, and professional learning. We have shared moments from our own professional journeys, and I know Nadine as quite articulate, not only on her beliefs about teaching, but also critically engaged in
questioning and debating new ideas and concepts. Nadine is an experienced teacher who sees professional learning through a holistic lens. For her, hands-on experiences and really being immersed in the learning experience, exponentially, positions all learning as “off the page.” She believes in the importance of making the learning work for her and has become deliberate in the choices she makes in her professional learning. Her deep passion and understanding of drama have informed not only what she has chosen to learn, but also how. Drama is an essential part of who she is, both as a person and as a learner, and she often relates her experiences as stories; sometimes in dialogue. This enthusiasm for drama as well as her love of reading and writing is what guided her to her current assignment as a librarian in an independent school, after having spent the majority of her teaching experience with a Greater Toronto school board.

4.4.1 Becoming a teacher
Nadine has always had a passion for drama as a subject as well as a way of learning. In high school, she attended a school designated as a School of the Arts. She has always loved working with younger children, so during summers and March break she often worked as a camp counselor and park leader. She has done so since she was sixteen and truly enjoys it. While in the last year of high school, she was still not sure of what she wanted to study in university. During this time, her mother had made it very clear to her that Nadine needed to know what she wanted to study before she applied to any courses. While in a Writer’s craft class one day, she happened to sit beside a young man who was looking at an information pamphlet about university courses. She asked him if she could take a look, and discovered a program called Drama and Education. While reading it through, she began to see herself in this program:

Oh, I like children … I have worked with children for the last few summers… I love drama, I can totally do drama. And you begin to put it together and you say I can work
with children and do drama. I think this might be the program for me. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Thus, she ended up doing her undergraduate degree in Drama and Education. After finishing her degree however, she still was unsure of where to go. She says that it was almost by default that she applied to a faculty of education, without being convinced that this was the path she wanted. Her experience during this year was not completely positive and she began questioning if she was actually going to go into the classroom and teach, yet was at the same time determined to make a decision: “I had done five years of university—it was time to go out into the world.”

Once again, it was her mother who got her started on filling out the application for supply teaching once she had graduated and gave her support and guidance. With her help, Nadine got an interview and before the beginning of the school year, she had secured a contract job teaching grade five. She started this job thinking she was going to only do teaching for a little bit, and then maybe enter the arts, or do something different. However, nineteen years later she is “still in the game.”

As a classroom teacher, she has taught from grade two to grade seven; but as a teacher-librarian, she has worked with all students from kindergarten to grade eight. Nadine spent nine years as a classroom teacher and after that time, her enthusiasm for reading led her to reflect on becoming a teacher-librarian. In the end, it became important that she made a deliberate and unhurried decision. In order to move in this new direction, she decided to enroll in the Additional Qualification course for teacher-librarian. She deliberately chose to take the course a year before she began looking for librarian positions. Once she had the Part One completed, she applied to, and almost immediately got a job working in the library, which had a positive influence on her professional life; “I spent a year in the library and I LOVED IT.” Enjoying this new venue of
teaching, Nadine decided to take the Part Two and become a Librarian Specialist. However, over the years, her experience with AQ courses have been quite mixed and, in this case, she came away feeling frustrated and disappointed. Her main issue was the way the second part was set up, where anyone with Part One could take the course, even if they didn’t have any experience working in a library. She found herself looking to share ideas and experiences, but that did not quite materialize.

I was in a class with people who hadn't been in the library, and part of me taking Part Two was so I could be in a community of teacher-librarians. So, I felt…and oh, I loved the class, it was a great class… but, I was left wanting more. I just felt like I wasn’t in a community of learners… I wasn’t in a community of teacher-librarians. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

4.4.2 Additional Qualification Courses as Professional Learning

Over the years, she had been taking AQs during her time as a classroom teacher as well and had begun to feel that they were not meeting her professional learning needs. While she stresses that it is not about questioning additional qualifications in and of themselves, to her the courses were no longer giving her what she craved: “the additional qualifications were not feeding my soul.” They did not meet her needs, so she became hesitant in continuing on this path. Nadine still wishes that the format of the AQs would allow for revisiting what was learned in an earlier AQ in a more structured or formal way:

I wish there was AQs that would allow you to re-visit a course. It could be called the reflection AQ or something like that. I took Drama way back at the beginning – and I love drama, -but I’d be a better drama teacher if I could go and take a drama course. I want to do it in terms of teaching and remind myself. Not just a workshop; I’d really want to be immersed in a course. Maybe it’s for a month, maybe it’s for a few weekends-
whatever it is... that there are opportunities for those types of courses where you can go back and say, “I want to go and take that AQ again”, as, like, a reflection. It could be half price, whatever. It is just an opportunity for you to go in and re-visit it. It is just something at the back of my mind, I have always thought about. Revisit your knowledge. As I said before, you don’t grow stuff if you don’t practice it and use it. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Somewhat frustrated with the structure of the AQS Nadine decided to go a different route in her professional learning instead. Feeling that there truly was not anything to lose, she chose instead to do her Master in Education. This would allow her to focus on what she wanted and to create, in a way, her own learning path. She looked at both an M.Ed. and an MA and, in the end, she decided to do the Master of Arts, because of her love of writing and research, as that would again give her choice in her learning.

4.4.3 Master of Arts

Her experience of doing her MA was overwhelmingly positive. However, it began with a bit of a rough start. As she had struggled with the online application and how to do it, the only course available that she was interested in was the Foundations of Curriculum course.

I took that class, and I have to say that by the time I got to break, that evening, because it was an evening course, because I was teaching full time as a teacher-librarian… I still remember sitting in that class at break and whispering to the person beside me, “I think they made a mistake.” Because all the big words were flying over my head! I had been so pompous in my belief that AQS were - I don’t want to say beneath me, because I still take AQS –hat they were so simple. And all of sudden I was in a university class where I was thinking: “I don’t even know any of the words! And I don’t know what they are talking
about!” There was that moment of panic, and then I realized … it was like being back at university again; you had to do all the reading. That was hard but exhilarating…and it challenged me, and it pushed me, and I am glad that that ended up being my first course because everything after it fell into place. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

The whole experience was, however, a positive one for her. She made some clear and deliberate choices concerning what she wanted to learn. For instance, she carefully selected her supervisor by doing all the research on all the professors even before she applied. In her applications to the Master’s program, Nadine actually requested who would be her supervisor, because of the work that this professor did and the work that she had done around writing. Afterward the two of them would laugh about the fact that Nadine had chosen her, but to Nadine, it was an important part of having choices in her professional learning. She was actually surprised to find out that other students did not go about it this way, but it speaks to the kind of learner she is. For Nadine, it is vital to spend time doing the research ahead of time in order to make sure you fully understand what you want out of your learning. Her supervisor helped her design a project that suited her personally and validated the work that she was doing. She was able to do her research around the work that she did in the library. Moreover, she had the opportunity to look at what she was doing in her daily work, learn to appreciate and reflect on it, as well as to come to the realization of what was happening in her teaching. She dug deeper into her own practice and learned about herself as a learner in the process:

I think that’s what a Master’s did… As well that feeling of accomplishment, the walking across the stage. All of it was such an experience. Yes, there were tears, yes, there were late nights and yes, there were moments where you understand why people don’t finish.
But at the same time, it was like, you know, an adrenaline rush, brain rush, an amazing experience.” (Nadine, interview, 2017)

What she truly enjoyed was the research, being able to have conversations with people, getting deeper into understanding how they feel and think about certain issues. She went on to collaborate with her supervisor in many different venues even after she had finished her degree.

4.4.4 Making a Career Choice

Doing her MA had an impact on her career in many ways. She enjoyed meeting new people who had different experiences and enjoyed being challenged by talking to different professors and engaging in debate. In one of her classes, she met a woman who taught at an independent school. Nadine found herself constantly asking questions about what it was like. At the time, she was not considering applying to an independent school, but as always, she found that anything that was different from what she knew was fascinating to her. In the end, this became the catalyst for a change in her career as well. “I met someone in a class who worked in an independent school and now I work at an independent school. We kept in contact, so I was able to touch base with her when I was even applying.” In the end, her Master’s degree was also important when applying to a new position; it helped get her resume pulled out of a pile of resumes at the independent school where she now works as head of the school library.

Moving into an independent school she now feels that her role as a learner morphed into something different, although she thinks that her public-school experience has informed what she does in the independent school. “But has it changed who I am as an educator? Like, as a learner, and an educator, as all those pieces? No, I think I am still the same person. It has made me better because of it, I think.” She found that her learning curve in entering this new educational sphere was not as steep as she thought it might be. She came with experience and found that people
valued that experience as well. Her experience in the public-school system had been positive and she remains in close contact with her former colleagues. Nadine sees professional learning as iterative and constantly evolving: “Just because you have done something before, you just don’t pack it away and throw it out—you bring it forward. You use it, but you learn from it and you…and then you share it.”

4.4.5 Reflections on Professional Learning

To Nadine, relevant professional learning is never one-off. It needs to be ongoing and continuous. She found that in the public-school system there was a bit of “push and pull system with the PD.” There is mandated PD where every teacher has to attend certain sessions. This is usually when something is coming from the board; either a document or a practice where everyone and every school needs to do it and every school is going to implement it. Nadine has had experiences working for administrators, where they need a representative from the school to attend something where “you can volunteer, or you are voluntold.” But what truly sparks her interest are those little moments as being part of a module, or a small group.

There are moments when you are working in a small group and you don’t want it to end. I think when you are with a group of people that are engaged in the same interest as you are… That’s always exciting. Some of my meetings with colleagues, you know, when you are planning a unit or some lesson. Those moments when you’re like: ‘I wish we could do this all the time.’ (Nadine, interview, 2017)

As a teacher-librarian, she has had the opportunity to attend PD specific to teacher-librarians, which she enjoyed as being part of a community of learners. She values the possibility of choice, which sometimes happens during full day PD days. However, she sees that a growing focus on accountability has in a way changed how free those choices could possibly be. In the
independent school, they also have whole school mandated PD as well as other opportunities such as being able to attend conferences such as *Reading for the Love of It*. When it comes to sharing new documents, strategies or practices, it follows a similar approach as with the public-school board, “where everyone goes into the meeting space and we all talk about the same thing. So that, again, it is spoken to by everyone, it is the language of the community.” Earlier in her career, she attended the summer institutes organized by the Ministry of Education. These were part of an initiative by the Ministry that included producing professional learning materials based on current research that was distributed to all teachers in Ontario. At that part of her career, she appreciated this kind of learning: “They made a huge impact on my teaching.” Not only was the information she received helpful to her daily practice, but she found that being able to dialogue with other teachers with the same experience incredibly powerful as it “grounded our dialogues in the same language and the same practices.”

