

**A Teacher's Investigation of Critical Incidents
and the
Re-Cognition of His Practice**

Curtis Snyder
Mount Saint Vincent University

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Abstract

This thesis employs teacher research as a methodology and uses critical incidents as a data source. These incidents were collected by an elementary school teacher over a school year and recorded in a personal journal. In this thesis many of those critical incidents are chronicled, reflected upon, and analyzed. The three central themes, and subsequent chapters that emerge, are about teacher collaboration, accountability, and leadership. The school involved was simultaneously participating in a compulsory province-wide initiative called School Accreditation. Under this initiative the staff of the school jointly read a text, *On Common Ground* by DuFour, Eaker and Dufour (2005).

The findings and conclusions offer a teacher's perspective on the day-to-day life of an elementary school as the staff attempts to become more of a Professional Learning Community.

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Prologue

“Women and men are capable of being educated only to the extent that they are capable of recognizing themselves as unfinished.” (Freire, 1998, p. 58)

It was the fall of 2006, and the troubled feelings I had set aside for the past few years had returned. The past two years had seen the birth of my second child, seventeen months younger than his older brother. Life was very busy, yet my mind yearned, to again, get back in the classroom as a student.

I began teaching in 1989 and felt in 2000 that the time was ripe to expand my knowledge of schooling beyond the undergraduate level. I spent the first four years of the new millennium obtaining a Master of Education from Acadia University. My focus was on curriculum studies, and I had enjoyed tremendously getting into the minutiae around the history and philosophy of education. By the time I finished graduate school in 2004, I had two children and was teaching some International Baccalaureate (IB) courses at a large high school. For the most part, there was a great deal of satisfaction in both my personal and professional lives, but I had begun to feel that my academic education was, somehow, still incomplete.

The local newspaper had just recently published some statistics from the previous school year. In 2005-2006, local junior and senior high schools submitted their discipline reports to the school board for analysis, and more recently, publication. Data surrounding school suspensions for fighting, skipping class, absences, and other reasons was in full public view. I was immediately struck by what was not included. My intuition told me that most of these suspensions were male. How could I know that?

During my ten years teaching senior high school I had three very different teaching experiences. My first two years were spent teaching the entire grade ten population a compulsory half-credit course called Career and Life Management. All 350 first-year students spent five months in my classroom. I taught the same lesson twelve consecutive times. I then taught a new lesson twelve consecutive times and so on, until the end of the course. Suffice to say, I knew the teaching material, and I knew grade tens. I felt I had a good breadth of knowledge about some of the differences between boys and girls and their schooling, as well as their learning practices and preferences.

The following year I applied for, and got, the job of being the school's only full-time Individual Program Planning teacher. I taught a total of twenty-three students and eleven courses. These kids needed an alternate program and I was a critical component of that program. All but one of these students were male. Some of them got five of a possible eight school credits from just me. My largest class was twenty-three in a combined Science 10, 11 and 12 class, and the smallest was four students in a combined Lifeskills 10, 11 and 12 classroom. I felt, at the end of the year, I had a good depth of knowledge about gender differences and best teaching practices.

The next year of high school I applied for a transfer to the Social Studies Department. This was my ultimate aim and destination as an educator, as I was offered the chance to teach some International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. I went to Upper Canada College for a two-week inservice on how to teach Theory of Knowledge. Over the summer I studied the curriculum of IB history and I was well on my way to finding my true teaching passion. This was why I entered graduate school in 2000. During these years I gained more scholarly information about curriculum and increased my personal knowledge of the differences between male and female students. But by late 2002, when I had started my family, and upon completing graduate school in 2004, I felt it was time to move somewhere else in the teaching profession. For various reasons, I felt a need to return to where I had started my teaching career.

My first full-time teaching job was teaching grade five on a Cree reserve 750 kilometres north of Winnipeg, in God's Lake Narrows Elementary School. I flew from my Nova Scotia home in September of 1989 to the Manitoba capital. Within a week, I had filled out all of the necessary paperwork to teach in a school jointly operated by the federal government of Canada and the local Band Council. With a four-month food supply, I moved north to this fly-in only community with one store, the Bay. As the twin-engine plane landed on the dirt runway I knew my life would never be the same. Over the next ten months my eyes were opened to many things academic and social. Many lessons, personal and professional, were learned. One of those lessons was that I loved teaching elementary school. The next year I returned to Nova Scotia, but it would be another fifteen years before I taught, once again, in an elementary school.

So, here I was in 2006 at the end of my first year teaching at a local elementary school, a parent of two young children, and troubled by a report in the paper. All of my previous teaching experiences told me that boys were struggling in schools. I was raising two young sons who would have to grapple with this issue in their academic and personal lives. For family and professional reasons, I wanted to learn more about gender differences. Then, I heard about a graduate program offered at Mount Saint Vincent University.

With the support and guidance of my academic advisor, Dr. Mary Jane Harkins, I applied for, and was accepted into, the Master of Arts in Education program. I wanted to investigate the gender issue further. At the time, I thought my degree would be all about gender studies. Because of the newspaper article and the new academic program, I bought, borrowed, and read dozens of books and articles about boys and learning, the female brain, and gender equity. While doing all of this personal research I was also taking some courses toward my new degree. As it turned out, none of these courses had anything to do with gender. Nothing about boys and learning was offered at the university. I kept taking other courses, doing independent studies, and putting on hold the actual thesis. Until one day in 2008 I met Dr. Andrew Manning.

We met in his office, and I began the conversation with some biographical information. I told him of my desire to do some deeper research for a thesis. Initially the conversation centered on my desire to pursue some research about gender. I had previously taken an independent study whereby some school literacy data was quantitatively analyzed to find correlations between the literacy scores and gender. There were no correlations. This opened the door for me to consider another possible topic for research, but I had not yet found a suitable replacement for gender studies. As we continued our conversation he talked to me about autobiographical writing and the value of qualitative data. I remembered that I had kept a personal journal earlier in my career when teaching junior high school. I also recollected that I had kept several other journals over the past several years for various personal reasons. Gender studies began to leave my mind completely.

By the end of our first meeting I knew I was going to purchase a new personal journal to be used to chronicle and capture significant moments, or critical incidents, of my teaching during a school year. I had a new focus of study for a thesis: my own thoughts and the analyses of them. It was here that I discovered the world of possibilities within teacher research.

Chapter 1

Teacher Research

1.0 Introduction

This chapter has two sections. First, it discusses teacher research as a research methodology. Second, it outlines the particular research method used in this thesis.

1.1 'Teacher Research' as a Methodology

Of all the ways and means from which to conduct educational research there are two broad strategies that create a spectrum from which teacher researchers choose their own method of inquiry. This spectrum has, at one end, quantitative methods and, at the other end, qualitative methods. Quantitative research is characterized by the use of mathematical models to make sense of what cause(s) phenomena. Qualitative research looks beyond the numbers to gain a more in-depth understanding by investigating the 'what', the 'how', and 'why' things happen. This thesis examines my own teaching practice over the course of one school year. I investigated it through the use of a personal journal. It can, thus, be considered qualitative teacher research.

Many names exist for qualitative research carried out by teachers into their own practice. These include action science, auto ethnography, self-study, cooperative inquiry action research, practitioner research as well as teacher research (Zeichner, 2001). The common characteristic of all of these is that it is classroom teachers themselves who carry out the research. Teacher research is used as a consistent term throughout this thesis.

There are four parts to this discussion of teacher research. First, there is a discussion of the 'who' of teacher research. This is followed by a discussion of the 'what' of teacher research. Third, is a section on the 'why' of teacher research and fourth, a discussion of the 'how' to do teacher research.

1.1.1 'Who' does Teacher Research

Teacher research and teacher-written texts are used to demonstrate that the knowledge base for teaching should include the perspective of the teacher researcher. Teacher researchers are "classroom practitioners at any level, from preschool to tertiary,

who are involved individually or collaboratively in self-motivated and self-generated systematic and informed inquiry undertaken with a view to enhancing their vocation as professional educators.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.9). The intent of teacher research is to improve practice, and it is classroom teachers who are in the best position to ask questions about learning, accumulate data, draw conclusions and take up new teaching directions based on their observations (Martin, 1987).

One purpose for teachers choosing this methodology is that often “Teacher research is seen as an important means by which educators can develop and better their capacity for making the kinds of sound autonomous professional judgments and decisions appropriate to their status as professionals.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 5). The benefits to them include: increased power and respect along with greater justice, motivation, empowerment and voice. With this awareness teachers can make informed changes to try and enhance the teaching and learning in their classrooms and practice. Teachers can, and perhaps should, view themselves as potentially the most sophisticated research instruments available (Kincheloe, 2003). Teachers therefore have the potential to better contribute to the resolution of classroom, institutional, professional and community issues and problems (Cole & Knowles, 2000).

1.1.2 ‘What’ is Teacher Research

Teacher research is not top-down but rather a grassroots involvement in policy and decision-making (Zeichner, 2001). Its primary aim is to solve problems at hand. A secondary aim is the construction of new knowledge aimed at solving these problems and the transfer of the learning that has taken place from one context to another. Implicit throughout this process is the notion of developing the ability to better interpret particular situations (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Teacher research demands that theory and action not be separated. It is committed to the idea that the test of any theory or practice is to resolve real-life problems in real-life situations. In short, it is about teachers trying to understand or demystify their own professional practice (Manning & Harste, 1994).

The improvement of one’s practice may include,“ ... ‘internal’ aspects such as achieving greater personal satisfaction and a heightened sense of worth, purpose, direction and fulfillment, as well as ‘external’ aspects like improving the effectiveness of

one's teaching practice in significant areas." (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 9). This approach distinguishes itself by not being educational research done to teachers but rather by teachers (Manning & Harste, 1994).

Teachers are inquirers and researchers who, when teaching, are offering a personal expression of knowing and knowledge. Teacher research focuses on, and results in, real life learning and supports the creation, or discovery, of new knowledge (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). This knowledge is useful and possibly transformative not only to the writer but may also be valuable to others through conferences, seminars, and publications (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007).

Ann Berthoff (1987) suggests educators need to think about the information they already have. She suggests, "the task of the teacher researcher is to breathe new life into extant data in the form of personal knowledge." (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 15). This begins with a question and ends with the generation of new knowledge. Greenwood and Levin (1998) make clear that the role of teacher research theory is to explain as best as is possible; what happened, how what happened was possible, and to lay out possible scenarios to explain and understand these happenings. This knowledge is a powerful tool and may lead to a change of direction.

In teacher research new knowledge is produced by teachers who use their own reflections (personal narratives) as the driving force (data) with the aim to transform education for a broader community (Zeichner, 2001). The new knowledge from teacher led research can be viewed as a valuable resource when mobilized to influence public debate about education (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). When voices are absent from a debate their non-participation is often interpreted as perhaps apathy or inefficacy, not what might more rightly be exclusion from the political process. Many educators have extensive experience and prior knowledge yet feel their professional development and supervision has been unhelpful. Effective development should use the practitioner's prior knowledge and experience (Lytle, 1992). Teacher research allows this to happen.

1.1.3 'Why' do Teacher Research

The studying of one's profession promotes the ongoing improvement of one's practice, learning and teaching. Through the systematic reflection on and analysis of their

practice and through personal journal writing, teachers take charge of their own professional development (Cole & Knowles, 2000).

Teacher research, via personal journal writing, opens an avenue for teachers to engage in the debates and conversations about education and empowers them by countering expertise with expertise. The strength of teacher research is that it anchors any changes in one's individual practice in a formal process of observation and experiment (Martin, 1987). Teacher research "involves looking for approaches that challenge us to question some of our own assumptions and to do more than just go along with the crowd or with what other people we know are doing." (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 10).

For some it represents a commitment to the democratic transformation of society (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Another implicit result and sometime explicit aim is toward the cause of greater social justice and equity in schools and society. Lankshear & Knobel (2006) suggest that by joining a culture of research teachers will:

- “* ‘begin to understand the power implications of technical standards’;
- * ‘appreciate the benefits of research’ particularly in relation to ‘understanding the forces shaping education that fall outside [teachers’] immediate experience and perception’;
- * ‘begin to understand [in deeper and richer ways] what they know from experience’;
- * become more aware of how they can contribute to educational research;
- * be seen as ‘learners’ rather than ‘functionaries who follow top-down orders without question’;
- * be seen as ‘knowledge workers who reflect on their professional needs and current understandings’;
- * become more aware of how complex the schooling process is and how it cannot be understood apart from ‘the social, historical, philosophical, cultural, economic, political, and psychological contexts that shape it’;
- * ‘research their own professional practice’;
- * explore the learning processes occurring in their classrooms and attempt to interpret them;
- * ‘analyze and contemplate the power of each other’s ideas’;
- * constitute a ‘new critical culture at school’ in the manner of ‘a think tank that teaches students’;

* reverse the trend toward the deskilling of teachers and the stupidification of students.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 6).

There are however skeptics of this qualitative approach to the generation of new educational knowledge. Teacher research can be considered politically loaded as simply asking critical questions about one’s own practice, classroom, and school can offend those with a stake in maintaining the status quo. It is also political in the sense that teachers creating new knowledge about their own practice are able to challenge those who view practitioners as passive recipients (empty vessels) and who look to blame them for low student achievement results (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007).

Politicians may not be the only skeptics. Science is highly prized in contemporary social research. Being ‘scientific’ confers ideological support and social prestige on theories, conclusions and recommendations (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). One need only attend any professional development seminar to hear the ubiquitous phrase ‘data-driven decisions’. These have become the hallmark of many modern consultants and bureaucrats. Teacher research is sometimes categorized as unscientific and therefore less or non-reliable and valid. However, unlike empirical instruments humans can synthesize information, generate interpretations, and revise and sophisticate those interpretations at the site where the inquiry takes place (Kincheloe, 2003). This may be inconvenient when qualitative findings are critical of existing power relations or opposed to quantitative or more scientific findings.

For the purposes of this thesis science is not seen as competitive with, or more reliable than, teacher research. Both in concert offer the power to generate new knowledge as they are both grounded in action. In the process the teacher, as researcher, can explore the unusual or idiosyncratic situation. The standard empirical (quantitative) research instrument has little use for atypical situations. These idiosyncrasies, however, may serve as the pathway toward new understandings of a curriculum, student, school or community. The modern day cult of the outside expert will perhaps be uncomfortable with this method of research, but a teacher’s personal understanding of educational life will be enhanced and enriched.

1.1.4 *'How' to do Teacher Research*

From their ongoing practice teacher researchers study social settings, the actions they take within them and the effects of their decisions on the problems they encounter within their practice (Zeichner, 2001). By sharing their own personal stories, reflections and analysis, teachers can provide a new, primary source of information to the field of education.

“This is done by sifting, organizing, rearranging, analyzing, and interpreting prior experience through the practice of reflective, serious *writing* that composes knowledge by putting pieces of experience together in ways that add up to a coherent representation of what has happened.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.p. 13-14).

Manning & Harste, (1994, p. 4) add,

“Teacher research should make a difference to those engaged in the process. It should lead to changed understanding as well as a changed pattern of interaction in classrooms. It should make teachers see themselves differently and their relationships with kids, parents and other teachers differently.”

