

Critical Friends Groups at Lower Canada College:  
The impact of collaborative communities on teachers' professional growth and  
classroom practices

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### Abstract

This qualitative inquiry into Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) at Lower Canada College (LCC), a coeducational, bilingual, K-12, private, day school in suburban Montreal, focusses on the impact of CFGs on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices. Using interviews, focus groups, participant observations and a questionnaire, I examined the recursive cycle of professional growth and transformation, and rooted the inquiry within the theoretical frameworks of reflective practice, the dialogic imagination, social constructivist learning and critical theory. I conceptualize teachers' professional growth as the transformation of professional practices through the deepening knowledge and expertise that arises out of collaborative inquiry and collegial dialogue. The major assumption supported by this study is that teachers learn from one another through engaging in ongoing and site-based critical dialogue focussed on classroom practices. This inquiry has implications for professional development programmes, school leadership and teacher empowerment.

### Résumé

Cette étude qualitative a pour objet l'impact des *Critical Friends Groups* (des groupes de discussion amicaux et critiques) sur le développement professionnel et les pratiques en salle de classe d'enseignants et d'enseignantes du Lower Canada College, une école primaire et secondaire bilingue, mixte et privée, en banlieue montréalaise. Au moyen d'entretiens, de groupes de discussion, d'observations participantes et d'un questionnaire, j'ai examiné le cycle récurrent de développement et de transformation des participants dans un cadre théorique alliant la pratique réflexive et l'imagination dialogique avec l'apprentissage socio-constructiviste et la théorie critique. Le développement professionnel est conçu comme une transformation des pratiques par l'approfondissement des savoirs et des savoir-faire grâce à la recherche collaborative et au dialogue avec des collègues. Le principal présupposé, corroboré par cette étude, est que les enseignants apprennent les uns des autres en engageant un dialogue de terrain, critique et suivi, sur leurs pratiques en salle de classe. Cette étude a des retombées sur les programmes de développement professionnel, la direction des écoles et les moyens d'action des enseignants.

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### Foreword

*“Je sais aussi,” dit Candide, “qu’il faut cultiver notre jardin.”* [“I also know,” said Candide, “that we should cultivate our gardens.”] (*Voltaire, 1989, pp. 215-216*)

*If the visit of an insect, that is to say, the bringing of a seed from another flower, is necessary as a rule to fertilize a flower, this is because self-fertilization, the fertilization of a flower by itself, like repeated marriages within the same family, would lead to degeneration and sterility, whereas the cross-breeding effected by insects gives to succeeding generations of the same species a vigour unknown among their elders.* (*Proust, 2002, p. 7*)

An English teacher by profession, I have a weakness for metaphor. And although I am not a gardener, I can appreciate the meticulous effort and tender care that goes into the cultivation of a garden. In tribute to my maternal grandfather Reginald Ernest Balch, an entomologist and conservationist, and to my mother Cynthia Moore, a passionate gardener, I have woven into my thesis the metaphor of the garden. To paraphrase Voltaire, educators have a duty and an obligation to cultivate their own gardens. In other words, we established teachers must do our utmost to nurture *newcomers* to the teaching profession by creating the optimal conditions for their professional growth. If we listen to each other, learn from one another, and grow together in collaborative communities of professional practice, we may transform our schools into fertile perennial gardens of knowledge for the intellectual sustenance of students and teachers alike.

## Chapter One: Cultivating Lands

*"A plant does its own growing, whether its seed was carefully planted or blown into place by the wind. You cannot pull the stems, leaves, or petals to make the plant grow faster or taller. However, you can do much to encourage healthy plants: till the soil, ensure they have enough nutrients, supply water, secure the right amount of sun exposure, and protect them from pests and weeds." (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, pp. 12-13)*

*"But the biggest thing was something I've always known and that is you've got to prepare the ground before you get there." (John, Interview #4, 05-01-03)*

These two quotes prepare the ground for the context of my research. By cultivating the land, one creates the proper growing conditions for annuals, perennials and crops; one creates through growth the coexistence of beauty and utility. In this introductory chapter, I lay the groundwork for my thesis by presenting the terrain in which I carried out my qualitative research study of *Critical Friends Groups* (CFGs) at Lower Canada College (LCC) and provide the reader with the narrative background to understand my research as it unfolds throughout the pages of this thesis. At its roots, this work is the story of professional change and transformation at the personal and collective levels of a particular educational community. Therefore, I begin by describing the soil in which this narrative is embedded and flourishes.

### *The Lower Canada College Terrain*

Lower Canada College is a private school that has been located in suburban Montreal for almost a century. Although firmly rooted in tradition, LCC has undergone significant change in the last decade. In some cases, the transformation has been so rapid that the winds of change have scattered the seeds of plants that have barely taken root.