One of the things she likes about being in an IB school is that part of the mandate is that you have to take an IB course every five years, which is tracked as well as paid for by the school. This requirement values and encourages her to continue her professional learning. She further enjoys some of the freedom in her new school when it comes to making decisions. One such example is how she organizes the Book Fair in the Library. She finds the process exciting as she does not have to follow a standard Book Fair format. Instead, she partners with a bookstore of her choice, and together they create book lists, things about themes that are connected to what she wants to highlight. Based on those book lists and interest of her readers, she begins to curate lists and starts to think about how it is going to look and what’s it is going to sound like to best meet the needs of her students. There is constant communication, often involving an author visit as well. She truly enjoys the creativity an autonomy in decision making along with the
opportunity to ensure that all the pieces work and make a statement. This holds within it a creative element that is not standardized or top-down. Instead, it is based on constructing authentic growth as well as the growth in the collaboration between all parties, in terms of creating and curating this event and making it work.

Belonging to a community of learners is part of what professional learning is to Nadine and she seeks out different communities of which to be part. She belongs to three different book clubs, two of them with friends and colleagues and one of them being a professional book club as part of a Reading council. She firmly believes that this community of learners is important to people of all ages, and actively creates book clubs for her students as well. Being in an independent school, she moreover has an established network of teacher-librarians. They are connected to each other even though they are in different schools. They email each other, communicate via social media and then twice a year, they have formal face to face meetings. They come from all over Ontario and meet in the fall and in the spring. There is a larger meeting-conference for all of North America, but Nadine has not had the opportunity to attend that one yet. She also belongs to the Ontario Library Association, where librarians from public and private schools as well as public libraries meet and network. Nadine has further found a community of readers and learners within the group of booksellers she works with. She truly enjoys discussing and debating “what’s hot and what’s not” when it comes to both learning and reading.

However, at this point in her career, she is missing being able to collaborate with a group of like-minded people. Part of this challenge is that being a librarian can sometimes be a solitary position in itself. While the other teachers in her school all have grade partners to work with, she finds that being in the library “is one of the loneliest things I have ever done.” While she has a
partner, a library technician, this teacher is not only new to the librarian role but also new to teaching. While Nadine enjoys the mentoring role and sees it as professional learning for her as well, she expresses how she is missing collaborating with other teachers who share similar experiences and skills. She would like to be in a space where she could problem solve and critically reflect on the problems of practice they encounter: “this is the issue that I am up against, what can I do, what you would do...” Collaborating with colleagues who are in a similar situation, have similar knowledge, understand the problems and can critically reflect is what she feels she needs to push her own practice forward now. Otherwise, she might end up describing her dilemma to her administrator or another teacher without getting feedback that is situated in the same learning situation, and she is afraid that it might simply sound like she is complaining instead of searching for constructive dialogue. Given a choice, Nadine would like to be able to spend more time visiting librarians at other schools and really spend time and develop those visits. Hoping to find a “partner in crime”, someone she could really connect with and have those critical dialogues with, she is looking for a connection that goes beyond someone you meet at a conference. Too often she feels she ends up having great conversations with other educators, but they end once the conference is over. She is looking to develop a professional relationship, spending a day in the library and making that a regular practice of learning: “Especially at this point in my career, I think… We can fill ourselves up by doing all these courses and doing this and that, but you are missing that (collaboration).” While she has developed many friendships from all her years in teaching, she is at this time specifically looking for a professional partnership.
4.4.6 Professional Learning Outside Educational Institutions

Nadine sees professional learning as bigger than what happens in school and the school community: she views her personal professional growth as closely intertwined with her life outside of her school day. The basic idea of inquiry; of asking questions and constantly being open to learning is something she sees as intrinsic to her way of approaching the world. She highlights travelling as a way to grow both as a person and a professional. A few years ago, she participated in a Habitat for Humanity project in a South American country. She was looking for that global experience as a way to become better connected with the world as a whole as well as a way to take her out of her comfort zone.

Travelling for me has also helped me with my professional learning. That experience really taught me what it’s like to give back and experience it in another country, learn about culture and engage with the people. And that experience, because we are always looking for global experiences hands-on experience and really being immersed in the experience, I think exponentially just brings that learning, even more so- it takes it off the page. It really brings part of who you are and what you give to the world, but also take in and learn from it. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Reflecting on that experience, she now wishes that she had been more open to travelling as an educator, perhaps teaching in a different country rather than limiting her teaching experience to Ontario.

As an avid reader, she emphasizes the vital role that reading has in her professional learning. She likes to read a variety of text, where her learning comes from both non-fiction and fiction books; from reading children’s literature, graphic novels, and magazines. In general, she feels that reading from a variety of sources is what leads to new insights. This learning informs
her practice and in particular she finds sharing and discussing it with other teachers, is what guides her forward in her thinking and practice. She makes use of social media as well and shares her learning through tweets. Nadine re-tweets things that she finds interesting or that align with her beliefs around learning and social justice: “Books can help open the conversation. Especially when reading together- adult and child.” She is an avid tweeter when it comes to promoting books—both books that she wants to read herself, and children’s and young reader’s books she uses in her practice. She sees books as an important element in her own professional learning. Sometimes she uses it as a tool for reminding herself of her thinking and learning. She makes use of Twitter by re-tweeting something, even an image, as a note to herself about an idea that she wants to put into practice or share with someone.

That type of learning also informs my professional reading. I don’t even have to go very far; just after getting off the subway- flip through my twitter feed and see. And all of a sudden, I got an idea and I’ve learned so much.” (Nadine, interview, 2017)

4.4.7 Knowing Your Own Professional Learning Needs

Nadine makes choices in her professional learning that supports what she wants to learn. She is also clear on what she does not like about professional learning and what does not engage her. “I don’t want to sit in these presentations, but I also don’t want to go to a one-off weekend, because it is crammed full of five different workshops. I want it spread out!” To her, the worst PD is simply when she finds that she is not paying attention; when the presenter is not involved in the process and does not respect the adult learner model. She feels strongly that the presenter or facilitator needs to take the responsibility for how the learning happens. To her, the worst learning opportunities are the dry presentations where the speaker is simply lecturing to the group. Nadine, being an active hands-on learner, finds that those PD experiences have been the
hardest for her. Her background is in drama, so in order to be engaged, she needs an active activity. “I want to be engaged, I want to interact. So, when that’s not happening, it is very hard for me.” As a presenter herself at times, she makes sure that she does not practice any of that which she finds frustrating when she is leading the learning for colleagues: recognize who your audience is and make sure that they are responding to the learning.

Another example of when professional learning does not work is staff meetings. She truly feels that no staff meeting she has been to is run well, and that is true for both public and private school, and Nadine suspects, for the business community as well.

There is something about them. They are not meeting the needs of the community because there is always someone in the room rolling their eyes or looking at their watch going; “Ok, I could use my time better than this.” And then everyone is then pleasantly surprised: “That was amazing…” and you don’t know what the magic was that made that meeting so engaging. So, I would probably eliminate staff meetings, but we need to have them. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Instead, she thinks the best learning happens when you are with a group of people that are engaged in the same interest as you are, coming together and talking about a problem, an issue or a question. She truly enjoys research, even as she recognizes that it takes time, but it is that time commitment that makes the learning grow.

As she has been involved in much professional learning over the years, she is cognizant of that when she looks at workshops offered. She has learned to carefully look at how the learning is being described as professional learning and has learned to anticipate what type of learning it will actually be. She does choose carefully and believes that it is important to do so. Even when being careful, sometimes the learning opportunity disappoints.
There was a time, and I’ve attended *Reading for the Love of It*, and because I loved a presenter’s writing so much (*I chose this session*) Their writing did not correspond to the person who was standing in front (*presenting*). So, that was very heartbreaking for me because I was so excited to listen to this person speak. And it didn’t work. So, sometimes that kind of goes against what you expect. That is an example of it not working. But, for the most part, it matches. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

### 4.4.8 Teaching Others as Professional Learning

Presenting to others is in itself another opportunity for increasing her professional knowledge, and Nadine has had several opportunities to present to her peers over her career. When she does, Nadine is careful to make sure that she engages her audience, just as she likes to be engaged herself. She plans ahead of time so that she does not to stay on an activity for too long. Her goals are to engage everyone so that no one is turning to look at their phones. One of the ways she strives to do so is to make it clear that she will provide them with the notes so that they can be actively engaged in the learning itself. By providing full access to notes and pictures of the important points, the participants can focus on the learning and interaction at hand. In the end, she provides that kind of learning environment she wishes for herself when it comes to presentations.

### 4.4.9 The Importance of Reflection

Part of her learning process is the art of reflecting on her learning, of revisiting and thinking about her practice. She sees this process as ongoing and for her, it happens mostly at night as she looks back on her day. Sometimes, she will bounce her ideas off a friend, her mom, or even her cat! Talking it through is like a reasoning piece; talking through some of the things that didn’t work out during the day, or something she has learned but still doesn’t quite understand. Nadine
feels strongly that there is something to be said for sleeping on something before making a decision about it and it helps her in understanding new learning.

That’s where my reflection is helpful, especially when something is really eating away at me or I can’t figure out an answer or solve it. I think time is SO important. And in removing myself from the busyness of being in a school, or on the subway, or on the street, or working out at the gym…Just like being away from everyone, being by myself, gives me an opportunity (to reflect), so I do it pretty much on a daily basis. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Because personal choice is important to Nadine, she believes that when it comes to professional learning, the annual learning plan should be aligned with the opportunity to organize your resume. To her, it should be a tool for reflecting on your career every year. She says that this is a great opportunity to stop and think about what you have learned and what you want to learn is often forgotten as a tool for professional learning. It is very much part of professional learning to her, and as an educator, it should be a function of reflecting on what you are learning and what you are sharing. Looking at the annual review, documenting your learning, either as a resume or some type of portfolio, opens up the opportunity to dialogue about what you do or how you do it. It informs your practice as well as it speaks to who you are as a learner.

So, professional learning is just that whole idea that, when there is a question, there is somewhere you can find an answer: it might be taking a course, it might be reading a book, an article, going online – it is just a constant craving to learn. (Nadine, interview, 2017)
Chapter Five: Authentic Professional Learning

In this chapter, I will discuss the themes of authentic professional learning, elements that provide a supportive learning climate for authentic professional learning, as well as the barriers to such learning, that I found in the narratives of the experienced participants in my research. I will also briefly discuss the importance of professional pride that emerged as a recurring topic in their stories of professional learning. Included in this chapter is an examination of the limitations as well as the implication for practice. Finally, I present my conclusions and reflection on what the experienced teachers identified as authentic professional learning.