Practitioners use their own site (class, community, school) as the focus of their study. Their findings rely on a narrative (journal writing) created from their own firsthand experiences. Evidence is used to support their assertions and analysis as to how the current curriculum and external accountability measures, among other professional concerns, are impacting their teaching, students, school, and community. Currently most Canadian educators are working with imposed accountability systems, based on standardized test scores, that may or may not reflect school achievement or improvement from a practitioner point of view (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). “Too often, this sort of research is used against teachers, used to mystify, to control their practice and undermine their professional judgments.” (Manning & Harste, 1994, p. 2). There is a clear absence of the voice of the teacher in this model. This new paradigm of regular external measurements has added additional pressures as to teacher accountability. “Teacher research can help better document and analyze these measures as a way to better understand their impact on teachers and teaching and these findings can help re-professionalize the profession.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 8).

The period of self-study afforded by teacher research helps teachers become more flexible, open to new ideas, and more proactive. It boosts self-esteem and narrows the gap between aspirations and realization. An explicit aim of conducting this research is the knowledge that, under certain conditions, teacher research promotes both teacher and student learning that is valuable and transformative (Zeichner, 2001).

Publishing this type of research makes the results of teacher research available to fellow educators who may be on similar journeys within their profession and in their careers. “We often get clearer understandings of ourselves and our own practices, beliefs, values, opinions, world views and the like by encountering ones that are quite different from our own, and that throw our own into relief and provide us with a perspective on them.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 8).

Teacher research often begins with an ‘aha’ moment when something troubles you in the middle of your educator life experiences and current teaching practices. These moments are captured in writing and reflected upon to better understand one’s own teaching (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). To achieve these ends many teacher researchers choose to document their own experiences in journals. This personal narrative often uses critical incidents documented in the teacher journal as a data source. Judith Newman (1987) defines critical incidents as moments when you can stand back and examine your teaching and beliefs. Journal writing is used as an ongoing thinking process to allow reflection on problems that arise day-to-day. As busy practitioners we have little time in the run of a busy day to stop and think about what to do, let alone reflect on our decisions. Teachers must react quickly to situations and express their knowledge through actions and words. With the multiple, pressing demands of students, parents, administrators, colleagues and community members (not to mention personal demands), teachers are increasingly challenged to do more with little time and they therefore place less emphasis on thinking about, challenging, discussing or questioning educational policies or practices (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Journal writing is an opportunity to pause, reflect, reenergize and perhaps reform and transform one’s philosophy and practice.

Journal writing, like all other forms of self-directed professional inquiry, is a vehicle for better understanding oneself as a teacher (Cole & Knowles, 2000). In its broadest sense it is used for systematic reflection on one’s teaching by synthesizing the

multitude of observations, documents, and conversations in the daily life of a teacher. It offers a private place to explore the planning, outcomes, and barriers of curricular and instructional classroom activities, and extra curricular activities. It is a place to record personal reactions to some of the pervasive and central issues surrounding education, such as gender, authority, autonomy and power, data, social and economic factors, and the overall purpose of education.

Teacher research is “not simply a matter of ‘looking for something that works’ but of aiming to understand why it works and how it works, and to think about where it might not work, and why.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The scope of this journal writing is limited only by the contexts in which one is working and the personal time and energy available to do it. A personal narrative approach to research offers an honoring of the power of the story as a form of inquiry. Experience and practice provides the basis for reflection and analysis that leads to future action, or course correction(s). Engaging in research on one’s own teaching and being reflective about one’s professional practice are one and the same when the inquiry begins with and returns to the teaching self (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Understandings of students, colleagues, parents, and communities are filtered through our understandings of ourselves. Therefore, better understanding of one’s teaching must be framed by one’s own experiences, perspectives, values and beliefs. Teacher research is not so much about description but about changing the conditions of practice (Manning & Harste, 1994).

Garth Boomer (1987) writes that the process of teacher research reacquaints teachers with themselves. He adds that all teachers should be experts in teacher research as it is a vehicle toward deliberate learning. His conclusion is that this process comes naturally to teachers and leads to improved action in schools. In his article, *A Quiet Form of Research*, James Britton (1983) concludes by saying this type of research is more about discovery and learning than about proving something. Every lesson for teachers is a form of inquiry that, when combined with reflection, can have maximum effect on children in classrooms. “In teacher research the ways these issues and concerns are addressed must be answerable and responsive to teachers’ own decisions and ideas about what is helpful and relevant.” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.8). It is important to understand that these experiences could have been different but were not. A particular

outcome was realized through the intersection of environmental conditions, a certain group of people, their actions, and events of the day. Teacher research provides teachers a place to record, reflect, analyze, and share their experiences.

1.2 *Method*

1.2.1 *Introduction*

This section provides additional context for subsequent chapters. Included is information about my school setting, school accreditation, professional learning communities, and a book titled, *On Common Ground*. The chapter concludes with details about the data I collected and how it was analyzed.

1.2.2 *Setting*

My study took place in a grade primary-to-six elementary school in rural Nova Scotia. The school had a total population of one hundred students. I was the Grade Four teacher responsible for the Atlantic Canada Language Arts, Science, Social Studies and Art Curriculum. Additionally, I taught grades two to six Physical Education Curriculum.

At the time of the study, three initiatives were happening simultaneously within our school that involved and impacted every member of the school community: a Nova Scotia Department of Education initiative named School Accreditation, a concept about building better Professional Learning Communities (PLC's), and the reading of a book titled, *On Common Ground*. As these became central to the analysis of the data, they are described here as part of the context of the study.

1.2.2.1 *School Accreditation*

Every school in Nova Scotia is in the process of becoming accredited by the Department of Education. The School Accreditation cycle takes a period of five years with the stated aim being to provide opportunities for school improvement. Prior to the cycle beginning, school accreditation surveys are administered to parents, staff, and students. The surveys ask questions relating to school performance and student achievement.

During the latter part of 2006 students, parents, and staff from our elementary school completed a 40-question survey provided by the Nova Scotia Department of Education. One of the premises of the school accreditation process is that goal setting is based on data. Our school would need to evaluate progress during each year of the accreditation cycle and establish priorities for the next year in a School Improvement Plan (see Appendix 1 for a one year timeline of activities). Following the return of the survey, results gathered in 2006-2007, an entire school year was spent determining a course of action for our staff and school. I was one of two co-chairs of the accreditation team at our school. I was responsible for examining school data beyond the initial surveys and for helping to guide the staff through a process whereby goals were established for the remaining years of the accreditation cycle.

From that year-long process, two goals emerged as being important to focus our school's efforts for the next three years until 2010. The first was related to student writing and the second was related to our professional staff becoming more of a learning community.

1.2.2.2 Professional Learning Communities

From the 2006 accreditation survey results it was clear to staff there was a need to create more of a community within the school. At the beginning of the school year 2007, and based on the 2006 teacher survey results, our school staff chose to focus much of its effort and attention on becoming a better Professional Learning Community (PLC). The second goal set jointly by staff stated that by June 2010, 85% of our teachers would regard our school as a PLC. We had three years to improve the climate within the school.

The data from the original forty-question survey suggested teachers felt this was the area of greatest need for focus and improvement. Our development in this area was linked to sixteen statements from the original school accreditation survey. Those statements fell under five categories:

- Effective program planning process
- Team spirit
- Implementing goals for continuous school improvement
- Our school as a professional learning community
- Effective leadership

There was widespread acknowledgment that each individual member of the school staff had an effect on the building of a professional learning community. (As co-chair of the school accreditation team, I had not only a stake in, but also an important role to play, in making this goal of seeing ourselves as a PLC happen.

We decided to create and administer a school-developed questionnaire regarding our school as a PLC (see Appendix 2). The statements in this survey reflected the original statements on the 2006 School Accreditation Survey. The questions allowed for reflection on our individual actions and contributions, as well as our actions as a team. In essence, this survey contained statements about the role individuals played in contributing to a PLC and statements about our school as a PLC. From this data we created our school improvement plan (see Appendix 3 for a recent example).

1.2.2.3 On Common Ground

To aid us in our pursuit of becoming more professional our staff decided to introduce some literature to help us accomplish this goal. A consultant from the school board provided us with the text, *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* by DuFour, Eaker & DuFour (2005). Over the course of the 2007-2008 school-year, our school staff jointly read this text. During those ten months we met every four weeks to discuss one of the eleven chapters from the book. Each staff member was responsible to lead one chapter's discussion by creating overheads and summary notes. These notes were used as a launching pad for group discussions about themes related to professional learning communities. Topics discussed revolved around five themes: Overview of PLC's, Critical Questions of PLC's, Creating PLC's, Placing PLC's in a Broader Context, and A Call to Action. These meetings lasted about an hour and the summary notes were put in a binder in the staffroom for access by those who might have missed the meeting, and to create an archive for any new staff members. From these notes and discussions three posters summarizing the three big ideas were summarized on the walls in the staffroom for the next school year:

Big Idea #1- *Ensuring that Students Learn*- There must be a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.

Big Idea #2- *A Culture of Collaboration*- The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice.

Big Idea #3- *A Focus on Results*- Teachers identify the current level of student achievement, establish a goal to improve the current level, work together to achieve that goal, and provide periodic evidence of progress. (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005)

These three ideas were to be a visual reminder of our year spent discussing and planning how to become a PLC and a guide to help us build a better PLC within our school.

1.3 Data Collection and Analysis

All of the data from my thesis comes from the journal I kept to chronicle thoughts about my school and teaching experiences. I spent the school year 2008-2009 recording and reflecting upon the critical incidents surrounding my classroom practice and my professional school life. The name of my school and the teachers who worked there were changed to provide anonymity and confidentiality. The right-side pages of my journal were used to record my recollections of the event on the day of it happening. This was my ‘first draft of history’.

I re-read these initial entries a short while later to try and gain a better understanding of the incident. My thoughts on them were recorded at least twenty-four hours after the critical incident occurred to allow some time for reflection. The left side of my page was used to record comments, any lingering questions, and reflections as I tried to understand what these incidents meant to my practice or to me. All of these notes and reflections about the critical incidents became my data for this thesis. These critical incidents and reflections were further analyzed, as explained below.

1.3.1 Critical Incidents

As mentioned in section 1.1.4, Judith Newman (1987) defines critical incidents as moments when you can stand back and examine your teaching and beliefs. Critical incidents might also be known as either barriers or pivotal moments in my teaching practice. They reflect both the positives and negatives of my experiences of being a teacher during this school year. Some incidents were barriers to becoming a PLC. Others

were bridges to better days. All of them were pivotal moments for me. When these journal entries were finished in June of 2009 my task was to further examine them for dominant themes. As suggested by Lankshear & Knobel, (2006) I had to sift, organize, rearrange, analyze, and interpret my prior experiences and put these experiences together again. This process was a way, as outlined by Coles and Knowles (2000) to use systematic reflection on, and analysis of, my practice and to take charge of my own professional development. My hope was to move beyond description toward setting the table for “changing the conditions of practice” (Manning & Harste, 1994).

The thoughts and reflections on the critical incidents that I recorded during the year in which I kept my journal were the prime source of data for the thesis. When I re-read these entries three central themes emerged that often correlated with our school goal of becoming a Professional Learning Community and with our jointly read text *On Common Ground* by DuFour, Eaker & DuFour (2005). The first topic was about school climate and was titled ‘collaboration’. The second topic had to do with ‘accountability’. The third was about ‘leadership’. These three topics became the main chapters of this thesis and are described in the following chapters. Each chapter begins with an introduction and includes references to literature relevant to the theme. Next, critical incidents are scribed verbatim from my own journal. Following each critical incident are reflections about the incident, again, verbatim from my journal. After each of these is an analysis of the incident. Each chapter concludes with a final analysis.

Chapter 2

Collaboration

2.0 Introduction

During the school year chronicling critical incidents, within my classroom and school, the data with the greatest number of critical incidents had to do with problems pertaining to a lack of collaboration. These incidents revolved around our staff attempts to better work together. School accreditation data and internal school survey results suggested staff did not feel they were collaborating effectively or often enough. All staff felt improved collaboration would result in a better perception of the school, as measured by end-of-year school accreditation survey questions. One half of the strategies and goals in our annual school improvement plan were dedicated to this topic. Becoming more of a Professional Learning Community necessitated that we work closely together on issues both curricular and extra-curricular. Practicing collaboration extends beyond the classroom door to encompass more than the regular school day. The life of a school includes aspects of curriculum inside our classrooms and extra-curricular activities beyond and after school. My data makes reference to both of these environments. I value and take as much interest in the extra-curricular part as I do in the curricular part.

In each of the nineteen years I have been teaching I coached at least one school team. In senior high I coached softball, volleyball, hockey and basketball. In junior high I coached volleyball and softball. In elementary I coached soccer, cross-country running, and basketball. I measured, and continue to measure, coaching success not by final scores or statistics but by how much enjoyment athletics and teamwork can bring to a person's life whether student, teacher, player, or coach. As an illustration, my wife and I had such strong feelings of bonding with one of my basketball teams that we took them on a two-week trip to Europe. That trip involved seventeen trains and six planes. Collaboration was critical to the success of those teams and especially that trip. Because of experiences, such as these select few outlined above, I felt I knew a lot about how to bring people together. If there is one common thread among all of those players, teams, and

experiences it is that we all got along very well together. What made that happen? As I think back about how tightly knit those teams were and how often I have been contacted by former players to come for a visit to my house over the holidays, I find myself asking questions and trying to remember how these groups all worked so well together toward a common goal. Because of the many critical incidents recorded over this past school year I now know that collaboration did not, and does not, happen ‘naturally’. Some pre-existing condition(s) must have been present beforehand to make togetherness possible, or some characteristic(s) causing possible friction may have been absent from the environment. Either way, we got along and collaborated exceptionally well together.

I also recall how tightly knit the academic (science, math, English and social studies) departments were in my former senior high school. Whether our social studies department was deciding where to spend precious resource monies or working together on the difficult task of assigning courses each year, we seemed not to need to first develop the ability to collaborate. It was already there in the department. Additionally, the International Baccalaureate faculty to which I belonged seemed so much more cohesive, communicative, and collaborative than the faculty in my present school. Each staff member took a great deal of pride in his/her respective courses and individual departments. Yet an overall feeling of fellowship and mutual support was present in meetings and gatherings where decisions were made. Everyone debated ideas and argued passionately their personal and departmental positions. Yet we all listened to, and were considerate of, each other. When a consensus was reached everyone supported it when they left the room after the meeting. There were no sore losers, no exclusively personal agendas, and no one seemed to take the give and take of debate personally. I recognize that coaching is different from teaching in that the former has less of a staff dynamic to it. But both processes involve small groups of people working together toward a common goal. A lack of collaboration in either will cause failure and friction.

Perhaps the historical nature of the teaching profession itself causes it to be a place where people find it difficult to collaborate. Alvin Toffler (1980) writes that western schools since the industrial revolution have focused almost exclusively on punctuality, obedience and repetition. If his thesis is correct the institutional nature of schools has been in place for a couple of centuries, and there is a clear absence of

teamwork as being either necessary or important within that industrial model of schooling. Hence adding a system of collaboration to the school I presently inhabit, in the absence of one already there, will take much more than one year (school accreditation cycle is five years in total) to instill.

Maybe teaching itself is part of the problem. Seymour Sarason (1996) cites teaching as a lonely profession and finds that in the past forty years little has changed. I know from my experiences in schools that most teachers want to work together and that it is not, as Bruce Joyce (2004) suggests, that the profession attracts many people who are seeking workplaces of high isolation. My sense is that school staffs, former and present, wanted to work together but some key ingredients in my present school were missing, as outlined in critical incidents from this chapter.