In the last ten years, the primary change initiative was the school's aim to become a coeducational institution. In fundamental ways, this ideological shift has contributed to transforming the school from a traditional educational setting to a progressive community of learners. The current Headmaster, in his sixth year of tenure, is largely responsible for cultivating this new educational terrain. However, changing a school at its core forces everyone to reexamine their practices and to transform many of their approaches to *education, teaching and learning*. Whereas ten years ago LCC prided itself largely on its strong academic and interscholastic sports programmes, the school's current emphasis is on student-centred, collaborative learning that takes into account the student in mind, body and heart, i.e., the whole person. This new philosophy has given rise to more arts programmes, as well as a variety of clubs, non-competitive sports activities, and a student leadership model based on a revitalized house system that had lain dormant for about thirty years. The student body is now divided into nine houses that compete for house points in categories ranging from sports to academics. To further accommodate these initiatives and to slow down the pace of life in the school, the administration implemented a new timetable two years ago that shifted periods from forty-five to sixty-five minutes in length.

A secondary change was the inauguration of a bilingual programme that has evolved from kindergarten to grade seven and will continue through the high school. The accompanying transformation of pedagogy and curriculum has required teachers and administrators to devote a great deal of time to the planning, implementation and evaluation of new programmes. At the same time, the school has been implementing the Quebec education reforms (see Education Quebec Plans of Action, Ministerial Policies, 2001), rooted in many of the theoretical frameworks I examine in the next chapter. Again, this ideological shift has created the need for our educators to reflect on their professional practices and, in many cases, change their approaches to education, teaching and learning.

A tertiary evolution has been the rapid proliferation of technology. Not only has technology changed the day-to-day operations of the school, but it has also altered the way teachers practise their craft and communicate with students, parents and colleagues. Voice mail, e-mail, laptops and other technologies are transforming the workplace with such celerity that teachers often feel overwhelmed by these cascading changes. A decade ago, my day was not consumed by electronic correspondence and I could devote more time to preparing my classes and correcting papers. Today, the Medusa of technology has wound its tendrils around every facet of my career. Like most of the workaday world, I am now beholden to the daily plethora of e-mails, voice mails, faxes and electronic memos. For example, during a typical day when I have two hours for preparing lessons and correcting student work, I spend an hour responding to various electronic messages from students, parents, administrators and colleagues. Ten years ago, I would have devoted that same hour to planning my classes and evaluating my students' writing. I now have to find another hour in my day to do the requisite tasks of a classroom teacher.

Another key change factor has been the expansion and turnover in the teaching, administrative and support staffs. Combined with several different administrative schemas, this reality has made it extremely difficult to establish continuity and clarity of purpose. For instance, many of the senior staff members who provided connections with the historical roots of the school have retired. As well, young personnel have come and gone so quickly that we have dubbed this rapid turnover "the revolving door." The administration has become much larger than it was ten years ago and, in search of the perfect mix, the administrative structure has been realigned every year. For example, we now have an extensive student advisory system, several deans and directors, development, admissions, communications, and human resources departments, while ten years ago none of these entities existed.

In the last decade, the governing board has engineered three strategic plans, along with three different mission statements, and carried out a major building campaign that resulted in a new educational facility housing a technology centre, a library, sports facilities, an auditorium, classrooms, seminar rooms, and offices. These initiatives have contributed some very positive elements to the school community. However, they have also heightened teacher isolation and general confusion about the direction and mission of the school.

In the next section, I describe the climate of professional development at LCC and show how teacher development is in transition from a veteran-oriented culture to an integrated professional approach.

### *Professional Development at LCC*

When I joined the LCC staff in 1987 as a novice teacher, academic department heads oversaw professional development. The Headmaster showed little interest in investigating or sharing best practices and rarely invited educational experts to speak to the teachers. There was no formal mentor programme. Therefore, as a new teacher, I relied on the good will and openness of my colleagues when it came to sharing knowledge and expertise. The teaching staff was predominantly male, and they treated new teachers with cynicism and ridicule. Although my fellow English teachers were helpful, many of the other veterans were not very welcoming. I would characterize my first couple of years as isolating: I spent most of my time in my classroom just trying to tread water in this sink-or-swim environment. Through willpower, determination, adaptation, and the help of a few supportive teachers and administrators, I survived my initial years and am now a veteran teacher. For the last six years, I have been the English Department Head. One of the reasons I am now so involved in professional development at the school (as department head, CFG co-founder and coordinator, member of the professional development committee and professional growth team) is that I have great empathy for new and novice teachers. I would like to mitigate newcomers' feelings of isolation and loneliness.