5.1 Analysis

Through examining the narratives from four experienced teachers, I sought to uncover what they themselves describe as authentic professional learning. Beginning with the stance that all learning is social (Borko, 2004), I discovered that, like other teachers who have been working in the teaching profession for more than a decade, these four teachers find themselves in a professional phase of their careers where they are managing changes in their own role, due to outside pressures and expectations, and at the same time becoming more grounded in their identity as teachers (Day, 2012). Working in a culture of performativity (Apple, 1986) as the participants in my research do, these experienced teachers communicate clearly through their narratives, how they crave professional dialogue and critical reflection with colleagues of similar professional teaching experience and interest. The element of choice stood out as a recurring and important theme in their narratives as well.

The teachers’ own experiences are clearly reflected in their stories. The subtitles in their re-storied narratives grew out of these lived realities and reveal some of their individual
differences. The themes, as developed from the coding and the analysis, reflect not only the frequency by which the themes occurred but also how the teachers stressed them during the interviews. Here I tapped into my notes in the reflective journal as well as my notations made after the interviews. What I used as themes in discussing their narratives, are key elements that occurred frequently in their interviews and were emphasized by the participants by body language (leaning forward, looking at the interviewer for affirmation etc.) and were also stressed or explicitly stated by the teachers as important. The collaboration during the re-storying process moreover worked to confirm that these were indeed important aspects of authentic professional learning in their experiences. Subthemes discussed below include collaboration, ready-made resources, the role of administration, approaches to teaching, and trust.

5.1.2 Arising Elements of Authentic Professional Learning

As Scott and Mimi work in the same school board, it was not surprising to find that the issue of how the BCIs are implemented was emphasized by both of them. They expressed similar concerns with, not only the lack of input allowed from teachers, but how the lack of trust in the teachers displayed by the presenters, or administrators was a barrier to engagement and collaboration. For Jackie and Nadine, their work environment had different challenges that highlight the lack of trust as a barrier to motivation. One such example is Jackie’s experience of how professional learning in her school and school board has been affected by the work action that took place, and the impact it has had on the atmosphere when it comes to professional learning. For Nadine, this means trust in her work as a librarian, where she is allowed to create and curate the Book Fair in a way that she feels best will support her students without having to worry about following a pre-set format.
5.1.2.1 Collaboration

Collaboration was a theme that was found in all their narratives, however, the lived experiences of the teachers lead to variations of how collaboration was embodied in their lives. Scott sees authentic collaboration as more of a possibility outside his school and school board and actively seeks out venues such as EdCamps and Twitter for collaboration with like-minded teachers. While he discusses his longing for a collaborative partner and reflects on how he enjoyed this type of collaboration in the past, he does not look for a group of teachers to work with like Mimi does, when she initiates a collaboration with colleagues in her school. Both of them mention the resources, such as books, provided by their school board in a positive manner and how they saw them as helpful in their professional growth. But while Scott looks at using them mostly on his own, Mimi sees them as important in the work her group does in implementing theory into practice. For Jackie, working in groups is indeed part of what she views as collaboration, but she emphasizes the focus on dialogue as the main component of making it successful. She repeats how she craves dialogue throughout her narrative. Nadine discusses her craving to learn in a community of learners, and like Mimi and Nadine she seeks this community within her work sphere; either at her school or with other teacher-librarians. Like Scott, she discovered a community of learners while completing her Masters and found this type of collaboration at the university level challenging and offering growth in her professional knowledge.

5.1.2.2 Ready-made resources

All the teachers mention the use of ready-made teaching resources, such as those that can be found on websites like Pinterest and Teachers Teaching Teachers. However, only Scott and Jackie discuss what they view as an issue of product versus process at any length. As they work
at different school boards, it is interesting to find that they both have the same reservation around what they perceive as a growing emphasis on the end products as evidence of student learning. All four of the participants discuss how when it comes to professional learning sessions, the presenters’ knowledge of adult learning, as well as the expertise of the subject they are presenting on, is an important feature of successful professional learning. Moreover, Scott and Nadine view it through the lens of having been presenters themselves. Both of them reflect on the importance of having the audience engaged and they use this insight when sharing their own expertise with other teachers. Jackie, having begun a journey in considering entering the field of administration, admits to viewing it through the lens of a school leader and reflects on the actual practical application of professional learning opportunities within a school.

5.1.2.3 The role of administration

In all their stories I found the important role that administration plays in supporting authentic professional learning highlighted by the participants. Scott and Mimi use similar language around being given encouragement, or permission, in seeking out opportunities that support their own learning. They not only clarify that they find it important to have this support, but that this “permission” partially empowers them to take risks in their own learning. It is interesting to note that in the interviews both Scott and Jackie bring in the role that senior administration, such as superintendents, may have on how professional learning is implemented at the school level. While they do not go into depth on this issue, both make some connection to leadership outside the school itself. Here it is not merely the leader within the school, but also the structure of support provided by the school board as a whole, that is viewed as impacting the professional learning (Campbell et al., 2016).
5.1.2.4 Approaches to teaching

Jackie, and to some degree Scott, bring up the subject of a holistic view of professional learning but neither of them develops it further. However, for Nadine, the holistic view of learning and her experience as having travelled—both professionally and personally—becomes a different lens through which she tells her story. Her view of professional learning is not limited to what is being offered to her by her employers, universities or institutions. Her desire to make deliberate choices in her own learning can perhaps be interpreted as an aspect of this holistic view as well.

When it comes to her teaching, Mimi describes how she learned to integrate subjects when she worked in South America. At the time integration was a necessity based on the time constraint she lived with as part of her teaching day. The teachers at that school had to teach so many subjects in a certain time, and the only way to do this was to connect them in an integrated way. When I worked with her, she did this naturally in her teaching, which led to the students being engaged and active learners in her classroom. She shared this knowledge with her colleagues and as intermediate teachers they planned such integrated units together with great success. In her narrative, she states that she truly enjoyed collaborating with the division colleagues in creating integrated units that they all taught and assessed together.

Scott knows how important such integration is to student comprehension and engagement as well. In his narrative, he discusses how he worries that in order to teach all the elements of math, he has chosen to, what he refers to, “silo” this subject. Scott worked hard on integrating all the stands and skills when it comes to literacy, and the work he had published in *Teachers teaching Teachers* is, in fact, a kind of handbook on how to do this using technology as a tool. Scott is looking at integration of a different sort than the one Mimi uses; not across subjects, but
rather across strands in a subject. Scott’s focus is also on technology. In the introduction of his handbook, he writes: “Technology is a tool that can help develop the critical literacy skills of students. This project attempts to show how technology as a tool can transform a literacy program, to help create critical consumers and producers of information” (source not revealed in order to maintain the anonymity of participant). It is not surprising then, that the professional learning he seeks concerns technology, as well as using technology as a vehicle of professional learning. In contrast, Mimi is more interested in creating collaborative groups working together in designing integrated units or similar group projects as part of her professional learning. While she does not emphasize dialogue as Grace does (the word comes up over fifty times in the initial interview), she clearly prefers this type of smaller focussed group where they can discuss and dialogue, both in person and in online. Neither Jackie nor Nadine discuss the idea of integrating subjects or strands, so it stands to reason that this aspect of their teaching is not reflected in what they consider to be valuable professional learning either.

5.1.2.5 Trust

While their experiences have been different, their stories clearly identify what they perceived to be the major barriers to authentic professional learning such as the lack of trust, the erosion of professional collaboration, initiative overload, an overemphasis on learning products, and what they refer to as packaged PD. While remaining positive in their stance to formal learning, they emphasized that their preferred learning approach is what the literature refers to as informal learning (Kyndt et al., 2016). Informal learning opportunities can be seen as embedded right in the teachers’ practice, therefore allowing for reflection and dialogue with colleagues. However, informal learning is in itself difficult to explicitly define and is much less documented within the research of teacher professional learning (Desimone, 2009; Kyndt et al., 2016;
Putnam & Borko, 2000). The teachers in this study, clearly express how they considered this type of learning not only valuable but because of the element of choice and the opportunity for innovation, they portray it often as more valuable than formal learning at this stage of their careers.

While all of them are still open to formal, structured learning, and strive to find information and knowledge even from mandated learning, they express a desire for having their voice recognized in making choices for their own professional growth. In their narratives, though at times they do not differentiate between the terms PD and PL, they clearly identify the elements that they find hampers their learning which is often related to the positivistic approach associated with professional development. They view the mandated professional development as breeding a certain type of attitude among both themselves and their colleagues, which they do not find helpful in their learning. For someone like Nadine, this type of learning is not actually considered professional learning—just another mandated initiative, where teachers once again are told they have to attend workshops or learning sessions. As Kennedy (2016), points out: “Attendance is mandatory, but learning is not” (p. 973).

5.2 Professional Pride

The pride in their professionalism that all four participants verbalize, however, shows that they continue to be positive and open to any formal professional development, including additional qualification courses, and consistently try to find something valuable in every professional learning in which they partake. They remain as Scott says, “relentlessly positive” about any type of professional development or professional learning, despite the many concerns they have. Scott is a positive person who is quick to laughter, but it is his professional attitude towards all learning that expresses the positivity and possibility in each learning opportunity. His focus is on
theory and the curriculum, and he takes pride in his knowledge of the curriculum. He feels a professional responsibility not only to his students but in sharing his knowledge with other teachers through his writing and presenting. Like Scott, Jackie focuses on theories of learning and reads professional literature to improve her practice. She takes pride in her learning and does not need to be “voluntold” in order to seek out professional collaboration and learning.

Mimi expresses how she has always found any kind of professional learning interesting, while at the same time she stresses the importance of being treated with respect and having choice. She finds that being told to do something, like using a certain seating chart, without discussion and reflection is not helpful to her. She will do as directed by the Board or her administrator, as she takes pride in her profession as a teacher but knows that she learns better if her input is considered. One example of how her professional pride is expressed can be seen in the group she is working within the “subversive” learning community. While they made the choice to work together, they also made the decision that it must be professional—no gossiping—as well as draw on the resources from the BCI (Building Collaborative Inquiry) sessions as the basis for their inquiry.