There were times during the past year when I wondered if Sarason (1996) was right when he suggested the structure and culture of schools create such physical and psychological isolation of teachers that it is almost impossible for them to engage in productive learning with their colleagues. Perhaps there was a different value system between the schools where I have taught or between the athletic field and my classroom. The frequency of critical incidents in my data that relates to a lack of collaboration this past year demonstrates that I need to pay much more attention to the barriers that keep people from working together. The analysis of them has helped me build a better understanding of what works and what does not.

Collaboration does not happen naturally nor does it result just because a staff jointly read a book about it. Suffice to say that simply hanging a few posters in the staffroom with excerpts about collaboration is not enough to ensure that workplace collaboration takes place. Spending a year discussing collaboration is not enough. From our common school staff text Richard DuFour (2005) makes it clear that, “the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting.” (p. xii). Following our year discussing the importance of collaboration it seemed as though our staff aimed for regular collaboration with the hope it became continuous and ingrained in school culture.

From our group readings and discussions I understand, as I believe does our school staff, the reasoning to work toward more focused teacher collaboration. But DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) also refer to the three daunting challenges when attempting to build a PLC. These are to:

- a. develop and apply shared knowledge,
- b. sustain the hard work of change,
- c. transform school culture.

Further reflection and analysis on these three suggestions tells me that ‘b’ and ‘c’ are not possible until ‘a’ is understood and practiced.

The data in this chapter offers examples of critical incidents surrounding the problems of changing and transforming our school’s culture in its endeavor to become collaborative. My analysis of them is an attempt to make new meanings from these incidents. Some of my assumptions have been long-held personal beliefs. Reflecting on the meaning of them has helped me better understand the reasoning associated with these assumptions. One of the lessons of this new understanding is that these difficulties may help me to develop new traditions for the benefit of my teaching practice and our school.

Dufour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) put forward that educators must not confuse congeniality or ‘collaboration lite’ with the serious professional dialogue essential to school improvement. The reference to ‘collaboration lite’ suggests to me there are varying degrees of people working together ranging from those who simply pay lip service to reform to others who perform the harder work of helping to construct new structures that lay the foundations of genuine collaboration. My contributions, and the lack of them, toward that goal have become easier to see because of the year I spent recording critical incidents and reflecting on their meaning(s).

2.1 Critical Incident- Wednesday January 14, 2009- “ The Essential Meeting”

At 2:05 (end of the school day) our Program Support Teacher (PST) comes into my room and states, “The meeting is in my portable”.

“What meeting?” I ask.

“The one scheduled about our boy who has autism”, she replies. “The autism consultant, her assistant, the program planning team and his teachers are supposed to be there. Didn’t you know about this meeting?”

“No, I wasn’t told. And, who has autism?”

“The Principal called the autism consultant about him and set-up this meeting for you. I thought she told you about it.”

“My Principal has never been in my classroom to observe students while I have been teaching and has never spoken to me about this.”

“Well, the classroom teacher has to be at this meeting.” she states and heads out the door to the meeting.

I quickly grab my daybook, and whatever assessments I can lay my hands on for my autistic student (the one I didn’t know I had).

At the meeting we all notice the Principal’s absence. The Program Support Teacher (PST) explains she has a previously planned School Advisory Council meeting and will arrive once that’s finished. There is no agenda for the meeting.

The autism consultant asks, “When was the diagnosis made?”

“There is no diagnosis.” replies the PST. “The Principal wanted us to get together to get your insights.”

“I don’t have this student on my caseload, I don’t know this student, and you want me to make comments as the autism consultant about a boy who hasn’t been diagnosed with autism. What’s going on here?”

“We just wanted to get your insights,” replies the PST.

“Lets be clear, we can’t say a student is autistic if there isn’t a diagnosis of autism”, says the consultant. “What are your concerns about this child?”

Both the afternoon math and health teacher, and myself the language arts, science, social studies, physical education and art teacher say that we don’t have concerns that are not already being addressed by the Individual Program Plan (IPP). Neither of us has expressed additional concerns about this boy and we certainly do not feel he fits any profile for autism.

The group then hears from the consultant about a great way to organize autistic students’ materials with a “bin system”. This conversation lasts about ten minutes but we

agree this is a moot point as this child is not autistic and has a good organization system already set-up by his program support teacher. I suggest that we all list our concerns on paper and sort them as either social or academic. All agree this is a good idea and we decide a week is a good timeline to have them submitted to the Program Planning Team (PPT) for further discussion. At 2:35 the Principal arrives and wants a review of the meeting.

The autism consultant suggests the meeting was unnecessary and that future team meetings about autistic students should include an actual diagnosis of autism. The Principal agrees.

At 2:45 the meeting ends.

2.1.1 Reflections- *“The Essential Meeting”*

How can a meeting that I have to attend about a student in my room be planned without my knowledge? How does it happen that my Principal can make a diagnosis of autism without ever talking with me about him or without ever visiting my classroom? I find this to be morally and professionally wrong. Educators, in my opinion, are not qualified to make a diagnosis of this magnitude particularly when it is based on, at best, second-hand information.

I have asked since my arrival at this school for each meeting to have an agenda. This would allow meetings to have more professional talk and less informal chat. My after-school time is valuable, and I find these meetings less than helpful. Thus far, the idea of meeting agendas has fallen on deaf ears.

Administrative time spent with individual teachers and in their classrooms would perhaps reveal needs to be discussed by the PPT and the necessity and frequency of larger group meetings.

2.1.2 Analysis- *“The Essential Meeting”*

This incident reminds me of a story I once read about a person who knew how to domineer but not how to influence. To me this incident is also an example of ‘collaboration lite’ mentioned earlier when DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) cited the

importance of having professional dialogue more than a congenial conversation. Decisions of this consequence about one of my students would be better made with me and not for me. In this instance the Principal chose to be more authoritarian rather than authoritative. This philosophy runs counter to what Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) state when they say, "As teachers work more and more with people beyond their own schools, a whole gamut of new skills, relations and orientations are fundamentally changing the essence of their professionalism" (p. 82). This incident was an example of a network of people from inside and outside of the building coming together to discuss a student's needs. Yet I left the meeting, not with feelings of better relations but, with a sense of not feeling very professional. While the Principal is free to exercise her autonomy it has to be recognized that her decision to exclude my thoughts on the matter, whether deliberately or not, prior to inviting the consultant was the antithesis of collaboration. I was not involved in the decision to label this child as possibly autistic. I was not informed of the meeting. The Principal was not even present until the end of the meeting. Perhaps she felt that as the gatekeeper (and gate-opener) to the school she was responsible for bringing in the outside expert on my behalf. If this was the case Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) write that this is understandable as in times of uncertainty there is a tendency to want to know what to do. Perhaps a lack of certainty about the needs of this student led the Principal to contact outside experts on my behalf. In a school of only one hundred students perhaps there is more time for the administration to focus on the needs of each student in the school. Maybe she felt that this student had the greatest need in my classroom and that I was not giving him enough attention. If this were true a meeting between the two of us about this student would have made more sense to me. We could have shared our insights and improved our personal and professional relationship. In relation to Principals, Fullan (2008) says, "In addition to any one-on-one mentoring Principals engage in, their greatest contribution comes, indirectly, from the collaborative cultures they create." (p. 17). The needs of this particular student may have been of greater concern to her than I had previously considered.

When I consider this through a historical lens I recall there have been several occasions in the past three years of our professional relationship when the Principal

commented to me about how difficult the transition must be in coming to elementary from high school. I always left those conversations with a sense that there may have been a little anxiety or skepticism on her part that I was not quite qualified to teach elementary school. A previous Principal of the school hired me, and perhaps the present one had lingering questions in her mind about my ability, qualifications, or experiences. It may have been an example of what Stacey (1996) suggests when he writes that we respond to the fact that situations are uncertain and conflicting with a rigid injunction that people be more certain. Maybe she wanted me to be completely sure that I was meeting this student's needs as best as possible. Perhaps she was still uncertain about how I was dealing with this student. Whatever the reason(s) it made me feel a bit embarrassed at the meeting, both for the school and for myself. It certainly was not an example of collaboration, and a mentoring moment between the two of us had been lost. The meeting did not work on any level. Maybe the problem stemmed from a perception of me as being different (because I came from high school), and that, therefore, I was not like-minded or as competent.

Two days later a similar meeting was the subject of another journal entry.

2.2 *Critical Incident- Friday January 16, 2009- "The Non-Essential Meeting"*

Just got word from the school secretary that two Individual Program Plan (IPP) meetings with students and parents are to be held after school on the 20th. I tell her that I have a medical appointment that afternoon and the afternoon (math and health) teacher is also away at an inservice that day. Therefore both classroom teachers will be unavailable that day. Can we find another date?

Her response, on behalf of the Principal, is that she (Principal), "really wants to get them over with and did not need the classroom teachers to be present at the meetings. She would hold the meetings anyway."

2.2.1 *Reflections- "The Non-Essential Meeting"*

Why are the afternoon teacher and I not needed at two IPP meetings for two students in my classroom? Forty-eight hours ago it was essential I be at a meeting to discuss a child with whom I had no concerns and today I am not needed at a meeting with

parents of students with whom I have many concerns. It is almost impossible to collaborate with parents and the core program team when meetings are held in my absence. This puts me in a position where my voice is not included in an important meeting where both my insights and responses are critical to get a clearer picture of what has been happening and of where we are going with these students. It makes me wonder if the most important part of the meeting is to get signatures on forms rather than to seek joint solutions.

2.2.2 Analysis- “The Non-Essential Meeting”

Many times during the past few years I have had parents express to me that they did not feel welcome at our school. This has been painful to hear, as I have always felt that more parental involvement is crucial for a school’s success. My first letter home to parents each September invites them to volunteer in my classroom and lets them know they are always welcome to just drop in for a visit. Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) suggest, “Nowhere is the two-way street more in disrepair and in need of social reconstruction than the relationship among parents, communities, and their schools.” (p.67). Holding a meeting about a child’s academic and social programming without either classroom teacher present is the wrong message to send to a community and is especially wrong when both classroom teachers wish to be present. My view on this reflects the view of Sarason (1996) who suggests educators should more often go out into their communities with empathy and interacts meaningfully with their constituents. This incident resulted in an opportunity lost for parent and teacher to talk and work together. A joint effort will share power and decision-making between all involved with the education of a child and demonstrates that we as a school accept and practice the idea that it truly takes a village to raise a child. Additionally, it will send a message that parents have valuable skills, expertise, knowledge, and experiences to contribute in that collaborative partnership. This is a more productive kind of message to send to a community, and it is another lost opportunity for staff to collaborate.

A few days later another incident occurs that further illustrates to me a problem stemming from a lack of collaboration.

2.3 *Critical Incident- Wednesday January 21, 2009- “The Ski Mix-Up”*

Drove to a local primary to grade nine building after school today to pick-up thirty-five pair of skis and boots for our physical education program. Our school is to have use of them for two weeks. As the physical education teacher I plan to have all students in the school cross country ski at least twice and to have the community use them during an activity night to be held at school later this month. My Principal insisted that all plans and arrangements go through her office. I made these arrangements with her prior to Christmas break and confirmed it again last week.

I arrive at the elementary building at 3:00 to find the physical education teacher in the midst of an after school basketball practice. He has no idea about me coming or about the ski exchange. He had planned on skiing this month with his students. But he agrees to give me the equipment he has for the two-week period. I take the boots to my truck and am told the skis and poles are in the junior high building next door.

I arrive at the gym and find the junior high physical education teacher also has no idea about the ski exchange or me coming. He agrees to give me the skis but tells me to come back tomorrow as they are up in the storage loft and he will need an hour to get them down with help from some older students.

I leave the building without any skis apologizing and thanking him for his understanding.

2.3.1 *Reflections- “The Ski Mix-Up”*

Why am I not allowed to make these arrangements myself? Could I, as a professional educator, not talk directly with a fellow professional educator to make these arrangements and thus avoid confusion? Not according to my Principal. I must not collaborate with another in an instance such as this. I instead must acquiesce to her authority. This makes my life and job more difficult as I now have to return for the equipment another day and I look a bit foolish to my peers.

2.3.2 *Analysis- “The Ski Mix-Up”*

After revisiting this entry I wondered if there was some sort of new paradigm I was not aware of that subverted the move toward collaboration. Dismissing that idea I try

again to understand the power dynamic between teacher and administration. Maybe this idea of collaboration was too new for our staff. Therefore, my expectation that we suddenly be collaborative must be viewed as an ongoing process, and that we are instead on the way to becoming collaborative. Maybe the old school hierarchical way of doing things whereby the Principal is at the top of the ladder and the teachers are beneath her or him has outflanked the move toward collaboration. I am reminded of what bell hooks (2003) said, “ Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished.” (p. 43). I remember the many times that I have gone to the administration during the past three years with a new idea for the school. On most of those occasions the reply to my idea began with either, ‘we have never’ or ‘we have always’. Breaking an old tradition and establishing a new one is much more difficult than it was at my previous school.

While in senior high there seemed to be a sense of not ‘anything goes’ but that ‘anything is possible’. On several occasions I went to a colleague, department head, or administrator about a new idea. It was always embraced as a valuable idea, and an attitude of ‘what can we do to help?’ was shown to me. Perhaps that school had collaboration as a way of doing business already instilled. It could be because I had a longer legacy in high school, and therefore my judgments were more trusted. I mentioned earlier about the possibility of a new paradigm, but when I consider this again from my own historical perspective I wonder if there is an entirely different ethos or value system in elementary schools compared to senior high schools? Regardless, the type of world where anything is possible is the one I want to help create and sustain at my present school.

I want to be empathetic toward my Principal by trying to understand how and why her decisions about school and me are made. Michael Fullan (2008) writes, “We know that effective Principals have to do two things jointly, to focus deeply on instruction and help others do that in the short run, and also especially to put others in a position to carry on beyond the leaders tenure. When there are urgent problems and one is expected as leader to have the answers, there is great temptation to jump in and solve the problem.” (p. 16). I am coming to be more conscious that my vision of what to do is not the only

vision that has to be considered. DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) talk about the difficulties of developing collaborative environments due to teachers' having a long history of working in isolation. I want to make sure that my efforts at collaborating do not stop at the door of my classroom. Thus, I have to consider carefully the lessons of this and other incidents to help me better figure out what to do in the future to be more personally successful with what I want to achieve. My personal goal is the same as that of the school, to be collaborative and therefore helpful with my colleagues.

However, the next critical incident resulted in a similar negative message being sent to the community and again demonstrated that collaboration was not happening in our school. I have often felt that the problem of not collaborating is between mostly the administration and myself. However a closer look in my data suggests there are wider instances of the staff not collaborating.

2.4 *Critical Incident- Monday April 6, 2009- "The Smart Board"*

Last evening at the Home and School meeting one of the staff requested \$1 500.00 to purchase a Smart Board for their classroom. This amount will exhaust all remaining funds in the account for this school year and necessitate earmarking several hundred dollars from next year's budget to pay for it. No other teacher was made aware that this request was pending and there was no discussion of it in school. Yet when discussion took place at the Home and School meeting the Principal mentioned to the parents and staff present at the meeting, that the Smart Board would be shared between classrooms and among the staff. No other teacher in the building was aware of this plan. Since that meeting there has been a lot of turmoil within the school.

Teachers have been discussing with me how disappointed they are that these substantial funds are going to be used in only one classroom. Some have said that this money would be better spent directly on students. No one else seems interested in using the Smart Board in his or her own classroom. A few have said that that amount of money should not have been given to one teacher. This issue has further polarized the staff to a point that I seem to be avoiding casual contact as only negative comments seem to be shared about colleagues. I think that this issue could have been handled a lot differently and resulted in less acrimony between professionals.

2.4.1 Reflections- “The Smart Board”

For the Principal to claim that this piece of technology will be used by myself and other members of the staff without first discussing it with me or us is not appropriate.

The idea of spending this large amount of money from a community budget could have been considered together as a staff in advance of the meeting. The feelings of resentment and confusion might have been avoided if we as a whole staff had had time to collectively and collaboratively explore and discuss this idea. This is another example of the lack of collaboration at our school and its resulting negative consequences.

2.4.2 Analysis- “The Smart Board”

I am in favor of using technology in the classroom. I am the only teacher in our school that each year provides students with e-mail accounts and uses this technology to communicate with them. I also teach each class how to use Microsoft Word and Power Point and how to send these as attachments. My longer-term view is to create digital portfolios that students can carry from year to year and teacher to teacher. This would demonstrate to me ongoing constructivism in action. I also believe that having the Smart Board in someone else’s classroom is a great opportunity to increase collaboration. I accept the view of Freire (1998) who says, “the epitome of negation in the context of education is the stifling or inhibition of curiosity in the learner and, consequently, in the teacher too. In other words, the educator who is dominated by authoritarian or paternalistic attitudes that suffocate the curiosity of the learner finishes by suffocating his or her own curiosity.” (p. 79). In this thesis, I want to make sure that I neither put a negative slant on technology nor on the curiosity and passion of another teacher. I believe that educators who are equipped with a clear approach to teaching and learning about technology can extend and deepen student and staff learning and understanding. The issue I want to bring to the forefront is that of collaboration. When writing about collaboration in his book *Improving Schools from Within*, Roland Barth (1990) suggests,

“Collegiality is the presence of four specific behaviors, as follows: Adults in school talk about practice. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise. Adults in schools

observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about. Adults engage together in work on curriculum planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated, and shared.” (p.63)

None of these things happened in this incident, but they provide a possible litmus test for future collaboration among staff.

When writing and thinking about the Smart Board I know it will be used well by the students and teacher who have it, and I fully support that idea. My objection is the way the decision was handled. I feel that a moment of collaboration between school and community has been lost.

As the person often called upon when technologies fail or when they are needed, I feel that my voice should have been heard before the claim was made that I would use it. Our staff should also have been informed of its intended general usage. As a staff we are very interested in learning how to create more sophisticated ways to instruct our students. But I would prefer to be invited to the table, not required at it. I would also be interested in our staff learning how to better use technology. Draining a limited budget of monies raised by our students and for our students reminds me of Mark Kingwell (2000) who wrote that citizens must build character more than intellect if they are to take up the challenging task of political commitment. Since the Home and School was involved in this decision I see it as important that our staff discuss, in advance, the use of this technology to ensure we have a solid framework from which to use it together. Again, I want to be empathetic to the feelings and thoughts of both the teacher and the administrator, but failing to collaborate in advance of this meeting left me confused about the intentions and skeptical of the outcomes. I had no choice in the matter.

In *On Equilibrium* John Ralston Saul (2001) writes that to believe in the reality of choice is one of the most basic characteristics of leadership. Many individuals who think of themselves as leaders find this reality very difficult. They believe that their job is to understand power and management and perhaps make minor corrections to what they

accept to be the torque of events. But they take for granted the reigning truths of the day and so are fundamentally passive. Maybe it was a great idea to purchase the Smart Board, but making a unilateral decision of this magnitude in a school with only six classroom teachers who are working toward greater collaboration suggests a different model of decision-making was instead being used. If so, it seems counter to our school goal of becoming more a Professional Learning Community through greater collaboration. Saul adds that the world of business does not easily admire internal debate let alone disagreement. He suggests it is a world of pyramidal order, obedience within structures and solidarity among senior figures and that received wisdom is the aristocratic code. The education establishment, and indeed our school, has perhaps adopted the industrial, military, business model. Perhaps the reason for the decision not to consult with each other was in the interest of time as these home and school meetings are held only bi-monthly. The evening ended with parents and teachers lingering by the coffee pot discussing the possibilities and intricacies of a new Smart Board for our students and school. Everyone seemed excited and to be getting along. I would conclude with Saul who feels a period of uncertainty is also a period of choice, and therefore one of opportunity.

An opportunity to collaborate as a staff was lost, and the end of the school year was near. Happily, the evening ended on a more positive note as our entire staff came somewhat together to discuss and solve a problem. Maybe this was not to be the last instance of collaboration by our staff and was possibly a harbinger of a new culture of collaboration.

2.5 *Critical Incident- Friday May 29, 2009- "The Great Beginning at the End"*

We as a staff (minus the Principal) met together after school to discuss the June calendar that was posted today in the staffroom. We discuss the fact that our Principal will be, according to the calendar, absent for twelve days this month. We seemed very relaxed about the whole idea and all agreed that we would have to pull together to make a busy June run smoothly. The first big event is next week's Volunteer Tea.

We discuss this event collegially and end up with a committee of set-up people, servers, and clean-up teachers. All staff volunteer themselves to make food. We also have preliminary discussions about our field day to be held at the end of June and agree to put a sign up poster in the staffroom for each teacher to choose an event they would like to supervise.

The meeting ends with all agreeing that we can plan and do things for ourselves when we pull ourselves together and listen to each other.

2.5.1 Reflections- “The Great Beginning at the End”

Only one other time this year (Christmas concert) have we, as a whole staff, come together to collegially and collaboratively plan an event. The positive energy and feelings in the staffroom that day were felt again on this day. At the end of a year of much turmoil it feels good to collaboratively address areas of concern in our school and in advance of them happening. It feels almost as a weight has been lifted in the school. This bodes well for June.

2.6 Final Analysis

There have been times throughout the past school year when I thought about going against the grain by closing my classroom door and doing my own thing without consulting others in the building. There have been many occasions when I felt out of place. There were times when my Principal called my actions insubordinate. On some of these occasions it dawned on me that I could fight back or against these winds of non-collaboration. It was sometimes tempting to seek a band of colleagues who might create a counter insurgency against what at the time was counter to my position. Many of these critical incidents might appear to be a personality conflict between the school administration and me. From my perspective I do not feel that this was the case as there have also been some positive moments between us in the past. I cannot know the rationale behind the Principal's decisions as it often was not shared with me, but I do believe she had the best of intentions. My research is only a partial story and perhaps other staff members found that collaboration was improving and happening to their satisfaction. There were perhaps incidents where the decisions made by the Principal

fostered collaboration, but I neither recorded nor was aware of them. I remind myself that I have only one set of eyes through which to interpret things in my school, but those eyes sometimes fail to see or recognize the good things that happen. Focusing only on issues of collaborative tension from a negative perspective ignores and misses positive moments. I have learned that critical incidents can be positive and negative. I take from the somewhat negative tone of many of these critical incidents that there were mostly problems with collaboration and not many successes. If I were to again do this research I would strive to ensure I record, and be more aware of, positive critical incidents.

I re-read a lot of Freire (1998) who said, “Merely rebellious attitudes or actions are insufficient, though they are an indispensable response to legitimate anger. It is necessary to go beyond rebellious attitudes to a more radically critical and revolutionary position, which is in fact a position not simply of denouncing injustice but of announcing utopia. Transformation of the world implies a dialectic between the two actions: denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new society” (p.74). And, he added, “one of the necessary requirements for correct thinking is a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitudes” (ibid). I constantly rejected the temptation to feel I was certain of anything and to avoid being negative because I felt that I have only an answer and not the answer. As a professional and as a human I also try to follow Freire’s maxim that respect for the authority and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favor that we may or may not concede to each other. Dignity in the workplace is of paramount importance to me. While my voice has not been heard on many occasions I feel that I must look toward the future and see that my role in the world of schooling is not simply that of someone who registers what occurs, but of someone who has an input into what happens.

Another look into our book by DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) found me noting an idea from Dennis Sparks who says, “Leaders shape conversations by persistently offering their values, intentions and beliefs to others and by expressing themselves in declarative sentences. Leaders also matter because they, along with others, shape a school or school system’s culture in ways that promote learning, collaboration, and environments in which all members of the community feel cared for and respected.” (p. 157). It now seems clearer to me that maintaining a sense of dignity in the workplace

has been the right thing to do. However, I now must also recognize the importance of sharing more often my own voice in conversations. Changing our school climate, and myself, to become more collaborative is an ongoing process and not an event. There are, however, obstacles to overcome.

Some perhaps see changing the environment as a threat to their power. A change in the history of how things are done does not come easily. My goal is to now view and promote change as a period of uncertainty and also a period of choice, and therefore one of opportunity. What I must also be cognizant of is that the desire for change is not the most common of human traits. Some are frightened by it. It would be easier to acquiesce and give up trying to build a better community-minded school in the face of the many instances where collaboration did not occur. I could, and at times throughout the past year did, retreat into the solitude of my own classroom. In those moments I found comfort in my isolation but the overarching feelings of loneliness were counterproductive to my desire for collaboration. I soon realized that indifference can, in my experience, quickly breed callousness, arrogance, and eventually contempt. I choose instead to reach out to my colleagues and see them more broadly as equal citizens. This view comes from my notion of what it means to be a good teacher.

As an educator I am primarily entrusted with nurturing children. My practice at the elementary level has always had an implicit notion of making them better citizens. To me, I have an obligation to act as a catalyst for change in their lives. I see my role as that of a teacher who is not only responsible for educational outcomes. I must also be a person responsible for making better people who are considerate of, and active in, their communities. This is a better way to create a more collaborative school and world and has always been one of my priorities as a teacher. Mark Kingwell (2000) put forward that citizenship is a way of meeting one of our deepest needs, the need to belong. That it gives voice and structure to the yearning to be part of something larger than ourselves and that it is a way of making concrete the ethical commitments of care and respect. This experience of recording critical incidents, reflecting and analyzing them has caused me to learn many new lessons and to reinforce others. The foundation of a collaborative community is built with these blocks of care, respect, aid, and seeing a bigger picture beyond ourselves. There are other important building blocks.

One of these is to never show anger or prejudice against others who think differently, but instead to show tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Saul (2001) wrote that the mark of loyalty in a democracy is disagreement. He suggests that if you cannot disagree you are not loyal to the public good. If all you do is agree, then you are not a real citizen. I better understand the importance of not crossing a line to become didactic or patronizing but to embrace the ongoing struggle toward becoming a collaborative school with discovering what my role is as a ‘collaborator’ and what action to take in order to have some positive influence. I must act in a positive way as a catalyst for change and as a fellow participant. This idea is summarized by Roland Barth (1990), “When teachers work for the common good, they give up a large measure of self-interest in the outcome. With leadership and responsibility comes the need to see others’ points of view and act fairly in their eyes” (p. 129). These are key reminders for a staff attempting to become more collaborative.

Looking ahead I intend to speak up earlier about how we can become more of a team, while continuing to respect and invite the opinions and differences of others. This delicate balance will help to bridge the gaps in my relationships with peers and nourish the seeds of collaboration that were begun at the end of the year. DuFour, Eaker and DuFour’s (2005) big idea number two, about establishing a culture of collaboration, will remain somewhat elusive. My efforts will continue perhaps more successfully in light of these critical incidents.

Chapter 3

Accountability

“Whoever really observes, does so from a given point of view. And this does not necessarily mean that the observer’s position is erroneous. It is an error when one becomes dogmatic about one’s point of view and ignores the fact that, even if one is certain about his point of view, it does not mean that one’s position is always ethically grounded.” Paulo Freire (1998, p. 22)

3.0 Introduction

There seems a growing movement in education toward quantifying knowledge and valuing it greatly as a predictor of educational success. When I was teaching senior high school the topic of how to get good grades was one of the first questions asked by students on the very first day of class. In my present elementary school this issue seems to be of more importance as provincial tests in language arts and math are given, and the grades are released each year in grades three and six. Parents, consultants, teachers, and students are now talking more often about these numbers and how to improve the scores. As an experienced teacher I thought I knew how to assess students. What I did not realize, before analyzing the critical incidents in this chapter, is that what was once hidden from me would become revealed as I discovered new knowledge about assessment and accountability. One of the ongoing questions I keep asking is whether or not I must submit myself to external accountability and all of its measures and data or continue teaching with the mindset that it submits to me.

My understanding of assessment is twofold: that which I had prior to the analysis of this chapter and that which I now have following further reflection about it. The most important priority for me as a teacher is to try and understand, or empathize with, the students in front of me. Before I can decide where I intend to take them in the future I have to get an overall picture of their present strengths, weaknesses, foibles and passions. These intuitive impressions develop over the course of the first few weeks of school. From there my strategy has been to provide shape and form to my teaching practice based on those early discoveries of my students’ understandings. This seems to me a way to focus more on the learning than the teaching. This is what I am most comfortable doing as a teacher. It also mirrors the philosophy espoused by DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) as adopted by our staff for this school year in terms of our goal of becoming a

Professional Learning Community. As I mentioned in chapter one, DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) write about ‘Big Idea #1’, which proposes a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, and about ‘Big Idea #3’, which asks you to shift from a focus on results to a focus on learning. These PLC ideas seemed to mesh with my own teaching philosophy and practice.

I have never been the type of teacher who had firm long-term plans for the current school year but rather firm ideas or memories from the previous year upon which to build. Each year I record the units, topics, and classroom practices that go well for the students and me. Whether it is an informative field trip, a good web site, or a fun read aloud book it is noted on my yellow pad of paper and kept inside my daybook as an archive of the year’s best lessons and activities. From these anecdotal observations I write a ‘next year’s ideas’ list of things to consider doing again. Throughout the next year I often refer back to these observations to remind myself of these positive moments and to perhaps repeat them. It is very much a reflective, qualitative, and deductive way of learning as I record these thoughts after the fact. This practice runs counter to what some other teachers do and to what some school board consultants and my administrator are expecting from me as I continue my career. It seems disconnected from the ideas and philosophy we are using from DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) to become a PLC whereby the emphasis is on learning more than teaching and results. The November critical incident outlined below will elaborate more on that, but first I want to comment more on my other responsibility regarding accountability. It is also included in the November critical incident.

I am also responsible for gathering and keeping data on each student in my teaching practice. This information is found in the back of my teacher’s daybook and is commonly referred to as marks, or grades. The usual scores for quizzes, tests, projects, and assignments are kept here. When I taught high school these were the numbers treasured and feared by my students and their parents. Initially, upon returning to elementary school, they did not seem to be of such paramount concern to administrators, students, or parents. More and more, however, people in the profession emphasize this data, as illustrated in the first critical incident.

3.1 *Critical Incident- Thursday November 27, 2008- “Make Time and Grades”*

Report cards were due in the office yesterday so the Principal could review them. I e-mailed mine in on time but there was a last minute problem. When I checked my mailbox there was a note from the secretary that there were no science or health grades on my report cards. I quickly logged back into the report card web site and added comments to both of those subjects, “Because the science unit on sound didn’t have enough data to generate a grade and was not yet finished science grades will appear on second term reports”. And, “Since Health has not yet had many outcomes assessed these grades will appear on second term reports”. I dropped in to the office twenty minutes later to report to the Principal that my comments had been added and hence my report cards were ready to print for signatures. Alas she was waiting for me with school board policy documents about report cards.