Nadine refers to her constant craving to learn as a professional and takes great pride in her work; from curating and creating a Book Fair that meets the diverse needs of her students, to constantly seeking new knowledge through book clubs and collaboration with her colleagues. For her, reading is an important part of her professional growth and she prides herself on being up to date with both professional and children’s literature. Each actively seeks out their own kind of learning communities that allows for collaboration and critical reflection. They are interested in delving deeper into the actualization of theory into practices and express a clear need for choice and autonomy in their professional learning. As practitioners, they emphasize the vital
importance of a climate of mutual respect and relational trust in order to create the space in which they can construct professional collaboration that often reaches outside their own schools. They seek out learning opportunities that honour their professional knowledge, integrity, and identity. While looking for a sense of autonomy in their learning they are also searching for their flock of educators in order to collaborate, communicate and construct new learning.

5.3 Barriers to Authentic Professional Learning

Despite expressing a deep desire for continuous professional learning, the teachers all describe how barriers in the workplace and beyond have left them with some grave concerns. The lack of relational trust and a safe space for learning, the erosion of professional collaboration in the schools, initiative overload and packaged PD with an overemphasis on products instead of process as well as the lack of choice, were viewed as impediments to authentic professional learning and development.

5.3.1 Climate lacking relational trust

In their narratives, the teachers discussed the importance of a safe environment in order to build the trust necessary, to be honest and vulnerable in their learning. Teacher professional learning is after all much more than an event; it is a complex system in which the learning environment is one key element (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 378). An environment that does not support such trust can work against teacher professional learning, even when the routines and structures set in place appear to be supportive of teacher learning. When Mimi describes the current year’s mandated Building Collaborative Inquiry (BCI) sessions as not being safe spaces for learning and refers to them as “non-examples” of authentic professional learning, she is referring to a structure that has become an element of a negative climate for learning: “The topics for the sessions are mandated, and the teachers’ input into the discussions are viewed as a kind of
test.” The idea behind these whole school professional learning collaborations was for teachers to explore and investigate professional questions as in relation to their schools and classrooms. While the original intent may have been to build collaborative inquiry and promote a professional learning community, the format had changed since the previous year, where Mimi had felt that the teachers had much more autonomy. Again, the perceived lack of respect for the teachers’ knowledge led to a breakdown in the relational trust in the environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Scott, working for the same school board, also finds himself struggling with a BCI format as model that he finds fails to differentiate and respect experiences and knowledge. The lack of relational trust, that is the result of the delivery as well as the format of this kind of professional learning, becomes a barrier for creating a positive climate and conditions for learning, especially when we view professional learning as based in relationships, with the construction and reconstruction of new learning taking place within this context (Beattie, 2001, p.18).

**5.3.2 Erosion of professional collaboration**

Circumstances that arise from being in a contractual situation at their workplace, where teachers are negotiating for a better contract, can be one component that affects the learning climate (Cooper et al., 2003). While one of the elements of what is being bargained for is often better working conditions, it is interesting to note that the process to do so can sometimes negatively affect the learning climate itself. Jackie noticed how the professional environment during the contract talks actually worked against creating a culture of professionalism, and this atmosphere continued afterward as well. Collaboration and professional dialogue suffered because the teachers during the work to rule, limited both the tone and type of the professional learning in which they agreed to participate. Despite wanting to believe that professional
dialogue would continue informally (in the hallway, by the photocopier, etc.) more often than not, conversations between the teachers centred on the ongoing negotiations or the media’s portrayal of the situation. Collegial conversations often turned into a kind of “complaining talk”. Jackie found it challenging to no longer have a forum within which to converse and collaborate with her colleagues. She also found that the newer, younger teachers did not have the habit of collaboration, as they had little or no experience working collaboratively and engaging in professional dialogue. When the structures for collaboration are not in place, the culture of working together falls to the side. This can more easily take place in an environment where teachers are viewed less as professionals and more as workers requiring re-training and re-skilling in order to efficiently do their work (Apple, 1986). This highlights the importance of consciously creating, maintaining and promoting a collaborative culture to sustain the collegial practices of professional dialogue and reflection.

5.3.3 Initiative overload

Another element that was identified as leading to the creation of a negative climate hindering professional learning was the burden of increasing demands on the teachers, including an overload of initiatives and PD. The teachers found that one of the issues with the current approach to PD opportunities, whether at the Board level or at the school level, is that teachers have been inundated with PD initiatives over many years now. Few of them feel these professional development sessions are of much value to their own professional learning. The feeling of barely keeping their heads above water in a sea of initiatives quickly leads to burnout and a climate lacking both enthusiasm and energy to engage in professional learning. Working within, what Apple (2005) refers to as an “audit culture” with an emphasis on efficiency,
accountability and a constant request for producing evidence, the learning culture quickly switches to one of compliance rather than authentic learning.

### 5.3.4 Packaged PD

Scott talked about how he has seen the pendulum’s shift over the last seventeen years of his career when it comes to his own professional development. Over the last 10 or so years, with the introduction of more mandated professional development, there has been an overemphasis on what participating teachers refer to as packaged PD. While research has demonstrated repeatedly that the one-size-fits-all does not work, it continues to be a staple in many school boards’ strategies to improve student learning through improving teacher capacity (Borko, 2004; Desimone, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011; Judah, 2006; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Scott, Mimi, Nadine, and Jackie all describe the dissonance in what seems to be the expected outcomes of PD by policy creators and principals, and what is experienced by the teachers who partake in them (Pedder & Opfer, 2012). Calling teaching practices research-based does not necessarily directly link theory to teachers’ practice in their own classrooms. Often, there is little attention paid to teachers gaining a comprehensive understanding of the theories behind the practice. The teachers in this research have spent many years experiencing and reflecting on their own professional learning. They are clear on what they consider to be good professional learning and what is not. They all express frustration with the passive “Sit-n’ Git” model, with the presenter talking while the participants stare at the carefully prepared PowerPoint presentation. Scott speculates that this passive approach to professional development may be why he finds that many teachers are likewise passive about their own professional learning. This transmission model where teachers bring back a copy of the PowerPoint and...
regurgitate what they have heard, as a way of spreading knowledge is, in his opinion, both ineffective and expensive. While Mimi has always found PD interesting and is definitely not against the form of PD where “we talk about the actual learning of how to teach,” she finds it frustrating to have to attend sessions on topics she considers herself to have mastered in her own practice. The type of mandated PD, where everyone had to attend certain sessions, can sometimes fill a broader need, especially when it comes to a new Ministry of Education document to be disseminated. Nadine has had experiences working for administrators where she had been told to go to such sessions, either as a representative for the school or because everyone had to attend. But these packaged PD sessions never engage her fully. What truly sparks her interest are those little moments when she is part of a module, or a small group working together. She finds these contexts provide relevant and situated learning. To her, the worst PD is simply when she finds that she is not paying attention; either because the subject does not feel valuable to her professional learning or when the presenter does not respect the adult learner model. Paying attention and being engaged are two sides of the same coin, and with packaged PD, the chance of either one of these taking place decreases for teachers who are keenly aware of their professional learning needs and know that the mandated PD is not addressing those needs.

Nadine, like the other participants, sees such mandated sessions, not as professional learning, but rather as a standardized set of activities. She feels that such packaged PD activities and workshops do not necessarily mean any actual professional learning has occurred. Quite often she has found that teachers she works with are not sure why they are attending a certain PD session and therefore do not feel it is relevant to them. Like Nadine, Jackie does not think that big, board-wide PD sessions are useful to her anymore, in part because she feels like she has heard it before. Packaged PD is simply not beneficial to her own professional growth. In truth,
she has indeed heard much of what is being presented many times before and the material is not new. Thus, she refers to these learning opportunities as a “waste of time,” and she would rather spend that time in the classroom with her students, tweaking and modifying her craft. These, often one-time events, mandated by the school board are not effective in terms of deep learning either, as the teachers end up simply doing the motions of what is being asked of them, without reflecting in any depth on their own practice. The danger of a mandated format with a focus on the top-down approach is as Scott explains: “PD has been so boxed that people are just trained to be boxed in their teaching as well.”

5.3.5 Focus on product rather than process

The teachers in this study view teaching and learning as a fascinating and ongoing process, and through this lens they observe and evaluate their students’ learning in order to adjust their teaching and meet the students’ needs. They know that teaching takes time and learning is both a social and emotional process for their students (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Timperley et al., 2007). Furthermore, in their teaching they tend to focus on how the students progress and even though they know that they need to evaluate their learning and give a summative assessment at some point, they chose to focus on the assessment for learning, and, as learning. Two of the teachers, Scott and Jackie, raised the issue of what they perceive to be a shifting focus from the process of gaining a deeper understanding of learning, to the product at the end of learning. This is a trend that they have seen in their respective school boards and a general approach to professional learning. They describe their own interest in students’ learning processes and how they want the emphasis to be on the actual process in their own professional learning as well. Scott underlines that at this time in his career, what excites him is not products and programs and
things to make. Instead, he searches for the process that goes into the thinking and learning theoretical foundations.

He finds this focus on product quite often overshadows opportunities that have the potential to become authentic professional learning. Even those sessions focusing on technology that he has attended have “just devolved into ‘use this program, use this program’ kind of thing. I fear that this is the state of education is right now. I think it is all product.” This type of approach to professional learning is underpinned by “the assumption that teacher professional development consists of a repertoire of activities and methods for learning and that teacher learning follows more or less directly from the frequency with which professional development programs use these specific activities, structures” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 378). Both Scott and Jackie see this type of teacher learning style as a barrier to authentic learning.

While Scott admits that he can see the appeal that tangible products hold for teachers, he is concerned that a product orientation is neither deeply engaging nor containing the thinking needed for sustainable learning. Scott refers to this as the *Pinterest version* of teaching and learning and believes that it might have morphed into a mirage of what real learning is. *Pinterest* is a popular social media network that is used by educators to share anything from classroom organization to lesson ideas (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014). While there are instances where *Pinterest* is deliberately used for educational purposes, Scott is instead pointing out the focus on visual appeal that is promoted there. The ideas presented are moreover not always pedagogically sound, as they are neither peer-reviewed nor checked for accuracy. Thus, the focus on producing visually appealing products that are promoted as tools to student engagement overrides the need for theoretically and pedagogically sound practice.
Jackie further emphasizes that she finds this shift towards the focus on products in teacher discussions taking place at her school. The professional conversations are becoming more and more superficial. Instead of examining and discussing student achievement, she finds that the teachers focus in on what “looks pretty.” Similar to Scott, she has found that teachers are more likely to seek out teaching ideas through Pinterest and other websites where the focus is all product. Thus, the discussions that pursue tend to focus on products, rather than discourse around how to move students through the different processes of learning.

5.3.6 Lack of choice

She spoke in a soft voice: “I thought what am I going to do? The system is a little bit broken, I can’t change a piece of it. I am going to take positivity from the part that I like and I’m going to push aside the others as opposed to challenging it.” (Mimi)

Because the teachers in this study know how their choices impact their own professional learning, they express a deep frustration with a climate of accountability and performativity where the top-down approach to mandated learning often means a lack of choice in their professional learning. The growing focus on accountability has in a way changed how free their choices can possibly be, as they are often sent to attend in-services and workshops hosted by their employer. The educational policy implemented by the Royal Commission of Learning reflect this top-down approach as it states that “professional development be mandatory for all educators” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1995, News Release, para. 6). While the experienced teachers may have enjoyed and seen value in this type of PD early on in their careers, they now see these formats as barriers to actual professional learning for them. As well, there is an underlying sentiment that the oft-mandated professional learning reflects a focus away from trust in teachers’ ability to construct their own meaning. In balancing the system needs with those of the individual teachers, a standardized approach does not allow for the fact that many teachers
are on different paths in their learning journey and that they need a differentiated and personalized approach. This has become an actual problem for these experienced teachers, as they need, and are not receiving, relevant conditions to create teacher professional learning that balances their personal aspirations with systemic requirements. They require collegial partnerships that foster critical dialogues recognizing both the social and professional capital they bring.

The most common example of where the balance of system needs and individual needs often tip in the favour of the system needs is staff meetings with a PD component. Nadine expresses it best when she says that staff meetings never seem to be meeting the needs of the community. The system needs prevail, and the top-down approach takes precedent. As with staff meetings, teachers are quite often unsure of why they are attending a PD session and often end up questioning how it is relevant to them and their practice. Jackie found the experience of attending an in-service on a new assessment tool a real turn-off as it was not only mandated for the schools, but the in-service itself was poorly executed. Not only did she not have a choice in attending, but she came away feeling that the format, as well as the presenter of the in-service, did not respect the teachers as learners on different paths in their learning. Nadine had many experiences with in-services mandated by the school board where “you can volunteer, or you are voluntold.” Mimi similarly found that being “voluntold” to go to workshops by her administrator did not align with her own need for learning, and that she was unable to partake in many of the opportunities offered by the school board, as so often the timing of the workshops is prohibitive for her as a parent of young children. To her, being treated as a professional, which means acknowledging both her personal and professional reality, is as essential as the opportunity for choice in her learning:
If your administrator says to you, “I saw this opportunity- I think you would like this.”

Then you are already approaching it with the mindset of, 'Oh, this is something that would benefit me. This is something that I would enjoy, and I would get something from' and so you go into it that way. But if the admin says to you: ‘I’ve signed you up for this PD, right -you and this other teacher are going.’ You say: ‘Ok. ‘Yes, sir, no sir.’ And you go. Sometimes you find that it is actually really good. But most of the time you are like ‘ok- when is lunch?’ (Mimi, interview, 2017)

5.4 Elements of a Supportive Learning Climate for Authentic Professional Learning

To create a climate that supports professional learning, the element of choice stands at the centre for the teachers in this study. While choice may take many various forms, at its core it honours the merging of the personal with the professional needs of the teachers involved. A climate of collaboration is where trust is a vital element that is essential in creating a culture of collaborative professionalism (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). In schools, it is therefore often the principal who is largely responsible for setting the tone and creating the conditions for collaborative learning that can lead to teachers at all stages in their career deepening their knowledge (Campbell, 2017; OECD, 2014). There is, however, a fine balance that school leaders have to make between supporting and controlling the learning that takes place in the schools, especially when there is an overall focus on coherence. This unfortunately often means that the teachers’ professional judgement and needs are ignored (Campbell, 2017). Part of creating a supportive learning climate means establishing structures for collaboration and choice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). An essential component of establishing collegiality for authentic learning is creating a safe learning environment. Here is where the establishing, building and maintaining relational trust, as the teachers in this study highlighted, is vital to a supportive climate and
culture of learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Warren Little, 1990). In agreement with researchers, the participating teachers emphasized the importance of the professional learning as being situated, tied to their classroom practice, incorporating the elements of dialogue and reflections, as well as activities that are seen as meaningful (Timperley et al., 2007). For the teachers in this study, this means further being able to choose with whom they collaborate.

**5.4.1 Choice**

As experienced teachers, the participants express a need for their learning to be connected to their own teaching reality; which class, which school and what subject they are teaching (Cooper et al., 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). While this may be true for any teacher regardless of their years of experience, it becomes increasingly important as teachers become more experienced and have gained both practical and theoretical knowledge over their years in the teaching profession (Postholm, 2012). Choice is an important element in creating and maintaining relational trust and a climate of learning that recognizes the different strengths and needs of the teachers working in the school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

In their narratives, the teachers often take a holistic view of teaching, demonstrating a deep desire to help their students connect the learning in school to their own lives. Mimi describes how she is always reflecting and even doubting if she is doing the right thing for the students, while Jackie expresses her desire to closely examine not just what the students need but how their teaching is having an impact on student learning. Scott reveals how he continuously seeks new and better ways to ignite the passion of learning in his students, always beginning his planning with the students in mind. He refers to this connection as “carrying the kids on my back.” The teachers have, over their years of teaching, built up a wide range of skills and deep
conceptual understanding of teaching and learning. They know through their own experience just how choice influences learning for their students and clearly see the link between choice and building new conceptual knowledge for themselves. This need for personalization and choice in their learning are aspects found to be instrumental in the creation of teacher agency (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Calvert, 2016). This desire to make choices in their professional learning and becoming an active agent in their own education was heard throughout all the narratives.

At this stage in their careers, they further wish to deepen their pedagogical and curriculum knowledge and its practical application in the classroom (Day, 1999; Masuda, Ebosole, & Barrett, 2013; Postholm, 2012). As Scott expresses it, “I find that I am much more interested in pedagogy, really interested in the things that provide the foundation of learning.” They have, through their lived experiences, developed a clear personal philosophy of how they view teaching, upon which they build when they make these deliberate decisions in their professional learning. Their philosophy of teaching, moreover, guides them in the choices they make beyond their own professional learning and influences how they choose to live their professional lives as it intersects with their personal reality. When Mimi encountered a working situation that went against her own moral compass of right and wrong, she made a clear and deliberate choice to resign from her position as it contradicted her image of herself as a professional educator.

The importance of making choices that promote their learning and validate their professional image and beliefs, guides not only the learning paths they take but also the processes they utilize towards achieving their goals. When Nadine was exploring becoming a teacher librarian, it was important to her that her final decision was well researched and
unhurried. She considers it important to be able to make these choices in her professional learning and career path, but more importantly, Nadine views choice in her professional life as clearly integrated in her own learning. She feels strongly that the annual learning plan that all teachers in Ontario are required to make, should be aligned with her goals of professional learning and career (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). This means broadening the concept of professional growth outside what we call formal learning opportunities and into a more global and holistic view of how her learning outside the school environment adds to her professional schema. When she became involved in the Habitat for Humanity project, she deliberately went looking for a global experience as a way to become better connected with the world and she identified this as a valuable form of professional learning.

Hence, viewing professional learning as more than simply gaining and constructing new knowledge repositions authentic professional learning with respect to the ontological frame of being a teacher (Webster-Wright, 2009). The teachers in this research purposely make decisions towards what they consider to be authentic learning, and they intentionally seek out people who can help them reach this goal. Both Jackie and Mimi insist on being allowed to make choices based on the expertise and knowledge of the instructors of formal learning opportunities. They need to be able to respect the instructors and believe that they are speaking from a position of wisdom and knowledge and that they have something worth sharing. Jackie knows that she “craves” professional dialogue and actively seeks opportunities both inside and outside her school environment to engage in deep professional conversations. Scott learned how to become an active agent in his own education during his time at the faculty of education, a strategy which was further cemented through his Master of Education studies. Thus, over the years as a classroom teacher, his pursuit of excellence has grown into active engagement in seeking his
own professional learning and consequently, he does more of his own research in areas that he finds he needs to learn more about, rather than relying on formal PD.

Working towards honing their craft and continually looking to grow in their practice is an ongoing process, and the immersion of their professional practice into their personal life is almost inevitable. Scott describes being a teacher as “intensely personal and intensely draining for a lack of a better word. It is a thing that you live and breathe. And it is hard to shut it down and let it go sometimes.” Mimi emphases that she needs her workplace administrators and colleagues to respect that she is more than a teacher; she is also a mother. Jackie is a person who needs dialogue and wishes for constructive conversations with her co-workers, looking to tweak and modify her classroom practice. Nadine, whose personal interest in research, seeks out opportunities that involve this element in her professional learning.

To Mimi, having choice in the format as well as the content and being able to trust the knowledge of the instructors presenting the information is of utmost importance. To her, teaching cannot be reduced to technique and procedures, as it emerges from her identity and integrity. This merging of the personal and professional (Palmer, 2007) and a desire for the personal to be part of their professional learning is echoed in the narratives of all the participants. Professional learning for Jackie is indeed personal and requires a genuine interest in increasing knowledge and instructional practice for any real learning to occur. To spark this interest, the learning opportunities must consider what she brings, in terms of personal and professional experience and depth of knowledge. At this stage in her career, Jackie is interested in delving into theories and philosophies of education and how they apply to teaching and learning. She explained “I am not interested in AQ because AQs look at Ministry documents; they look at
planning a lesson. I don’t want to look at planning a lesson. I want to look at theory. I don’t need to create another lesson plan.”

Scott yearns for professional learning that will allow him space to share his voice and find his own space within it, which to him means that his expertise and knowledge is recognized and acknowledged as part of the learning process they are going through. When his school board introduced mandated Building Collaborative Inquiry (BCI) school sessions a few years ago, he was excited to be collaborating with others in the action-reflection cycle. The implementation in Scott’s school board focused on a standardized more top-down approach where teachers were told what to investigate based on data, such as EQAO scores. As time went by, Scott found himself grappling with a structure and format that did not relate to his experiences, nor did it recognize the problems he was dealing with in his classroom. He explained that in order to feel that he was learning, he needed to see it as “speaking to me.”