It seems this six-page board policy document on grades and reporting has been printed for me to read. For the next fifteen minutes I am made to feel like a kid who has been caught with his hands in the cookie jar as the Principal explains to me the importance of ‘outcomes driven curriculum’ and ‘data driven decisions’. Once again I am forced to defend (not explain) what I do in my classroom. I remind her that my timetable (created without a voice from me) has me in the classroom only four mornings out of six. The provincial Time-to-Teach document outlining required minutes of curriculum instruction per week and my actual timetable do not allow me to meet the required minutes of curriculum instruction. Thus, I do not have enough time to teach each subject as is outlined in that document. I also remind her that my yearly Professional Growth Plan has a goal to weave together subjects such as writing and social studies, reading and science. I tell her that this is a work in progress. At the end of our meeting the Principal gives me a letter instructing me to have all remaining core subject curriculum plans for the remainder of the school year submitted to her by December 16th.

3.1.1 *Reflections- “Make Time and Grades”*

‘Data driven decisions must be made’. So says my administrator and it seems the many Department of Education consultants who have visited our school of late. Hence,

we are told to 'create more numbers to drive decisions'. Marks are compulsory on report cards each term. No matter that every single parent-teacher meeting (and my classroom teaching) in my nineteen-year career has tried to move further away from grades as a way of evaluating. Yet my responsibility seems to be focused on the generating of quantitative data as a way to demonstrate learning as evidenced by my administrator's response to missing data on this term's report card. It seems as though a few isolated teachers (including me) are the only ones bucking the trend toward quantitative decision-making and it follows that the folks driving this trend are silencing or ignoring us ever more and again.

Why must I script learning? The outcomes required for each subject are general and specific. I fully understand that I am required to implement them as mandated by board policy and under the education act. What I prefer is to combine an inductive and deductive approach to learning. For example I used an inductive approach when we wrote our persuasive letters to the Prime Minister. As mentioned earlier I had an idea how to proceed with this language arts topic but as we got into the lessons I deduced that this was a chance to also weave-in some social studies outcomes on Canadian government. This discovery was made after the writing plans began. An intuitive decision was made to include social studies outcomes based on the questions of the students as they participated in the language arts lessons. It was an excellent example of teacher research. What I am now forced to do, in reference to the now required yearly plans, is to instead script those moments in advance in order to satisfy my administrator's and board's desire to feel I am doing my job properly. This takes intuition, spontaneity and examining the teachable moment as a way of teaching out of my repertoire of skills. It also suggests to me that there is an element of losing control of my teaching that I am now forced to accept. This is disempowering.

On-line report cards have allowed educators to recycle last year's comments from our "Comment Banks" on to this and next year's report cards. How much authenticity and genuineness does this show on my part if I am given a reporting system that allows this to happen? Is this not an ethical issue that deserves consideration and discussion within the profession? Has anyone else thought about this?

3.1.2 Analysis- “*Make Time and Grades*”

When I was teaching senior high school, and a student brought up the subject of grades, it made me cringe. I fully understood the importance of getting really good grades as these numbers were used to decide who got money from scholarships and bursaries. For a few years I sat on the Awards Committee and remember many meetings where the distinguishing characteristic between students who had applied for scholarships, bursaries and other financial support was grades. They are weighed very heavily both inside and outside of senior high schools. In the classroom, however, I found them to be too much of a distraction for both the student and me. It became my practice to answer the student concerned with ‘how to get an A’ by suggesting they already had an ‘A’ the moment they walked into the room. This comment was followed by me telling them that I had pre-judged them to be intelligent before I graded anything on paper and that their behavior and work in the classroom (written and oral) would perhaps ensure that the high mark would be maintained. We then got down to what I considered to be the most important part of classroom instruction and focus: dialoguing. This philosophy seemed to represent one of the big ideas in DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) that my present elementary school had chosen to work on in Big Idea #3 where the focus shifts from being on results to learning. The emphasis in teaching is not on raising test scores but on the school making a positive difference in the lives of students by ensuring they acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions for their futures. This incident, however, taught me that numbers on report cards still matter a great deal. Their absence on a report card is unacceptable. This episode is a part of a wider issue surrounding accountability and standards.

Douglas Reeves (2005) writes that the notion of an educational system having a coherent set of expectations about what students should know and be able to do is widely held in schools. The common term for this is ‘standards-based’ curriculum. Unfortunately for me what has followed is a movement toward standards-based instruction. This practice may be the result of a provincial initiative, as evidenced by the need to produce for the board and my Principal, a yearly plan in advance of the actual learning in the classroom.

When our school began the accreditation process consultants visited us from the provincial Department of Education. The thing I remember most is that they went out of their way to emphasize 'data-driven decisions'. My understanding of this is that I must pay particular attention to getting more numbers. In other words it means accountability is more valid and credible when numerical data is given. Perhaps my view is biased because of my lack of ability in mathematics.

Since my days in high school I have not enjoyed math. I suspect I do not really like the subject because I am not very good at it. Long have I lamented the time wasted on learning theorems and formulas for which I saw no practical application in my life. No math teacher has ever been able to explain to me why math and numbers are so important. This absence of evidence, combined with my lack of ability, has perhaps tainted my view of emphasizing numbers to determine success in schools. I now have to either re-consider that belief or set it aside.

As to preparing a script for my teaching I feel that my teaching is made new again because of ongoing and spontaneous adaptations made while using my imagination and judgment to consider how to reach children more directly and effectively. This personalizes learning and is for me a much more comfortable way to teach. I am reminded again of Freire (1998) who said that to know is not simply to intuit or to have a hunch. He said we must build on our intuitions and submit them to methodical and rigorous analysis so that our curiosity becomes epistemological. Somehow this type of professional knowledge is less important to my Principal than having grades on a report card.

Another incident later in the year confirmed for me that data on report cards is not the only area where data-driven decisions are now the norm.

3.2 Critical Incident- Monday March 2, 2009- “The Data Games”

Tonight is grade primary to two parent-child floor hockey in the school gym from six o'clock to seven-fifteen. The lunch break today had the Principal come to my room with an envelope of the names of students who signed-up for the activity night. I am supposed to track who comes tonight in order to generate school data. I tell her my feeling is that there is no need to have anyone sign-up for these activity nights as they are, in my opinion, causal evenings for casual conversations and some fitness. She counters that this data is necessary and she reminds me the ultimate responsibility rests with the administrator. I am to gather data this evening in addition to supervising and organizing the event. She expects the envelope back in the morning.

3.2.1 Reflections- “ The Data Games”

Fifty-five parents and students show up for the activity. In the frenzy of organizing teams, creating schedule for play and officiating games I have no time to take formal attendance because I am the only volunteer. So, I get a hard count (no names) of the people present and hope that this will suffice for the Principal.

The next day there is no request from the Principal for data or the envelope. I encounter her three times today and at no time does she ask how last evening's activity night went for me or anyone else who attended. I suspect that she has forgotten about the data.

3.2.2 Analysis- “The Data Games”

Thoughts creep into my head that perhaps extra-curricular activities are not important to our school. Quantifying those present at volunteer activity nights is making my life more difficult. Requiring specific data (names) complicates my life as a volunteer. I only consider this briefly and then dismiss the idea, as I have heard from others that my Principal has a long personal history of supporting after-school activities. I do wonder if perhaps she is feeling the same external pressures to produce data as I am. She is my boss and is maybe passing on what her boss is demanding. I let my mind create a thought web that includes links to school boards being responsible to track happenings in schools and gathering data as a way to help quell uncertainties they may have as they

answer calls about accountability to the broader general public. Upon further reflection it seems that all of us are perhaps under more pressure to produce data and not just poor old me. Maybe I am as much a victim of this new climate as is my Principal and the school board.

On a positive note the next activity night was held on the 3rd of March for the grades three to six students, and no request from the Principal for data was made. The envelope with sign-up slips was left in the office. I wonder if maybe the Principal did that purposely to advocate and support my efforts. I recall how many times of late I have seen her with huge binders that have to be filled to create school documents on everything from evacuation plans to food policies. Maybe she and I are both in the same position where our worlds have changed because of new accountability procedures.

As the next incident illustrates we are not the only professionals in our building concerned with the pressures from standards-based education.

3.3 *Critical Incident- Wednesday March 25, 2009- “ What is Par?”*

Just finished a great March Break and feel excited about the remaining time in this school year. The topics left to teach are built around hands-on activities including the schools first science fair, planting some tomato seeds in school that have been on the International Space Station, planning a unit on explorers and going on a year-end class trip. Also excited at the prospect of spring weather and setting up a cross-country running club and continuing the activity nights with parents and students. The good mood does not last too long.

A colleague came into my room after school today to vent. She is the type of person who seems often to see the problems and mistakes in school and kids. Rarely has she come in my room to celebrate a success but only to register a complaint. She came in to tell me again how ‘stupid her students are this year’. She is worried about the pending provincial assessment in math and confirms that the same ones who failed the language arts assessment will fail this math one as well. She has tried all year to get them ready for this test and all of her efforts are failing because these kids just don’t ‘get it’. Her attempts to shame them into learning appear to have fallen on deaf ears. She cites the example of a student who was, “almost up to par until he went on that two week vacation

to Florida.” She complains that he has not been the same since then. She cites statistics from the math assessment kit that predict a dire future for many in the next math unit of study in her room. She says, “I know already who is going to fail that year-end math assessment and nothing I do will change that”. She looks defeated. What am I supposed to say to her?

Usually I stand there passively and nod politely and understandingly as her rants continue. Other teachers have told me of having conversations with her under the same sorts of circumstances. I ask myself if it is better to remain quiet, and be the shoulder to cry on, or whether I should finally stand up to argue for another way of looking at learning, assessment and school.

3.3.1 Reflections- March 25, 2009- “What is Par?”

It is very spiritually deflating to have someone constantly find the negative in students.

Using shame as way to instill pride should have gone out of teaching methodologies a long time ago.

Measuring internal success and satisfaction from external assessment scores seems dated, foreign and unethical to me.

Acquainting travel with intellectual failure is an alien concept to me.

I am again reminded of the observations from Alvin Toffler in his book “The Third Wave” that the common threads of all schools in industrial societies are punctuality, obedience and repetition. I have always tried not to follow that pattern of thought and teaching however some teachers and these assessments appear to reinforce that ideology.

3.3.2 Analysis- “What is Par?”

I know this teacher too well to believe she does not care about kids. In fact I go to her often for professional advice. She has had a long career and is still looking for a better way to teach. Her passion for learning is as great as my own. So what drove her to be so upset about a test score? This past year for me was one where I did not have to deliver a standardized test to my class. Last year when teaching grade three I spent four days in the

fall and five days in the spring giving provincial assessments in language arts and math. Her comments bring back to my mind the feelings and anxieties I had back then. It also makes me think that these assessments have both visible and hidden consequences.

Quantitative data is not the only thing generated from these tests. There are human emotional consequences as well. Like me last year, this teacher will have her abilities judged, fairly or unfairly, by these grades as they are published in provincial and local newspapers. The pride she takes in being a teacher cannot help but be influenced by these numbers, and she is naturally troubled by the prospect of losing face and, in her mind, probably credibility. Since I have not had to worry about these tests this year as I did last year I have been in a position where I can dismiss data as being inconvenient. However, she and my Principal cannot as they face them this year. I also wonder if we as a school have focused more of our collective energy on these results and had problems with collaboration as a result.

My previous position on the matter was that maybe the Principal had an issue of control regarding my assessments. Upon further scrutiny I see that she may be concerned about being accountable to her own supervisors. I feel a bit naïve as I am again re-examining my own personal theories. I am reminded that I have ‘an answer’ and not ‘the answer’.

3.4 Critical Incident- Friday May 1, 2009- “Truth in Numbers”

Once again a teacher has come into my room at the end of a day and called her students dumb. It seems the rubric scores from the latest in-school literacy assessment indicate that her kids aren’t ‘smart enough’. Apparently she can now accurately predict how many of them will fail next year’s provincial math and literacy assessments. The future looks bleak from her perspective as the results are going to make her look bad, and her kids are in real academic danger.

3.4.1 Reflections- “Truth in Numbers”

Again I ask myself what my professional obligations are in this matter. Should I tell her the truth that I am not interested in testing results? Or, am I obliged to let her blow off some steam? I am neither confident nor yet articulate enough to argue with her

on the merits of standardized tests as indicators of intelligence. Should I prepare an argument contrary to her worldview?

3.4.2 Analysis- *“Truth in Numbers”*

David Cohen (1996) writes that standards based reform has moved educators toward more ambitious goals, newer assessments, and more substantial curriculum. This may be true but what has not perhaps been recognized as much is the cultural shift these standardized tests have placed within the profession. This has added much more stress and anxiety on the classroom teacher, and it is changing the culture of the profession to focus more and more on data.

The teacher referred to above is a friend of mine whom I respect both as a person and a professional. I would have liked to ask her if she genuinely feels that quantifiable data is the most important thing we produce as educators and whether high percentages and grades are the results we value the most? But, the last thing I thought she needed was to feel like she had to defend or explain herself to me. I chose to fall back on what I knew best, to be a caring and passive listener. I also think I did that at the time because I might have been a little afraid to bring up something that could possibly cause controversy or animosity between the two of us. Collaboration has friendship as its foundation. I am glad now that I did not bring up these questions as I still have plenty to learn myself.

3.5 Critical Incident- Wednesday May 20, 2009- *“The Running Data”*

On my way out the door to coach our cross-country running team of forty-five students immediately after school today I was met by the secretary who asked me to provide her with a list of all the students attending today’s run and the parents who were driving them. The event begins in forty minutes and the drive to the site of the run is thirty minutes. My first job upon arrival at the cross-country meet is to check-in all the students from our school. They range in age from seven years to twelve. This takes time, as there are usually three to four hundred other runners at the meet from up to twenty other schools. This is our fourth event of the spring, and in my four years of coaching this sport at our school this is the first time that I have had to do this for the secretary.

I initially tell her that I do not have time to do it now but will do it tonight and return the form to her tomorrow. She replies that the Principal needs it completed before I leave as per board insurance policy. This takes me ten minutes to complete. I arrive at the cross-country run three minutes after the first race has begun. I feel this makes me look bad in the eyes of the parents and runners. It also results in a very frenzied afternoon. There are ten groups of young runners on our team who need their coach's effort to get them to the start line on time. Some runners are forced to run with older students, as they did not make the start of their race on time. They are new this year to these events and I did not have the necessary time at the beginning of the run to make sure all were ready for the events.

3.5.1 Reflections- "The Running Data"

A coach's handbook with a checklist of tasks would be very helpful as they could be examined prior to events and thus avoid delays.

I am also left to wonder why this data collection was left until the end of the day and was not necessary for earlier events.

3.6 Final Analysis

I feel as though I am back at the beginning my career. In *A Teacher's Guide to Performance-Based Learning and Assessment* (1996) the authors refer to teachers in the initial stages of their careers who have not yet mastered a skill and are unaware of this lack of competency as being in a state of 'unconscious non-competency'. At the beginning of this research I felt as though the issue from these incidents was solely around accountability. I have now discovered that accountability also includes issues and concerns about curriculum, colleagues and extra-curricular activities. Politics also plays a major role in education and especially in issues of accountability.