5.4.2 Climate of collaboration

In the participating teachers’ narrative experiences, I found clear indicators of what components or circumstances they feel are needed for collaboration to be authentic and valuable. The feeling of trust where they know it is possible to explore new strategies and philosophies without judgement is to them all a key element to true collaboration. Mimi expresses this as the feeling of being safe with each other as professionals, as well as a feeling of working within a secure environment where there is risk-taking, or at least the willingness to take risks. She explains “Ok- Let’s do it! What is the worst thing that is going to happen? Because the worst thing that is going to happen is that is not going to work, so, you might as well try something new.”
Scott describes how he sees the potential for self-growth when he feels he is working with like-minded people who are truly engaged, innovative and always pushing the envelope. He portrays it as a recursive process of taking risks, being willing to fail and then coming back to try working through the problems again. Part of the power of working in such a collaboration is a sense of engagement; a sense of being open to learning new ideas while supporting each other during the process. He describes it as “amazing” when working in this type of atmosphere, as all collaborators recognize and acknowledge the different stories and experiences that are brought to the collaborative learning experience. There is group support in learning together and a valuing of the uncertainty of the process of learning itself. The participants are able to build trust, creating a safe place where they can say: “this is the problem I am having”, and “this is what I am wondering about” and “let’s work through the problem together.” Jackie experienced this true collaborative learning experience when she and other teachers took the risk of going to each other’s schools. They walked together through the schools, examining each other’s learning environment, discussing it as a group and sharing it with their own staff.

5.4.3 The role of administration in creating a climate of collaboration

The role that school administrators play in creating school climates of mutual respect has been documented by researchers for some time. By working to create and maintain relationships with staff and teachers, principals support an environment that allows for collaboration and an openness to explore successful professional practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; McIntyre, 2011; OECD, 2014). While I deliberately did not focus on this aspect of professional learning at the beginning of my research journey, the narratives of the teachers made it clear that to them, the school's leaders play an important part in creating an environment where authentic learning can take place.
The participants feel school administrators play an important role in creating an environment that encourages and recognizes teachers’ willingness to learn and explore new approaches. They share how they value being able to actively engage in new practices. Scott talks about getting “permission” from his administrator to explore different methods and says, “I don’t think that is often encouraged enough.” This speaks to how individual schools’ abilities to support teacher professional learning, including the tone set by the school administrator, have been found to be vital in creating teacher engagement (Opfer and Pedder, 2011, Postholm, 2012). This further aligns with what Campbell (2017), found in her recent study on teacher professional learning: “if a professional learning culture is to be sustained, school and system leaders must be actively engaged in encouraging, supporting, and engendering this climate of shared learning and experimentation” (p. 18)

Jackie agrees that the principal is pivotal in setting the tone for encouraging teachers to grow and develop as professionals, creating a culture that values informal learning as well. Jackie describes an experience where she worked with an administrator that knew the staff well and, she feels, selected staff who were open to the learning, open to going to different professional learning opportunities. By allowing teachers to collaborate in a project between several schools, she had the chance to work with other teachers who were interested in what was happening in the school and wanted to learn from other teachers and schools; teachers whose learning stance was, “What can we learn, what can we change, and what can we do better?” However, in her experience, professionalism, and teachers’ attitude toward professional learning can change quickly depending on the leadership of the school as well as due to the leadership of the school board.
This kind of positive culture of learning often relies on the principal’s ability to distribute leadership (Fullan, 2007; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016), and it follows that it becomes essential to involve the teachers as part of the leadership team. School administrators set the stage for successful professional learning by recognizing, highlighting and supporting the strengths of the school team. Both Mimi and Nadine have experienced the negative aspect of this when their principal was sending them to workshops without consultation or dialogue around their own thoughts on what they needed for their professional learning at that time. They felt that this was a missed opportunity for creating a professional learning environment that honoured their skills and expertise while at the same time supporting the school’s unique situational needs. It is important for administrators to listen to their staff and involve teachers in creating a shared vision of learning for the school. Furthermore, administrators, while still being accountable to the school board, need to find ways of being more flexible with times of when justifying the time or the money spent. The teachers know just how important it is for administrators to create time and place in order to work together, to share and engage in dialogue.

Sometimes this means that when principals evaluate their priorities and distribute leadership, they can then cultivate teacher leaders who can be part of the process of maintaining, tweaking, and leading other teachers in practices that improve student learning. Jackie knows that her professional learning was strengthened when her administrator supported this kind of teacher-directed and teacher-supported learning by involving teachers as part of the leadership team.

5.4.4 Dialogue and reflection

After over a decade in the teaching profession, the teachers in this research express how they have more and more come to value the role that reflection and dialogue have as part of their
own learning. Dialogue and reflection are important elements of what they consider to be authentic professional learning. Educational research has long recognized the centrality that the act of reflection has in professional learning (Day, 1999; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Schön, 1987; Webster-Wright, 2009). While much of the research has focussed on quantifying, labelling and organizing what reflection is, the experienced teachers here tacitly understand that it is an integral part of both their practice and their learning. Whether it is done as solitary contemplation or as critical dialogue in groups, they all recognize it as an important element in creating positive learning environment (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 19).

Nadine sees the art of reflection as part of her learning process, where she revisits and thinks about her practice. While she does at times use reflection-in-action, her preferred mode is the reflection-on-action (Schön, 1987) which usually happens at the end of the working day:

That’s where my reflection is helpful, especially when something is really, eating away at me, or I can’t figure out an answer to it or solve it. I think time is SO important. And in removing myself from the busyness of being in a school, or on the subway, or on the street, or working out at the gym…Just like being away from everyone, being by myself, gives me an opportunity (to reflect), so I do it on pretty much on a daily basis. (Nadine, interview, 2017)

Scott often reflects through writing. The blog that he has used for several years has become a vehicle for reflection of his practice and learning. He describes the act of reflection on his teaching as an ongoing practice that takes place both at school and outside of school; on the weekend, during holidays, and while doing day-to-day things like running and walking the dogs. Scott does not view reflection simply as a solitary action but rather appreciates any professional
learning opportunity that provides him with time to critically reflect on his own practice and to problem-solve issues he encounters in his daily practice.

Mimi also firmly believes in the power of reflecting together with other teachers, particularly when trying new approaches and giving each other feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Here reflection and dialogue become two sides of the same coin, as they support and deepen the opportunity for authentic learning. Mimi values professional learning that involves collaboration, as well as the opportunity to reflect together. She knows that when she is working in isolation, she questions whether she is doing the right thing for the students. She prefers dialoguing with colleagues, as the dialogue provides a mirror that reflects the thinking back to her. She is clear, however, that reflection must be challenge the status quo in order for teachers to grow; it cannot be a discussion of platitudes where every idea is greeted as “wonderful” (Lieberman, 1995; Timperley et al., 2007). Jackie, as well, finds that collaboration, where the teachers are asking the questions, is a large part of reflective practice. She sees professional learning as an iterative cycle of learning, practicing and reflecting on the practice.

Reflection and dialogue are two central elements identified as vital in the pedagogical inquiry process that leads to building new knowledge (Parker, Murray-Or, Mitton-Kukner, et al., 2017). Both Mimi and Scott know how important it is to be able to see themselves critically reflected in the dialogue in order to grow in professional knowledge and to create new understanding for the group as well. For this type of reflective dialogue to take place, they once again point to the importance of working within a culture of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Authentic collaboration, moreover, involves individuals working together for mutual benefits with a shared intentionality (Tomasello, 2009; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). This shared intentionality cannot be mandated from the outside, but instead must be
co-created by the participants themselves as they create norms on how they will cooperate and develop a sense of *we-identity* (Tomasello, 2009, p. 59).

An absence of collaborative dialogue can lead to teachers feeling isolated, and as Jackie explains, makes it easy for teachers to become complacent and retreat into the classroom instead of sharing and collaborating with the teachers in their school. Like Scott, she needs to see herself as part of the dialogue to move forward in her learning. They both feel that, while there is much emphasis on collaboration in mandated professional learning, there is a lack of discussion about the actual challenges that such dialogue and collaboration contain. Collaboration is an ongoing process, whether it is a choice or mandated. While it is easy to talk to likeminded people, they both acknowledge that it is challenging dealing with, and mediating, the inevitable tension that comes from communicating with teachers who come from different standpoints and experiences. At the same time, they do recognize that it is often within that tension that new learning originates.

**5.4.5 Finding their flock—the paradox of autonomy and collaboration**

All too often, teachers involved in mandated professional learning, experience themselves as “caught between competing discourses of personal empowerment and individual autonomy on the one hand and externally driven measures of accountability and excellence on the other” (Judah, 2006, p. 69). The apparent paradox seems to be that while the experienced teachers in this study desire autonomy in their choices of how to grow and deepen their professional knowledge, at the same time, they actively seek out opportunities for collaboration with other teachers.

Teaching is often thought to be a solitary profession, even though research has demonstrated that collaboration and collegiality are important elements in professional learning.
and development. (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In my research, I found that rather than considering autonomy and collaboration as opposing elements of their learning, there appears to be a merging of the two. The teachers ask for autonomy in choosing the format and content of what they want to learn, but more importantly, they also ask for permission to decide with whom they choose to collaborate. They are now at a stage in their careers where finding (what I decided to refer to as) their *flock*, means that they wish to work with other teachers who are on similar paths and who can both support and challenge their thinking and learning.

For Scott that meant establishing a personal learning network (PNL) through Twitter and attending an EdCamp un-conference learning experience; and for Jackie, it was working with the lateral networks in collaborating between schools. Mimi knew the power of deep collaboration from her time in South America and has sought out a group of like-minded teachers in an almost subversive type of collaborative community, while Nadine seeks different communities of learners from which she can draw strength in her own learning while yearning being able to collaborate with a group of like-minded people.

Scott explains how he finds himself searching for something outside of the traditional professional development that was being offered by his school board, and beyond formal university courses. He yearns for a kind of collaboration with collaborative partners, who can give that honest feedback and reflection. He is searching for educators who will be able to challenge his thinking in a meaningful way which led him to develop a Personal learning network (PLN) through Twitter. Personal learning networks have grown in line with the expansion of social media in general and can be described as a network of interpersonal connections and resources that support ongoing, informal learning (Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter,
This kind of reciprocal learning contains choice and the opportunity for dialogue and reflection. Scott began finding his *flock* by connecting with educators who like him were determined to explore their practices to make it even better. Part of the excitement about his PLN on Twitter is that it reflects current thinking and findings by other educators throughout the world and the support of a network (Trust, Kutka & Carpenter, 2016). Scott finds himself energized through the connection with new or different ideas for his classroom practice. The downside of using his PLN is that the multitude of ideas and barrage of information sometimes became a barrier in itself; something Scott refers to as “drinking from the fire hose.”

Attending an EdCamp unconference, he again had the experience of once again finding his *flock*. The learning he experienced was a feeling of coming home, of being able to dialogue and reflect with teachers he met who were as passionate about learning. This format of interconnectivity created a supportive climate of collaboration where the ability to choose made it possible to engage in dialogue and reflection.

After having had a positive experience early in her career with collaborating, Mimi was also searching for a space and a group where she could have choice, the opportunity for shared reflection, and the possibility of innovated learning as well as a connectedness and relevance to her own practice. She found her *flock* through explicitly creating a collaboration with a few other teachers who wanted to learn together. Building on what they were doing in the mandated BCI meetings they created a private, safe space with no judgement, where they could collaborate and learn together by sharing their diverse and unique experiences with each other. They worked collaboratively to interpret theory they were learning into practice by reflecting and dialoging both in person and online. Using technology, they were able to tailor their learning format to one that honoured their lived realities as parents and caregivers of young families. They met in
person after school as well, but it was the use of computer program OneNote that facilitated the sharing by using an online format. As a group they early on decided on norms for working together; they wanted honesty and were clear that they didn’t want to waste time. This shared intentionality allowed for a safe and trusting environment where they were mutually responsive to each other throughout the process of collaboration (Tomasello et al., 2005).

I call their work subversive in that they viewed themselves as working under that radar, but at the same time parallel to the school and board mandated professional learning. As a group, they collaborated well together and while they didn’t expressively exclude others, they were at the same time clear that this *flock* has deliberately chosen to work together closely adhering to the norms they have developed. Their submissive type of professional learning would be classified as informal even though they have clearly developed a formal structure of their own. In essence, they had created their own learning culture that fostered their shared intentionality, beliefs and a sense of community (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011). Mimi is aware of how if their group was formally recognized, it might have caused conflict with other teachers, so they did not make it public that they were collaborating as part of their own professional learning:

> It is not something we are telling everyone either. We are just friends, and we are just meeting, and we are sharing ideas. But we are doing more than that. If anyone wanted to join us they could, but they would have to commit, and they would have to follow our idea and the norms that we set down before.

What contributed to the feeling of empowerment that they experienced was the fact that they had input into what they wanted to explore. Together they felt they had created a culture of learning that allowed for authentic knowledge to emerge.
In her narrative, Jackie returns often to her experience of working in the lateral network with a group of teachers who shared her enthusiasm for building new understandings and sharing them with others. What made this feeling of belonging, of having found her flock, was the knowledge that they would continue to dialogue regardless of whether the principal gave them time to do so or not. To Jackie, belonging to this group, and being able to work with groups outside her own school, was one of the best professional learning opportunities she has been part of as it gave her both a feeling of empowerment and professional growth.

Nadine explains that if she was given permission, time and money, she would actively spend more time travelling and visiting librarians at other schools, spend time to develop those visits on a deep professional level. Looking for educators with whom, she can really connect with and have those critical dialogues with, she is searching for a connection that goes beyond meeting someone at a conference. Nadine is currently missing the opportunity to be collaborating with other teachers who have similar experiences and skills that she has. She wishes to be in a space where collectively they could problem solve and critically reflect on the problems of practice they encounter. In essence, she too is seeking her flock; colleagues who are in similar situations, have similar knowledge, understand the problems and can critically reflect is what she feels she needs to push her own practice forward now.

5.5 Limitations and Implications for Future Research
Beyond the limitations of the nature of narrative inquiry itself, and especially around implementation and drawing of conclusions, there are certain elements of this study that need to be considered in terms of how it affects the analysis. There is a need to acknowledge that the lens through which I have viewed the stories may have an impact on what stories get told and the relative emphasis of particular themes. Additionally, as is generally acknowledged in a narrative
inquiry, the sample size itself makes it difficult to generalize and draw broad conclusions. Instead by going deeper into the stories, something Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to as “burrowing,” the re-storied and analyzed narratives of these four teachers provide an image that can be used to focus the discussion around the subject of teacher professional learning. While these four stories do not represent all experienced teachers in Ontario, their stories provide understandings that can be examined and debated on a broader scale.

My selection of participants may also be considered a limitation, as I have chosen a deliberate sampling method of interviewing teachers with whom I had a previous professional relationship. The reason for collaborating with these teachers is that there was a relationship from previous interactions with them, and thus the establishment of trust between the researcher and the participants was already in progress. As relational trust is an essential element of narrative stories, my selection criteria were important to my research. However, my selection process was influenced by my own lens of what I consider to be a reflective practitioner in inviting teachers to this study. This means that the teachers in this narrative are teachers who had already demonstrated a habit of reflecting on their practice and had completed graduate work. They were teachers I knew to have demonstrated an intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and self-reflection in their professional role as educators. It was important for my research to be able to dig deeper into authentic professional learning from teachers’ perspectives. However, my selection process led to the exclusion of other teacher voices and their construction of professional learning.

We need also to consider that participants’ experiences in their Master’s studies are woven through their narratives and may provide a different interpretation of professional learning from teachers who continued their learning through other channels. How exactly this
has impacted their thinking is challenging to discover and I have not made any attempts at analyzing this but rather used their own words in describing their experiences. Thus, further research may look at expanding the research base to include experienced teachers who have not gone on to do graduate work. To deepen our understanding of how experienced teachers view professional learning in the current educational environment, future studies could consider the use of focus groups to include a larger sample of teachers with questions based on the findings around the importance of choice for their professional learning. A longitudinal study of experienced teachers that follows their professional learning path over several years, may further add to the understanding of how they construct the concept of authentic learning.

5.6 Discussion

The Swedish poet Thomas Tranströmer writes in one of his poems about two paths, or truths, that merge. One of the truths comes from the inside, meaning from the core of each person, and the other one comes from the outside, or the external world. In his poem his claims that it is only when those two paths converge, that the possibility of seeing ourselves, our authentic selves can occur (Tranströmer & Fulton, 1997). This idea of the personal (inside) and the professional (outside) meeting to create an authentic self, I find serves as a powerful metaphor for what I found in my study as well.

The current educational climate of accountability and performativity has curtailed the choices that the teachers in this study feel they can make. The lack of acknowledgement of their own wisdom and expertise leads to a feeling of not being valued or appreciated, even with the professional curiosity and openness to new learning that they bring to every learning opportunity. They value the situated learning opportunities that consider their current teaching reality and allow them to build new knowledge based on the experience and wisdom they bring to them.
They choose to work collaboratively, reflecting and working through their problems of practice by deepening their professional knowledge.

Congruent with much of the research in the field of professional learning, the teachers in this study highlight the importance of dialogue and reflection and their need to be engaged in educational learning activities and situations that contain both (Biesta, 2007; Broad & Evans, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Webster-Wright, 2009). While there is research that confirms many of the elements of professional learning that the teachers are asking for, the reality is that the implementation and actualization of professional learning for experienced teachers differs from the intent. These four experienced teachers give voice to the need for an environment that allows for critical examination of theories and practices, an environment that has the flexibility to recognize their personal as well as their professional needs. As parents of young children, they may want the option to use technology to share, learn and collaborate. As readers and writers, they ask to choose to do their own research and write and share their craft with others. As professionals, they demand learning that focusses on theory and learning processes as opposed to gimmicky products. As learners in the mid-career of their professional path, they ask for chances to learn that expands beyond formal AQ courses or mandated workshops that they have come to know will not work in extending and enrich the comprehension of their classroom practice. Instead, they prefer to cast themselves more in the image of the teacher as an artist, interpreting learning (Eisner, 1967), creating and constructing new learning based on what they bring to it rather than being driven by outside mandated educational goals or formats. They ask for a place of learning where they balance their personal life, the culture of the educational setting in which they work, the collaboration with their colleagues and their professional work in the classroom, recognizing the interconnectivity of
being a teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional, in a community of learners. Only then do they feel that authentic professional learning can take place.

They ask to be treated as professionals, and even though most of them comfortably wear the mantle of being a master teacher, they also view themselves as life-long learners and display positive an inquiry minded view to all new learning. They are going from teacher to learner and back to teacher again in this continuous reflection of their practice. They want their learning to be of personalized relevance and understand how it affects their motivation as well as their knowledge construction and practice (Timperley et al., 2007). They know and articulate their own strengths and needs and have reflected deeply on what they need to grow as teachers. Asking to be heard and recognized means, moreover, that they demand a working climate that encourages, values and creates opportunities for collaboration. The role of the school leaders in creating and maintaining this culture that is built on relational trust is essential for a collegial learning environment. Even though they are independent workers and learners, how they are perceived and treated by their principal makes a difference in the risks they are willing to take in their learning. Their passionate engagement in their professional learning requires not only a kind of permission from themselves but also encouragement and permission from the school leaders, to be able to grow and deepen their practices and knowledge. When feeling that they are not being seen, or valued they simply retreat and continue their learning in their own way. However, when they feel valued and have permission to build on their wisdom, they often find a gateway that leads to the possibility of authentic professional learning.

They finally ask to have their voices and the choices they make recognized, by being able to seek out like-minded educators with which to collaborate. They know who they are and what they need as educators. After all, “teaching at its best requires motivation, commitment, and
emotional attachment, and this requires a deep knowledge of self as well as students” (Day & Leitch, 2001, p.414). At this point in their career, they all are now looking for that group of people, their professional flock, which they know will provide the fertile learning ground upon which to build and grow their professional practice and knowledge.

5.7 Implications for Practice

It is my hope that my results can be used to provide direction for administrators and teacher educators responsible for teacher professional learning. These results align with previous research on the need for professional dialogue and continuous reflection in making professional learning relevant and authentic to all teachers (Judah, 2006; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Ponte, Ax, Beijaard, & Wubbels, 2004; Timperley et al., 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009), but especially those in the midcareer phase of their careers. However, my findings add to this research by revealing the importance of choice for experienced teachers. Choice not only of what and how to learn, but the choice of working with their flock. Choice here is the main aspect of personalized relevance and motivation to these teachers and they discuss how it deeply influences how they transform their understanding of theory and practice (Timperley et al., 2007).

The professional working environment, as well as what teachers bring to it, contribute to the complexities of professional learning (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Both school boards and individual principals are advised to consider these complexities in their planning of professional learning. For example, while the Ontario Ministry of Education has, since 2007, provided funding for project-based research by experienced teachers through the Teaching Learning and Leadership program (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.), the option of creating opportunities for teachers to be part of collaborative research of their own choosing at the school board level, has often not been available due to various circumstances. This would be one possible avenue to
capture the knowledge of experienced teachers and provide them with an authentic approach to
deepening their professional skills. Principals, either by themselves or in collaboration with other
schools, might advocate for, or provide a platform for teachers to choose how they wish to
design their own professional inquiry. This would require a high level of relational trust within
the school and among teachers and school leaders. It would require the principals to collaborate
with the teachers in creating a supportive school culture where professional dialogue and
reflection is part of regular practice. In knowing their teachers both as professionals and
individuals, the school leaders have a unique opportunity to tailor the professional learning to the
individual and maximize the learning opportunities. They can provide what the teachers referred
to as, “permission,” for experienced teachers to use their professional judgement in designing
professional learning that respects their autonomy and knowledge.