Historically, the classic liberal looks for more inputs in the system. The classic conservative looks for more outputs. As an example on the issue of crime a liberal might be in favor of more stress management in school curriculums whereas a conservative would be more in favor of harsher penalties. Both would see his/her idea as potentially reducing crime. Our province and our country have had almost a half-decade of minority

governments switching between a conservative and liberal agenda. This has led to turmoil around standards-based reform and to what Elmore, Abelman & Fuhrman (1996) refer to as ambivalence and confusion about standards and related policies. Some policies of late emphasize outputs like standards based assessments. Other measures like submitting curriculum plans a year in advance are advocated as it seems putting these plans in writing beforehand will perhaps better ensure student success. Both methods may have the best of intentions, to produce a knowledgeable person. However, DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) and Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) ask us to be wary of becoming a 'Christmas tree school' and of the dire consequences of 'initiativitis'. There is some confusion amongst not only the general public but also among educational professionals, colleagues and myself. The bottom line is that these new assessments will make educators vulnerable to political attacks. We are now more than ever publicly accountable for the numbers and scores produced by our students. The different ways and traditions of the past must make way for this new reality. I take comfort however from a line by Douglas Reeves (2005) in *On Common Ground* when he recognizes that "differentiated assessment acknowledges that students must be able to show what they know in a variety of ways." (p. 58). Maybe all of this change and flux offers a wider variety of assessments for students and more of them will be successful in obtaining an education. These entries illuminate that I have to learn to live with my vulnerability, as I have to make decisions as to where students will be in their curriculum well in advance of teaching it. I am accountable in ways different than earlier in my career and it does not look like that will change anytime soon.

Chapter 4

Leadership

“The respect that we as teachers owe to our students will not be easy to sustain in the absence of the dignity due to us on the part of public or private education authorities.”
Paulo Freire (1998, p.89)

4.0 *Introduction*

How do you lead? This question has occupied a great deal of my professional and leisure time. Since I was a boy I have been captured by stories of willpower overcoming nature or bad guys. Whether it is novels about sea faring or arctic adventurers, movies about rising to the occasion, or short stories about the Canadian frontier, I love the type of story that portrays life as being sometimes hard but that also shows all obstacles can be overcome. Sometimes you have to go through a wall, other times under or around it, on occasion you have to retreat for awhile, and sometimes you need a friend to help you over it. Always facing your demons will help you become more stoic and valiant. This is how I have chosen to live my personal and professional life. These are the qualities I admire in leaders and these are the characteristics I try to pursue with both my own children and the students I teach.

Strength of character (physical and emotional) is an important lesson I try to instill in my sons. I want them to be able to push themselves and to always do the right thing. They have both recently learned to ride a bike without training wheels and I feel it important they know how to struggle up a hill on their own without help from Dad (just some verbal encouragement) and that they get back up in the saddle when they fall off. Preparing them to face the physical challenges of life is something I think is very important. They need to learn some stamina and some perseverance.

Not all lessons are of a physical nature. One of my favorite sayings to them is to ‘think of other people’. It drives me a bit crazy when children look only inward. It is very important to me that children, my own and my students, learn to recognize, accept and appreciate others. Building the foundations of empathy at an early age is of paramount concern to me as a father and in my role as a teacher of children. These lessons, physical and intellectual, help build not

only a better ability to be personally responsible and humane, but they also help to construct leadership skills. I consider them to be the hallmarks of an active citizen.

In 2000 I remember Ralph Nader making a statement that the function of leadership is to create more leaders not more followers. That struck me then as a great way to summarize my thinking as a teacher on the subject. I have always been one to participate actively in staff meetings, and I have always liked discussing and listening to other's opinions on topics related to schools and education. As a teacher and student of history I have long appreciated and learned the importance of being an active citizen. One of my personal mantras I have tried to instill in my students is the idea that it is more important to be a human doing than a human being.

Over the course of ten years my senior high students often volunteered to do community projects. One year we adopted a family at Christmas. This single mother had a fantastic Christmas as my class delivered in three pick-up trucks over fifty wrapped presents for her and her son. These gifts included a computer, novels, clothes (for both Mom and child), gift cards, and a complete turkey dinner with utensils and a roasting pan. I remember well our nervousness as we walked down the hallway of her apartment building and rang the doorbell. Fifteen minutes later we left her home and there was not a dry eye among us as we returned to school. This type of moment and lesson summarizes what I feel is important for schools, students and teachers to do more often. Community participation is essential to me as a teacher. Many critical incidents in this thesis reflect a personal desire to involve and include the community more often in the life of a school. To accomplish this requires a certain amount of risk-taking and a great deal of trust in others. These are also important characteristics of leaders.

Another reason the words of Nader resonated with me is because I have also felt it important to allow students a lot of curricular freedom. In my experience most students not only want to do the right thing they are waiting for an opportunity to do it. To use a coaching analogy as a way to understand my thinking, I like the idea of giving kids the keys to the equipment room and just letting them play without me setting too many rules. By and large they figure out on their own how to play with each other, and no one has ever been seriously hurt. Additionally, when I let students know what is needed, today

referred to as an outcome, they can usually navigate their own way of getting to the end of the lesson or task. This is to me the essence of personal responsibility and leadership.

Another anecdote I like to share involves a program I used in senior high. Each June, I would contact the three junior high feeder schools and speak with each Principal about their school leaders. I would ask them to fax me the names and phone numbers of twenty to twenty-five grade nine student leaders. Not just academic leaders but leaders in bands, councils, activities and sports. I would personally call each of these students in August and invite them to come in to their new high school for a half-day August in-service where they would meet and hear from the new administration, guidance counselors, athletic director, music teachers, and student's council executive. My message to them was short. I asked them to take part in the life of their new school upon arrival and not after a semester or a grade ten year. I felt it important they receive an advance, personal invitation and a little nudge to get actively involved early in their new school. More importantly, I wanted them to hear and understand my message about participation and leadership. It is not only necessary that students do as I say but also that I, as well, do these things.

In many of the critical incidents from the previous chapters on accountability and collaboration, I find that time and again I have played a leadership role in my school. Whether it be a five-year commitment to be a school accreditation co-chair, a committee chair dedicated to getting skis for every student in our school to use, or a coach who volunteered extra time to improve the lives of student and staff. I think that many of my students have heard and followed the message about the importance of active participation in the life of a school. When I look over the entirety of my teaching career I feel very proud of the personal accomplishments that have resulted from being an active participant who has lead activities during and after school. DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) suggest that a PLC is only possible when leadership is widely dispersed throughout a school. They advocate Principals who see themselves as leaders of leaders and not leaders of followers. It would seem that their ideas coincide with my previous practices and experiences and the philosophy of Ralph Nader. Therefore, they would mesh well within the framework of a PLC we were trying to create at my present school.

The critical incidents in this chapter suggest there is still a lot of work to do, as leadership hinges on collaboration. In most of these aforementioned instances I have had most of the control and freedom to pursue a course of direction of my own choosing. This past year's critical incidents, which represent pivotal moments in the attempt by our school to become a PLC, have caused me to reflect back on these previous positive experiences of personal leadership. These memories have been an attempt to help find and understand the causes of the barriers that exist within my present school as they relate to leadership. There is a disconnection between the old world that I was used to in high school and the new elementary school experience in which I now find myself. This research has helped me to figure out that being an individual leader working in an already collaborative setting, such as my previous school, is a lot easier than leading in a community that is not yet collaborative and somewhat preoccupied with accountability.

Dennis Sparks (2005) writes in *On Common Ground* that many educational leaders find the pace of change in schools to be glacially slow and frustrating. I know that at many times throughout the recording of these critical incidents I found myself frustrated at the slow pace of reaching our collective goal of becoming a PLC. Sparks also points out that leaders matter. I know that as a coach and a teacher most of the time I can make snap decisions and stay the course on policies in my own classroom and on a playing field. But, leading a PLC, as the co-chair while also working with others as leaders, takes a lot more time and patience than I had expected or anticipated. The events below outline some of the critical incidents where personal and collective philosophies and practices around the issue of leadership were pivotal moments in our school's attempt to become a professional learning community.

4.1 Critical Incident- Monday February 16, 2009- "Art is Dead"

Last week, I launched an after-school Art Club at school that had twenty-five students in grades primary to six signed up for an hour and a half of extra art beginning this Wednesday after school. Yet, I have just been informed that because of a 'scheduling error' the Principal has unilaterally decided to postpone the Art Club. This is because she has scheduled unbeknownst to me an Individual Program Planning meeting about one of my students for this Wednesday after school. I have to attend this meeting

and found out about it from an announcement made on the public address system at the end of today.

4.1.1 Reflections- February 16, 2009- “Art is Dead”

Sometimes I have to attend an IPP meeting and sometimes I don't (see Critical Incident- Friday January 16, 2009 in Chapter 2). Never have I been consulted about meeting times or dates that involve me. Schedules are made at the sole discretion of the Principal without voice from me. Extra-curricular activities and my thoughts are obviously not as valuable as meetings. Our school community has expressed to me feelings of not being welcomed since the arrival of this Principal three years ago. We as a school have struggled to find volunteers for breakfast and lunch programs, book fairs, sports teams, etc. These after-school activities are a way to get parents into the building during non-academic times and to share the responsibility of teaching and raising children. This should help them feel more connected to the school and perhaps more apt to help us out more often when needed. Kids especially like extra-curricular activities. Yet obstacles keep getting put in the way by the Principal's unilateral actions.

4.1.2 Analysis- “Art is Dead”

Unilateralism is a strategy that is counter to collaboration but also is an example of ineffective leadership. There may be valid reasons why decisions are made unilaterally, but I have not been given an explanation as to why this decision was made beyond the oft stated, ‘I’m the Principal and I’m responsible’ type of answer. My offering to volunteer extra personal time to lead, organize, and supervise an Art Club ought to have been considered before a decision was made to postpone the activity. Were the consequences for the twenty-five parents who have to reorganize their schedules taken into account? While this incident might be an example appropriate in the chapter on collaboration further thought brings to mind questions about how to lead a staff.

Henry Mintzberg, (2004) writes leadership is about, “energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things. Effective leadership inspires more than it empowers; it connects more than it controls; it demonstrates more than it decides.” (p.16). Maybe my vision of leadership is much different than that of the Principal. Has

the issue of accountability superseded the goal of collaboration? Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) write, “Those who imagine strategies of legislation and prescription will really work are treading a fine line between ignorance and arrogance.” (p. 90). This was not the last time unilateralism appeared in my data.

4.2 *Critical Incident- Tuesday March 10, 2009- “Money is not Transparent”*

Today I approached the Principal about purchasing a set of skis for our school. I offered to spearhead a fundraising committee with the intent of buying our own set of school skis. Since I taught physical education to all the students in our school and they all had twice previously been on the borrowed skis (loaned from another school) and enjoyed the activity, why not have our own skis? My hope was to launch the campaign with some funds from our Health Promoting Schools budget of \$3 000.00. I sit on this committee and we had, I thought, yet to spend much money this year.

However, I was told that there was merely \$600.00 left in this year’s budget and perhaps I could have \$500.00 of that money. I asked if we should perhaps have a Health Promoting Schools committee meeting to authorize this expenditure. She said that, “As the administrator I can authorize HPS expenditures without a meeting.” I left the office with \$500.00 but no explanation as to where the other \$2 400.00 was spent and no indication of a future Health Promoting Schools meeting.

4.2.1 *Reflections- “Money is not Transparent”*

I am thrilled that permission and money was given to support the idea of purchasing school skis. This will help expand both the physical education program and the family activity nights. I also get excited when faced with challenges like these. Research into where to buy the skis, fundraising ideas, partnerships, and grants will all be investigated, and it appears that I am allowed to head this initiative. My mind is racing with ideas, and I love that part of my job.

However, I am left to wonder why and how an administrator is allowed to spend large sums of money on behalf of a committee when the committee has not been informed of these expenditures? This type of decision helps neither parents (who also serve on this

committee) feel their voices are valued nor does it generate feelings of trust and empowerment.

4.2.2 Analysis- *“Money is not Transparent”*

This helps me to understand what DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) point out when he suggests that transforming a school is painstaking work. It causes me to think about how I position myself as an educator, staff member, and employee. It gives me cause to decipher the many roles I play on a staff and to unravel the personal components of each. It mirrors the advice of Hargeaves & Fullan (1998) who write, “Be authoritative about your expertise, but open about your uncertainties”. (p. 96). This is a new way of seeing myself, and I recognize that it is a matter that needs careful and deeper consideration. I must move to resolve who and what I am in these roles. Now that I see the parallels between what I have written about others and what I practice myself I wonder how competent I am in these areas.

Many times in life and in teaching I have tried to be proactive and not reactive. The old adage of ‘doing as I say not as I do’ also comes to mind. I better grasp and appreciate that what I do in the present is as important to think about as it is to think of the actions of others after incidents have happened. This leads me toward taking more responsibility, seeing less fault, and laying less blame.

4.3 Critical Incident- Tuesday May 12, 2009- *“Your Participation is Not Required”*

Last week my colleague and co-chair of the school accreditation committee, along with the Principal, agreed not to attend a workshop at the school board office to prepare the annual accreditation report. Last year’s report was completed exclusively by the Principal, and we three acknowledged that it would be better to take a group approach in writing this year’s report. We felt it important to establish new goals and strategies re: building a professional learning community on-site and together rather than away from the school and without input from the entire staff. We agreed on a process where the goals and strategies for next year would be discussed and reviewed collaboratively by our entire staff before a report was submitted. It was to be a shared leadership activity.

After school today my colleague and co-chair informed me that the Principal had decided to go to the board workshop alone and that she would e-mail the staff a copy of the completed report when it was finished. We looked blankly at each other and wondered both what had happened to change our plans and what we could do about it now.

4.3.1 Reflections- “Your Participation is Not Required”

Time spent thrashing out ideas for school goals, as a full staff, is valuable time spent as we all have a stake in those goals. Deliberating collectively on how our school can accomplish goals requires all staff to be conferring together on the strategies to achieve them. How can we feel ownership if we are not involved in leading these decisions?

How can staff develop a united approach when time is not granted for considering the pros and cons of these plans and ideas? How better to spread around and develop leadership than to allow this type of activity to take place?

What benefit is there to making unilateral top-down decisions? We are left to wonder if the administration lacks trust in us or, does she think that by acting alone she may be saving us some effort and stress?

4.3.2 Analysis- “Your Participation is Not Required”

In my experience, having a voice that is valued and sought out is a pre-requisite for collaboration to happen and an essential component of effective leadership. bell hooks (2003) talks about one of the dangers we face in the educational system is the loss of a feeling of community, the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and also the loss of feelings of connection and closeness with the world beyond the school. I wondered if I had a radically different interpretation of the terms leadership and collaboration than our Principal. Our entire school staff read the same book that included joint discussions on the subject of leadership. As I re-read the book *On Common Ground* by DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005), I found a statement from Michael Fullan about a growing problem in large-scale school reform. According to Fullan terms, such as leadership and collaboration, travel well

but the underlying conceptualization and thinking do not. I begin to think that a better foundation is needed to guide our staff toward greater collective leadership.

I wonder if a different way of starting the year would have been helpful in clarifying our understanding of what collaboration actually meant and looked like? I thought of an idea that I have used in my senior high and elementary classroom. Whenever I start a new unit of study I make it my practice to begin with the language of the topic. For example, in senior high I might start a global studies unit on the ‘environment’ with an exercise that first built a personal definition of the word. I have carried this practice and philosophy over to my elementary classroom. This past year when we covered our unit on ‘Canadian government’ I felt it important to ensure each student had an understanding of the words ‘Canadian’ and ‘government’. I wrote the word ‘government’ on the whiteboard and asked each student to write his or her own personal definition. Purposely, no dictionary was used. Each person was asked to share what they came up with and I added the main words from each student’s definition to the whiteboard. This presented a visual artifact of the language around the word. I made it clear to the students that I was looking for their definition and not a textbook definition. I also made it clear that all were permitted to borrow language from their peers to clarify their own definition. Once we had heard from each person in class there was a moment to revise the initial definition to add further clarity.

This fifteen-minute activity has been a great way not only to begin new areas of study but, more importantly, it has led to more of a common understanding from the beginning of the exercise or unit. It established a foundation built by all participants, and offered an opportunity for mutual ownership. It is a simple format to follow and could easily be used by our staff to build a better collective understanding of the word ‘leadership’. It might assist us in developing a shared language around PLC terms and priorities. Our failure to do this mirrors the comment of Roland Barth (1990), “But many teachers and Principals feel that teaching and leadership are mutually exclusive”. (p. 128). In hindsight, this joint activity, whereby all staff listen to and agree upon a common definition of ‘leadership’, may have been a better way to begin a multi-year exploration of how to understand and share the leadership within our school. I may suggest it as a great way to begin a new school year. A shared language means the signs, descriptions

and evidence of those feelings can more often move us toward becoming more collectively empathetic and aware of what the terms collaboration and leadership mean to each individual.

The next critical incident further demonstrates a lack of consensus as to understanding the meaning of leadership.

4.4 Critical Incident- Thursday May 28, 2009- “Suddenly in Charge”

On the way in to the school science fair this evening at 6:45 my wife, two sons, and I were met at the entrance by the Principal. She says, “Oh good you’re here. You and Joan (pseudonym) can look after things tonight, I have to leave because my daughter needs the car.” With that she left the school full of parents and students to a colleague and myself, neither of who expected to or were asked to take on that responsibility. The science fair started at 6:30 and ends 8:00. Our family plan was to look at the exhibits together and return home at 7:45 for bedtime stories. Instead I’m now faced with something different.

We decide to view the fair together, and as I walk around I meet up with Joan who has no idea she and I are to ‘look after things’. We quickly iron out a strategy. I’m to stay with my family until 7:30, drive them home, and then return to school for cleaning up the gym where the displays are presently set-up.

I drive my family home and drop them off. I return to school to wrap-up the science fair and clean up the school as parents and students were in classrooms, the gym and bathrooms. We finish at 9:15 and I get home at 9:30.

4.4.1 Reflections- “Suddenly in Charge”

Someone once said that if you want something done, give it to someone who doesn’t have time to do it. With the entire staff present this evening I feel that perhaps the Principal looked at my colleague and I as being the best candidates to do something unscheduled. Perhaps this is a vote of confidence in our leadership and ability.

Or, perhaps she understands that I would not say no to her and especially in front of my family while being caught off guard. Either way, this again demonstrates a lack of preparedness as these plans could have been made jointly with a quick staff meeting at

the end of the day to get support and share the leadership for this event. That way my family plans could have been altered and others could have been involved in helping with the science fair evening instead of a last minute committee of two being left with most of the responsibilities. Several of the other staff members volunteered to stay at the end of the evening to help out, as they recognized there was a need. And that was very helpful. It indicates that in times of crisis we as a staff can collaborate, demonstrate joint leadership, and work together toward a common goal. It also indicates to me that we as a staff care enough about each other to help each other out. This care and consideration for each other is a very positive sign for our building and an essential ingredient in successful leadership.

4.5 Final Analysis

I now appreciate that viewing ‘leadership’ exclusively through my own personal lens of understanding is both naïve and a little arrogant. In his chapter on leadership found in *On Common Ground* (2005), Dennis Sparks cites a finding by Kouzes and Posner who posit that the route to high performance is in fostering collaboration. Earlier in the chapter Sparks also suggests that leadership is not a solo act. However, in an earlier work Roland Barth (1990) puts forward that the well-intentioned efforts to involve teachers in decision-making have exacerbated tensions between teachers and Principals. In fact, he found in the United States the national association of Principals responded ‘defensively’ to the idea of teachers leading schools. This implies to me that the tension between the Principal and myself, around the subject of leadership within the school, is a common barrier to becoming a PLC. Also, the presence and pressures of external accountability sometimes get in the way of, or supersede the idea of people collaborating and becoming leaders.

These critical incidents around the issue of leadership have reinforced the idea that I have to develop a new understanding of the term leadership. I have to see and consider issues from additional perspectives beyond my own. As accreditation co-chair I will have to perhaps further my understanding of the term ‘leadership’ by asking all of our staff members to first express their own opinion of what it means to be a leader. This may help to make better sense of my practice and school.

There are no islands in a healthy community. Acting in isolation does not negate the fact that there are consequences beyond myself when making decisions that appear on the surface to be mutually exclusive. And I have to remember that like Ghandi, 'I must be the change I wish to see in the world'. Ironically and similarly, Dennis Sparks (2005) cites Roland Barth (1991) in his chapter on leadership in *On Common Ground* (2005), "We can work to change the embedded structures so that our schools become more hospitable places for student and adult learning. But little will really change unless we change ourselves." (p. 128)

I am more conscious of what it means to be a leader. These critical incidences are teaching me to focus on and reconsider what I should do, or not do, to help put in place effective leadership within our school.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.0 *Introduction*

The process of reflecting on my practice, thinking about my reflections, analyzing my thoughts, and writing this thesis has allowed me to consider and reconsider important questions such as how to collaborate with others, how to lead, and to whom I am accountable. These issues are hard to quantify but equally worthy of careful thought, reflection, and analysis. While this thesis can provide insights to others who are interested in possible school-based issues that revolve around the three themes of collaboration, accountability, and leadership it is the reflections and learning of the researcher that is important in this research. In particular, this research has helped me understand more about the process of school accreditation, the role the Principal plays as a leader, and the importance of establishing a sustainable Professional Learning Community. These are discussed in the sections below.

5.1 *School Accreditation*

Many of the critical incidents where difficulties occurred between me and other school staff revolved around issues associated with the five-year cycle of school accreditation. Whether it was the three themes involved in our two school goals, the differing opinions on the importance of student data and accountability, or the responsibilities I have as the accreditation co-chair, there were numerous times when the process of becoming an accredited school was, and still is, difficult. The school accreditation process came with a guidebook that detailed roles and responsibilities for all involved. It now seems clear that, like curriculum documents, these pages are the ‘what’ to do and not the ‘how’. Writing this thesis has allowed me some time to think more deeply and to analyze how I feel about the process of accreditation as an individual teacher and to look at the broader picture of how my colleagues are doing on our five-year journey toward becoming an accredited school in Nova Scotia. Our staff is a group of individuals who possess a wide array of experience and skills, and we will this year complete our five-year cycle of school accreditation. But transforming our school under

the aegis of school accreditation will take much more time than I originally thought it would. In particular, issues around leadership and the role of the Principal, and creating a sustainable Professional Learning Community are discussed in the next two sections.

5.2 *Leadership and Principals*

My own personal vision is not the only thing that has to be considered when dealing with issues related to curriculum or to extra-curricular activities. At the time I and another colleague were offered the position of school accreditation co-chairs, the Principal mentioned in this thesis was at a different school. When she arrived at our school, she inherited the two of us to make-up a team of three responsible for implementing almost all of the accreditation procedures. Some of the critical incidents in my thesis, such as when we disagreed about what meetings were essential for me to attend and which one's were non-essential, perhaps suggest a personality conflict between the Principal and me. I can only speak for myself, but I truly do not believe that to be the case. Working for three years in tandem with the Principal by acting as the co-chair of the school accreditation team seemed an opportunity to jointly contribute to the betterment of our school. While there are several critical incidents whereby we disagreed on process or method, such as when after school art was cancelled or when committee money was spent without consulting with the committee, I do believe we both saw the many issues involved in school accreditation as important topics worthy of ongoing thought and discussion. The issues of accountability, leadership, and collaboration have emerged as central themes in my thesis but they are perhaps bigger than both of us and much more challenging than either our school, the Principal or I recognize or are able to resolve. I am reminded someone once said that some problems can only be managed and not solved.

There have been times when many of us on staff were perhaps pulling in different directions. There were incidents when I felt the Principal acted unnecessarily unilaterally. Other times I wished I could act alone. Maybe a school with a stand-alone leader is impossible in these days of extraordinary accountability. Perhaps other policies and priorities of the board or province have superseded the goals of school accreditation making site-based goals more difficult. It has only now occurred to me that I had to think

much beyond the door of the administration or the school. I now have to consider that the administration has to take into account not just what is good for the school but also what is permissible and valued by those outside and above the school.

Roland Barth (1990) in *Improving Schools from Within* wrote about a number of questions that came to his mind when thinking about the concept of a personal vision between teacher and administrator:

“What are the advantages for teachers and principals of being in touch with their visions? What do students gain when the adults with whom they work are visionaries? What are the disadvantages of holding and sharing a vision? What is the relationship between a personal vision and a collective vision? Where do visions come from and where are they developed? How can one person be a part of another person’s vision? How is vision translated into practice?” (p.p. 154-155).

He concludes his thoughts by saying that educators who explore these questions can make valuable contributions to school reform. Again, much more time than I anticipated may be needed for an entire school staff to collaboratively explore, discuss, understand and implement a shared vision.

5.3 *Professional Learning Communities*

Our school set out to re-form itself. We chose one text, held less than a dozen meetings and had a lot of formal and informal discussions. Over a dozen steps and strategies were planned and implemented over the course of three years. All of these actions were taken with the intent of creating a more Professional Learning Community. The critical incidents in this thesis detail many of the obstacles faced during one school year. Sometimes our staff did not talk or work together prior to major decisions such as with the Smart Board and with the Science Fair responsibilities. On other occasions, such as with the school skis and with activity night responsibilities, decisions were made that impacted me directly without my voice being heard at all. These obstacles correlated with the themes of collaboration, leadership, and accountability. Each theme has a massive amount of literature available for study and reflection. How to reform your school has volumes of texts and journals at one’s disposal for further study and thought. Becoming a PLC has been around long enough that it has become a ubiquitous term with reams of literature on sale and easily obtainable. As such, finding a consensus on the meaning of

the term is a work in progress. For me to expect that I can seek out and implement a personal vision of what a PLC is and expect an entire school staff to become a PLC in one year is naive. For our staff to expect that we might quickly become a PLC is perhaps a false hope and indeed setting ourselves up for failure. I would never ask a child to learn faster and should ask no less of my colleagues or myself.

Epilogue

I have spent the better part of fourteen months reflecting on and analyzing critical incidents as they pertain to issues of collaboration, accountability, leadership, school accreditation, and Professional Learning Communities. I feel I have learned some valuable lessons I can use to improve my practice and professional relationships. Yet many issues linger and our school learning community is threatened. Our small school is in danger of closing because of its small size. It seems data driven decisions by our school board mean larger student numbers are needed to illustrate and justify value. Three local schools have recently been closed due to their small size. The true test of how well our staff can collaborate and lead ourselves toward preventing the school closure is pending. We are accountable unlike ever before to the parents, students and community. Reflection involves the always incomplete attempt to make sense of who we are and what we are up to, trying all the while to do that most difficult of things, to live better (Kingwell, 2000). The reflections in this thesis have helped me to make sense of where I am, what to look out for, and what to possibly avoid. I truly hope my colleagues and I become more of a team. I must also remain focused on being true to myself.

Barth (1990) writes that once I find out the elements of my own personal vision I have to ask myself how to sharpen and further develop that vision and make it coherent, respectable, and legitimate for others and myself. Further, he asks one to think about whether they should fly their vision from the flagpole by revealing it to all. He concludes by saying that every vision has an equal and opposite re-vision. This leaves me thinking that I have not yet finished reflecting or analyzing but only begun to do what is perhaps compulsory. To paraphrase Freire (1998) I know that things might get worse but I also know that I can intervene and improve them. I am left with the ongoing goal of becoming a part of a community of visionaries like in my previous school. My knowledge and experience from the past can, and is, always used to help make my teaching more vibrant. But history is only of relative importance as the present is most vital. Through the writing of this thesis I see myself as having further renewed my vision by looking backwards, sideways, and ahead of me. Yet, many questions remain, such as how to deal with the

pressures of external accountability, what is the meaning of the term ‘leadership’, and how can I help our staff better collaborate?

Again, Barth (1990) provides hope when he suggests I have an obligation to find and implement my own unique and personal vision as to what the school can become. I must also seek out, listen to, and consider the vision of others in my school. My teaching and learning future lays both out there and inside of me. I recall what Freire (1998) said, “As a teacher I cannot help the students overcome their ignorance if I am not engaged permanently in trying to overcome my own. I cannot teach what I do not know”. (p. 89). This reveals to me the personal truth behind a statement I have made to many students and classes during my twenty years of teaching. Questions are more important than answers because answers mean we do not have to think any more. Hence, my sense of what it means to be a professional, a learner and a member of a community is an answer and not the answer. As put forward by E. O. Wilson (1999), we are drowning in information but starving for wisdom. For those of us still hungry for better days, brighter tomorrows and who swim against the current of received wisdom, this thesis may provide some lessons. It has for me.

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Appendix 1

Timeline

May/June, 2006

- Distributed surveys from N.S. Department of Education to parents, teachers, support staff, and students
- First Co-chair designated (Curtis Snyder)

August, 2006

- Second co-chair was designated

September 13 & 14, 2006

- Co-chairs and principal attended a two-day workshop on the Accreditation process given by the N.S. Department of Education

September , 2006

- Established the Internal Review Team consisting of both co-chairs, principal, administrative assistant, a parent representative from the School Advisory Council, two parent representatives from the Home & School, and the teaching staff
- Included an explanation of our involvement in the School Accreditation Process in the newsletter sent home to parents

September 29, 2006

- N.S. Department of Education representative did presentation on the School Accreditation process to the Internal Review Team
- * Carousel activity completed for gathering data from teachers on School Performance and Student Achievement

October 13, 2006

- Started organizing and typing information collected from the carousel activity completed by teachers on School Performance and Student Achievement

November 8, 2006

- Met with South Shore Regional School Board facilitator to review the process and set timeline goals
- Collected data from student report cards in cumulative files
- Made lists and requests for information needed from teachers and administration
- Organized and typed data from report cards

November 14 & 15, 2006

- Finished typing data on School Performance
- Planned agenda for meeting with the Internal Review Team
- Organized and photocopied information for the meeting

-Wrote update on where we are in the process for the Home & School and The School Advisory Council

November 14, 2006

-Gave presentations to the Home & School and School Advisory Council to update them on the School Accreditation Process

November 17, 2006

-Met at all day session to present data collected to the Internal Review Team and draw conclusions on that data

-Made decisions on areas for further data collection

-Discussed procedure for communicating to parents

November 22, 2006

-Wrote an update, for parents, on where we are in the process

November 24, 2006

-Newsletter containing update on School Accreditation was sent home to parents

December 7 & 8, 2006

-Organized, edited, and typed the Internal Review Team's conclusions on the School Performance and Student Achievement data

-Met with SSRSB facilitator to discuss progress, get feedback on our progress and request assistance in finding answers to some of our remaining questions

-Typed cover page and list of participants

December 10, 2006

-Typed information gathered on teacher's professional development and their utilization of the technology available in their classrooms and the school

-Typed Summary of Procedures

December 18, 2006

-Worked on Review Document: inserting tables from survey results, clarifying and organizing information from carousels, tidying up format of document

-Met with staff to update them on progress and request their input on data and conclusions

December 19, 2006

-Proofread, edited, and clarified carousel items

- Distributed Draft of the internal review report to all members of the Internal Review Team for feedback