There is a common misconception that I have often heard, which is that teachers do not
know what they need to improve their practice. Through talking to teachers over the years and
having been in the position of evaluating teachers as well, I have found this to be untrue. Most
teachers, like the teachers in the study, are able to articulate what they need for their professional
learning and often specify what form it may take. Instead of asking what counts as professional
learning we need to recognize that the dynamic nature of professional learning resides in the
knowledge that the teachers bring themselves. If we are searching for an avenue to be able to
conceptualize professional learning, it comes down to the fact that we need to trust the teachers;
trust that they know what they need. We need to trust that they want to grow as professionals
while respecting how both their personal and professional realities are important in making those
professional learning decisions. If we trust the teachers, then using a narrative form of tool might
assist us in opening up new aspects of professional learning opportunities that meet the needs of
experienced teachers, while honouring the knowledge that they bring. The power of narrative is that it has differentiation build right into it. When it comes to implementing their requests, I believe that we once again need to trust that they know how to do so. Like Mimi and her group, they have many of the answers for application, if we can learn to trust their knowledge and professionalism. While alignment and coherence with school boards’ and individual schools’ goals may not be exclusive of this kind of approach, it is important to understand, as we hear in the voices of the teacher in this study, how minimal the impact is from mandated professional learning. Ministry and school board initiatives often have a focus on accountability, while it is clear from reading the narratives that the teachers feel a deep responsibility for both their own and their students learning. Thus, responsibility rather than accountability allows for a professionalism in where the experienced teachers’ professional learning needs can be actualized and valued (Apple, 2005; Biesta et al., 2015).

Through their stories, the teachers in this study reveal how they will go out of their way to find avenues to establish authentic learning opportunities, even when that means working parallel to, or outside of the current educational system. Making experienced teachers fit into a mold of professional learning is both frustrating to them and counterproductive to authentic professional learning. Experienced teachers are a rich resource capable of building up the educational profession itself. If we do not honour and take into account their professional competence and the wealth of experienced teachers’ knowledge, we are not only disrespecting them, we may be disadvantaging the system as a whole. It is important for the educational system to capitalize on the professional capital, wisdom, and knowledge of experienced teachers.
5.8 Epilogue

As I now find myself back in my native Sweden, I reflect on how this research confirms my initial thoughts of the influence of democratic education has had in guiding my research. The democratic theories of Dewey that influenced the creation of the Swedish school curriculum, remains the main pillar of my own educational philosophy. Working with the current Swedish curriculum documents, I find that the idea of a democratic society remains a foundational aspect of the school system here. My stance in this inquiry into authentic professional learning is based on the democratic tenets of equity and active collaboration. After having completed my research, I find my belief in these democratic principles has been strengthened as I heard clearly how the participants asked to be included in their own decisions regarding their professional lives.

The core idea that democratic education focusses on promoting ongoing development, life-long learning and most importantly a desire for learning, can be found in all of the narratives. Seeing how this underlying concept is expressed by the participants has made me reflect on why I initially found the possibility of the facilitator position so appealing. After all, it is this drive to learn that motivated me to accept the job in the first place. It continues to motivate my choices in teaching and learning, which includes accepting this position here at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. The participants in this study also reflect this desire to keep learning. Scott defines being a master teacher as someone who is consistently willing to engage in new learning and excited about new possibilities for expanding his knowledge. He views himself as a life-long learner and places a high value on being able to actively engage in new and innovative practices. Mimi comes back to the positive experience of learning together with others and describes how she is attracted to professional learning that helps her be a more effective teacher. She sees her role as a learner intimately connected to her role as a teacher and prides herself on being
someone who seeks out learning that will meet her needs to improve her practice and knowledge. Jackie, in part, took the principals courses based on her desire to better understand a different aspect of teaching. Her reflection mantra of “What can we learn, what can we change, and what can we do better?” illustrates that desire to continue to learn and grow as a professional. Nadine seeks learning both within and outside her role as a teacher-librarian. Her quest for knowledge is more than her drive to read and learn, it is also her passion for inquiry and research.

As I re-read the Swedish curriculum documents, I clearly see the importance of respect is embedded as part of the values that are promoted as essential to the actualization of a democratic education. I recognize how the respect I felt in being part of the VPLC project connected to my belief in the democratic values that is an important part of my foundational pedagogical beliefs. This feeling of respect is closely connected to the element of trust needed to learn and grow as a professional. The teachers in this research clearly spoke to the how respect was a vital part of their own pedagogical approach as well. It was important in how they were approached in their own learning but also in how teaching was realized in their daily practice. You hear it when Scott says he wants to be respected for his knowledge and what he brings to professional learning opportunities. His fear of “boxed” professional development leading to “boxed” teaching implies that when you remove respect for the teacher, you are moving away from the democratic belief that everyone can learn and the need to respect the learner’s different needs. You hear the importance of trust when Mimi demand to be respected in her dual roles as a teacher and as a mother and how the two are connected in her professional life. You sense it in Jackie’s and Nadine’s descriptions of the lack of respect for the adult learning model they experienced from workshop presenters.
An essential part of any democratic system, educational or political, involves active participation by its members. This participation is based not merely on being part of something, like a BCI or action research project, but being active in shaping the learning that takes place. It is based on the democratic principles that we respect each other’s viewpoints and that no person is valued higher than another. This, in essence, is what I mean in my belief statement when I say that schools should “ensure equity for all students at all levels.” Active participation as part of democratic education can be found in Mimi’s interest in equity education in her own professional learning and in her desire to work as equals within the group she started at her school. For Scott, participating in the democratic set up of the EdCamp he attended gave him a feeling of not only being an active participant in his learning, but also the excitement of being part of a process that valued each teacher and what they brought. He felt empowered to be part of it and this was a feeling he carried with him in his practice: “I met so many amazing people there that were all fired up and passionate about education, and I follow them still on Twitter.” As dialogue is something that Jackie has expressed that she values in her professional learning, the active participation in constructive dialogues around professional knowledge and practice is indeed important to her. Active participation for Nadine goes beyond participating, it centres on being viewed as an equal in her learning. Thus, actively choosing her supervisor, her job situation or what conferences to attend, means being a sense of equity and asking for and receiving what she needs- not what someone else perceives that she needs. Not being respected as an equal, valued and active participant can lead to a divide between what is intended and what actually is enacted in democratic education.

The disconnect between what I was doing as a facilitator and what I observed to be the teachers’ responses, was in many ways confirmed as I heard the participants express how
mandated professional learning is problematic and does not necessarily lead to teacher learning or change in classroom practice. While I heard how the dissonance between the teachers’ professional and personal identities was expressed by the participants, I found that this an important aspect of what they conceptualized as authentic learning. While it became challenging to try to separate the two into opposing entities, it instead became clear how each teacher brought their own experiences, both personal and professional to their learning and the importance this had on their own learning. Having reviewed the literature on professional learning, I found that it actually has been stated by many researchers, and even the governing bodies that are tasked with creating professional learning, that teacher voice and choice is important for their professional growth. The disconnect here is clearly between intent and implementation. My most important realization has been not only how clearly that teachers articulate what they need for their own learning, but their strong plea to be heard; to be allowed to work with their flock. In answer to the main research questions of my research: What constitutes personalized, purposeful and relevant professional learning for experienced teachers in Ontario? it has become evident that it is more than certain elements that promote authentic professional learning. A climate of collaboration that is supported by principals, where dialogue and reflection are embedded is indeed essential for such learning to take place. However, authentic learning is about teachers being able to use their voice, to make choices based on their professional needs but most importantly, to be able to collaborate with teachers who are exploring the same path of professional learning. Authentic professional learning for experienced teachers means having the choice of working with their flock.

In my current role as an adjunct at the Linnaeus University in Sweden, I have had the opportunity to work with teacher candidates in the concurrent program here. While they are just
at the beginning of their career and not experienced teachers, I have taken what I found from my inquiry with me when I teach. Some of them have worked as unqualified teachers already since there is an acute shortage of teachers in Sweden. While they are still looking to work with more experienced teachers in their practicum, I am keenly aware that they too bring knowledge and wisdom to their new roles as teachers. In my teaching, I try to honour that by inviting them to tell stories about their experiences in order to dig deeper into their own learning and understanding. While not looking for their \textit{flock}, as their experienced colleagues do, they seek dialogue as well as an opportunity for critical examination of theories and practices and how their personal and professional selves interact in their learning. Their stories become a tool for helping them understand the intersectionality of both.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

As this is a narrative inquiry, the stories of the participating teachers are the center of this research and the interviews are not structured to elicit specific answers to pre-determined questions. Instead, the questions in this interview protocol are merely guideposts for the discussion and the creation of the narratives of the participants.

There is no specific time allotted to each of the questions, but I anticipate that the first two questions may indeed be main part of the first meeting with the teachers. The following questions are suggestions for this dialogue with the teachers.

1. Can you please describe how you came into the field of teaching? Tell me about your journey to becoming a teacher.
   a. How many years have you been teaching?
   b. What grades or classes have you taught?
   c. Tell me what qualifications you have and explain a bit about your choice for choosing these areas to deepen your professional knowledge in.

2. Can you please tell me a little about you as person outside of teaching; your interests, passions, and how you spend your time when not teaching?

3. As a teacher, you have taken part of different kinds of professional development and learning over the years. Can you please tell me about the different kinds of professional learning you remember?
   a. Tell me about a time that your participated in professional development or learning that really stands out to you. Could you please explain why you remember this time?
b. Can you tell me what professional learning has had the biggest significance to you as a teacher? Please explain why you connected with this particular professional learning.

c. Can you please talk about a time when you participated in professional development or learning that did not seem useful to you? Explain why you think it was less than helpful to you as a professional.

4. Over the years, I have heard teachers talk about how some of the learning they appreciated best was the informal learning that takes place in the hallways, staff rooms, and when co-planning or reflecting on a lesson with a colleague. Can you tell me a story about a time when you were involved in informal learning and your response to this type of professional learning?

   a. What do you think are some of the factors that make professional relevant to you both as a person and a teacher?

   b. What do you see as some of the barriers to authentic, personal relevant professional learning to you?

5. Do you think that you need different professional learning now, in comparison to when you first began teaching? Explain why or why not this is the case for you personally.

6. As part of my research I am trying to find out what teachers consider to be authentic, personally relevant professional learning. If I asked you to come up with a definition of this, how would you express it?

7. If given a choice of any kind of professional learning, regardless of time and money, what would you chose at this time in your career?