December 28, 2006

-Created and added additional tables, containing results from the survey, to the Draft document

January 4, 2007

-Edited Draft document – made additions and clarified existing information based on the feedback from the internal review team

January 8 & 9, 2007

-Co-chairs and principal attended a two day workshop on developing SMART Goals given by the Nova Scotia Department of Education

January 12, 2007

- Newsletter containing update on School Accreditation sent home to parents

January 23, 2007

-Staff Meeting to determine strengths and weaknesses based on the evidence collected
-Planned in-service day for January 26

January 24, 2007

-Prepared materials needed for the in-service

January 26, 2007

-The Internal Review Team and members of the Healthy Schools Initiative attended an in-school in-service to determine priorities for improvement, write Smart Goals, and start to develop a plan of action for attaining our goals

January 31, 2007

-Co-chairs organized and type information from the Jan. 26 in-service

February 22, 2007

-Internal Review Team met to develop strategies and a plan of action to implement the school improvement plan

March 5, 2007

-Co-chairs wrote Summary Analysis and Priorities and began work on School Improvement Plan

March 6 & 7, 2007

-Co-chairs worked on School Improvement Plan

March, 2007

-Principal contacted External Review Team to confirm dates of visit to school

March 9, 2007

- Distributed draft of the School Improvement Plan to members of the Internal Review Team

March 19, 2007

- Distributed draft of the School Improvement Plan to members of the School Advisory Council

March 28, 2007

-Revisions made to Internal Review Report and School Improvement Plan

March 29, 2007

- Feedback received on School Improvement Plan from School Advisory Council
- Forwarded draft copy of IRR and SIP to School Board Accreditation Advisor

April 3, 2007

-Feedback received from School Board Accreditation Advisor
-Made revisions to IRR and SIP based on comments from School Board Accreditation Advisor, School Advisory Council and Internal Review Team

April 4, 2007

-Wrote executive summary

April 5, 2007

-Printed final draft of IRR and SIP
-Distributed copies to Internal Review Team and SAC chair
- Wrote an update for all parents with overview of Accreditation and SIP for distribution in Friday, April 13th weekly parent newsletter

April, 2007

-Signed-off on School Improvement Plan
-Sent copy of Internal Review Report and School Improvement Plan to members of the External Review Team

* Carousel activity is another name for a 'structured democracy' approach to ensuring all participants provide feedback in group settings

Team Spirit

Implementing Goals For Continuous School Improvement

Our School as a PLC

Effective Leadership

APPENDIX 3

**NOVA SCOTIA
SCHOOL ACCREDITATION PROGRAM**

Anytown Elementary School

2009-2010

Action Plan

Goal 1: School Performance

By June 2010, 85% of our teachers will regard our school as a PLC and engage in relevant activities as measured by questions on the Nova Scotia School Accreditation School Performance Survey and informal data collection tools developed by staff.

Strategy 1: Staff will continue to develop an understanding of the characteristics of a PLC.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Review DuFour's 3 Big Ideas of a PLC.	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	Administration Staff	September 2 In-service Day		
	Review Each term					
One of the 2 staff meetings a month is dedicated solely to accreditation issues.	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	Administration PLC Team Writing Team			
Apply Assessment For Learning Principles to determine where we are and to set goals to further our development as a PLC.	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	PLC Team	September 2 In-service Day		
	Review Each term					

Strategy 2: Continue developing a PLC for writing

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Set up book club to discuss "Guided Writing as part of our PLC on writing	Sept 2009	May 2010	Writing Team	Book "Guided Writing"	Already Purchased	
Alternate every second Tuesday staff meeting with PLC discussion and book club	Sept 2009	May 2010	PLC Team Writing Team			
Share student work, discuss student strengths and needs, and suggestions for supporting our students' learning	Oct 2009	May 2010	Classroom Teachers			

Strategy 3: *Continue to collect and analyze data to measure progress*

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Maintain a PLC log (meeting schedule, attendance, artefacts, and minutes)	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	Staff	Binder		
List and copy of PLC literature in Professional Reading Binder with a brief summary of each article	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	Staff	Binder		
Develop an easy method for documenting informal conversations regarding our development as a PLC.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Co-chairs			
Hold informal conversations with staff members about Anytown as a PLC	Sept. 2009	Ongoing	Co-Chairs & Principal			
Administer school developed questionnaire regarding PLC at Anytown	May 2010	May 2010	Co-Chairs & Principal	Questionnaire		

Strategy 4: Continue to build a safe, collaborative, and positive learning environment for the staff.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Set-up two school teams to focus on accreditation goals (PLC and Writing)	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Co-Chairs			
Discuss responsibilities of each team	Sept 2009		Staff			
Each team reports on progress and concerns at monthly meetings and in-services	Sept 2009	June 2010	Staff			
Meet for upcoming events at least two weeks in advance and divide up the workload	Sept. 2009		Event Chair(s)			
Design a template with jobs that need to be done throughout the year and individual teachers can sign up well in advance.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Co-Chairs			
Discuss teacher responsibilities, not attached to teaching, so everyone is aware of what is expected (outside duty, dishes, fridge cleaning, supervision of students-recess, lunch time, library, assemblies, regular class time, end of day, required start and finish times for teachers school day etc.)	Sept 2009	Jan. 2010 Review	Administration And Teachers			
Teachers held accountable to follow the discussed responsibilities.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Administration			
Post the list of committees and its members in staffroom.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Administration			
Discuss extra-curricular activities that teachers take on voluntarily and consider ways to assist.	When necessary		Staff			
All staff to make a genuine effort to work at eliminating negative comments about parents, staff members, and students.	Sept 2009	Ongoing	Staff			
Staff members can help reduce negative comments by giving a reminder. "Remember, no negative teacher, student or parent talk."	Sept 2009	Ongoing	Staff			
The focus of any PLC discussions, formal or informal, will focus on improving student learning.	Sept 2009	Ongoing	Staff			

Strategy 5: Improve the teamwork between teachers and administrator.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Continue the use of the white board for the weekly schedule and any upcoming events, meetings or concerns.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Administration & Teachers			
Continue the staff's monthly calendar and office door calendar listing scheduled events.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Administration	Large Office Door Calendar	\$25.00	
Post specialist schedules in the staffroom and put a copy in each staff handbook.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Administration			
When a decision impacting all staff has to be made or changed, call a quick staff meeting to consult with them.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Staff			
When inviting school board personnel, ensure that student learning is the focus of the visit.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Staff			

Strategy 6: Improve participation of staff at meetings.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Topics for the staff meeting need to be submitted to the office to allow time for the agenda to be distributed at least one day before the meeting to allow for staff reflection.	Sept 2009	ongoing	Writing Team PLC Team Individual Staff Members Administration			
Whenever full staff participation is essential for decisions or goal setting, have teachers discuss issues in small groups first.	Sept 2009	ongoing	Meeting Chairperson			
Teachers may submit written comments prior to the staff meetings if this is more comfortable than talking at the meeting.	Sept 2009	ongoing	Teachers			

Strategy 7: Continue the referral process for Program Planning for individual students.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Review the Program Planning Process.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	PST	CPPT Referral Forms		
Schedule a regular meeting time for the Core Program Planning Team.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Staff			
CPPT to meet with individual teachers to discuss each student in their class and identify strengths and needs.	End of Sept 2009	Meet again in Jan 2010	CPPT Staff	Class Lists		
Program Planning discussions on how to best utilize the resources in our school (PST, mentors, PSA, speech pathologist) to meet the needs of our students.	Sept 2009	ongoing	CPPT	Timetables of Support Teachers List of Students		

After discussing the results of the Teacher Survey we felt it necessary to clarify some of the statements.

Strategy 8: Revise questionnaire to clarify the meaning of each statement.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Meet with each teacher to determine what they think is the intent of the statement.	Jan. 2010	March 2010	Co-chairs	Questionnaire		
Revise statements where necessary.	April 2010	May 2010	Co-chairs			

Goal 2: Student Performance

By June 2010, 75% of our students will achieve a level 3 or higher on school-wide grade specific outcome based writing rubrics from the Department of Education website.

***Strategy 1:** Continue to maintain a folder/binder storing S.E.L.L. tasks and writing samples.*

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Get binders/folders to store student writing.	Sept. 2009	June, 2010	Classroom teachers	Binders/folders		
Copy strong and weak samples of student work from the binder to use for Assessment FOR Learning before passing it to the next year's teacher.	Oct 2009	May 2010	Classroom Teachers			

***Strategy 2:** Establish a baseline of our students' writing using the S.E.L.L. writing task and meet to discuss areas of need.*

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Students do writing task, teachers score and record scores in their class S.E.L.L binder, and on school-wide chart.	Early Oct 2009	End Oct 2009	Classroom Teachers & Literacy Mentor	SELL Writing Tasks for \Each Grade Level		
Compile class and school wide scores for all categories of the writing rubric.	Early Nov 2009	Early Nov 2009	Writing Team			
Meet to discuss the data collected and set goals to deal with student needs.	Nov 2009	Nov 2009	Writing Team Staff			
Based on the results, have each teacher submit their personal goals for their teaching focus and plans for meeting those goals.	Nov 2009	Nov 2009	Classroom Teachers Collection: Writing Team Storage: Co-chairs	Submission Template		
Provide release time for professional development of teachers if needed.	Sept 2009	May 2010	Administration	Substitute Days	\$800.00	

Strategy 3: Use Writing Maps to provide a framework for grade level writing outcomes.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Ensure that all teachers have a copy of the writing map for their grade level.	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Writing Team	Writing Maps for each Grade Level		
Meet and discuss the timelines for each grade, resources needed, common scheduling to foster collaboration	Sept 2009	Sept 2009	Writing Team Staff Members			

Strategy 4: Develop strategies to support the writing needs of our students and give address how to support the needs of our male students.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Discuss and implement Gradual Release of Responsibility principles for the writing process.	Sept 25 2009 In-service	Ongoing	Writing Team Classroom Teachers	-Teaching in Action Document P-3 & 4-6 -Writing Essentials, Reggie Routman		
Continue to learn about and implement Assessment FOR Learning strategies	Next In-service Day	Ongoing	PST Classroom Teachers			
Two staff members will attend the Ralph Fletcher Summer Institute –Boy Writers	June 2009	Aug 2009	TBA	PD Grant Approval		
Have staff members share the information from the summer institute at the first PLC staff meeting in September	Sept 2009		TBA			
Implement strategies identified at the summer institute	Oct 2009	Ongoing	Teachers			
Start a collection of literature on gender issues that affect boys as writers and keep it in a staffroom binder.	Oct 2009	Ongoing	Writing Team Staff			
Consideration of attending the Leonard Sax presentation at the PETA Conference in Oct.	Sept 2009	Oct 2009	Teachers	NSTU Conference Booklet		
Encourage writing across the curriculum.	Sept 2009	June 2010	Writing Team Teachers			

Strategy 5: Celebrate writing throughout the year.

Steps Sequence of actions	Timelines		Responsibility (names)	Resources Needed	Budget	Achieved
	Begin	Complete				
Organize our yearly “Celebrate Writing” event	Jan 2010	TBA	Writing Team		\$400.00	
During monthly assemblies have students share writing	Sept 2009	June 2010	Classroom Teachers			
Set-up an area in the Library for borrowing of student published work	Sept 2009	Oct 2009	Writing Team			
Organize visits from authors in our community	Jan 2010	May 2010	Writing Team		\$500.00	
Continue Grade 6 newspaper article writing in collaboration with the South Shore Bulletin	Spring 2010	June 2010	TBA			

SECTION F

MEASURING GROWTH PLAN

School Performance Goal:

By June 2010, 85% of our teachers will regard our school as a PLC and engage in relevant PLC activities as measured by questions on the Nova Scotia School Accreditation School Performance Survey and informal data collection tools developed by staff.

DATA COLLECTION:

Methods	Schedule		Responsibility
	Begin	Complete	
Informal discussions with staff members regarding our development as a PLC	Nov 2009	May 2010	PLC Team
School Developed Questionnaire	May 2010	May 2010	Co-Chairs
Accreditation Survey Questions related to Professional Learning Communities	May 2010	May 2010	Co- Chairs

Student Performance Goal:

By June 2010, 75% of our students will achieve a level 3 or higher on school-wide grade specific outcome based writing rubrics from the Department of Education website.

DATA COLLECTION:

Methods	Schedule		Responsibility
	Begin	Complete	
Collect student writing samples from SELL writing task	Oct 2009	End Oct 2009	Classroom Teachers Literacy Mentor
Collate scores from SELL writing task	Nov 2009	Mid Nov 2009	Co-chairs
Teacher goals based on the SELL results, including their teaching focus and plans for meeting those goals.	Nov 2009	End Nov 2009	Classroom Teachers Collection-Writing Team
Collect student writing samples from SELL writing task	May 2010	End May 2010	Classroom Teachers Literacy Mentor
Collate data from SELL writing task	June 2010	June 2010	Co-Chairs

SECTION G

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PLAN

Goal 1: School Performance

By June 2010, 85% of our teachers will regard our school as a PLC and engage in relevant activities as measured by questions on the Nova Scotia School Accreditation School Performance Survey and informal data collection tools developed by staff.

Knowledge and Skills

- Characteristics of PLC
- Assessment FOR Learning

Learning Opportunities to be Provided During the Year

- School Based Professional Development Day
- Provincial Professional Development Day
- Discussion at Monthly PLC Meetings

Participants in the Learning Opportunities

- Teaching Staff
- Support Staff
- Administration

Learning Opportunities Schedule

- September 2, 2009 –Characteristics of PLC, determining where we are, and setting goals for improvement
- October 23, 2009 – Provincial Professional Development Day
- November 20, 2009 & April 1, 2010 – School Based Professional Development Days – Topic to be decided
- Throughout the 2009-2010 School Year -Continued Discussion at Monthly PLC Meetings

Human and/or Material Resources Required (and associated costs)

- PLC literature –revisit “on common ground” (\$0.00)
- Lunch & snacks for meetings (\$400.00)

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PLAN

Goal 2: Student Performance

By June 2010, 75% of our students will achieve a level 3 or higher on school-wide grade specific outcome based writing rubrics from the Department of Education website.

Knowledge and Skills

- Gradual Release of Responsibility
- Assessment FOR Learning
- Gender Issues Affecting Boys and Writing
- Writing Maps
- Collecting of Weak and Strong Student Writing Samples

Learning Opportunities to be Provided During the Year

- Summer Institute with Ralph Fletcher – Boy Writers
- School Based Professional Development Day
- Provincial Professional Development Day
- Book Club Discussions at Monthly PLC Meetings
- Sessions with Stephen Jamieson, SSRSB Literacy Consultant

Participants in the Learning Opportunities

- Teaching Staff
- Support Staff
- Administration

Learning Opportunities Schedule

- July 31-Aug 1, 2009 – Summer Institute (Boy Writers)
- September 25, 2009 – School Based Professional Development Day -Gradual Release of Responsibility
- October 23, 2009 – Provincial Professional Development Day
- November 20, 2009 & April 1, 2010 – School Based Professional Development Days – Topics to be decided
- Throughout the 2009-2010 School Year -Continued Discussion at Monthly Staff Meetings

Human and/or Material Resources Required (and associated costs)

- Book – “Guided Writing – Practical Lessons, Powerful Results” (already purchased)
- Book – “What’s Next for this Beginning Writer?” (already purchased)
- Lunch & snacks for meetings (\$400.00)