In referring to Harvard University's *Project on the Next Generation of Teachers*, Susan Moore Johnson and Susan M. Kardos (2002), teacher researchers involved in the study, distinguish between *veteran-oriented* and *integrated professional cultures*. Veteran-oriented professional cultures serve the needs of established and independent veteran teachers and do not create opportunities for new teachers to engage with the veterans in meaningful and productive ways. As a result, the newcomers have little or no access to the old-timers' knowledge and expertise. Inexperienced teachers in the Harvard study speak of their isolation from their more knowledgeable, experienced peers. For example, Katie, one of the participants in the study, says of her supposed mentor:

I'm very isolated from her [...]. I met with her a few times and I was always welcome to go in her room and take a look at her materials and borrow anything that she had. But she just didn't have the time to come in and observe me and really talk with me practically about the things that I could do in here. (Johnson & Kardos, 2002, p. 15)

The key to Katie's preceding observation is that her mentor simply does not have the *time* to communicate with her in ways that could help her improve her classroom practices. The veteran-oriented professional culture does not create formal opportunities for collaborative dialogue among colleagues. Time and space are not allocated for critical interaction among teachers with various levels of experience. When I began my teaching career at LCC, I joined a veteran-oriented professional culture that did not cultivate professional growth with ongoing and site-based teacher development. Aside from the occasional conference or expert guest speaker, very few opportunities existed for in-service teacher education.

In the last six years, LCC administrators have become much more aware of the need for a comprehensive programme of professional development. Although the school does not have what Johnson and Kardos (2001) refer to as an

integrated professional culture, it is moving in the right direction toward the ideal form of professional growth: “ongoing professional exchange across experience levels and sustained support and development for all teachers” (Johnson & Kardos, 2001, p. 15). LCC currently has a director of professional development who chairs the professional development committee, the professional growth team, and supports and participates in the CFG programme. The professional development director oversees all aspects of professional growth, including teacher orientation, mentoring and evaluation, professional development days, and funding for teacher education. I am also actively involved in all these professional development vehicles, some of which are still in the germinal stage. Although LCC did offer ample financial support for teacher education prior to 1998, the professional culture did not support ongoing, site-based *professional growth*. The school’s professional culture is currently undergoing a transformation from a veteran-oriented to an integrated approach to teacher development.

### *Teacher Collegiality and Collaboration*

In her pivotal work on the social organization of schools, teacher researcher Susan Rosenholtz (1989) concludes that collegial school cultures (or “learning-enriched schools”) offer their teachers more learning opportunities than “isolating” (or “learning-impooverished) environments (p. 102). Through collaborative team learning, teachers share pedagogical strategies and develop curricular goals that benefit students and teachers alike. In learning-enriched schools, teachers are more likely to ask peers for help and advice and to work together to solve instructional problems (p. 41). As I explain in the next chapter, teachers’ optimal learning experiences are socially constructed and situated within the context of the school culture.

Educational leadership theorist Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) refers to collegiality as a “professional virtue” or what I would term a moral imperative (pp. 86-98). In other words, teachers share a collective, moral responsibility to

cultivate professional growth, which I conceptualize as the transformation of professional practices through deepening knowledge and expertise. Sergiovanni accentuates the transformation of the school culture into a learning community as the key to cultivating collegiality (p. 88). He adds,

Collegiality cannot be understood in the abstract. What makes two people colleagues is common membership in a community, commitment to a common cause, shared professional values, and a shared professional heritage. Without this common base, there can be no meaningful collegiality. (p. 91)

Team development researchers Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter (2003) put the onus on the school leader to “foster professional practice by putting into place processes and structures that promote teacher collaboration and collective responsibility” (p. 9). Without the support of the leadership within the school, collegiality and collaboration are difficult, if not impossible, to cultivate and sustain.

Although in general I would characterize the LCC teachers as collegial, i.e., willing to help one another and to collaborate on projects and initiatives, there are not enough processes and structures in place to cultivate and sustain meaningful collegiality. Most of the collegial interaction is ad hoc, and the bulk of committee work is designed to meet the administrative agenda of the school. Rarely do teachers have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue that focusses on their professional practices. There is a clear need for ongoing and site-based collegial dialogue that would foster a reflective community of professional practitioners.

In the mid-1990s, the National Coalition of Essential Schools pioneered Critical Friends Groups with the academic support of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. A CFG consists of about six to fourteen participants who meet once a month for two hours. CFGs focus on developing collegial relationships and encouraging reflective educational dialogue. They

create opportunities for teachers and administrators to solicit and provide feedback on their professional practices. Most important, CFGs offer ongoing, site-based, inexpensive professional development for the benefit of the entire school community.

*The Germination of Critical Friends Groups at LCC*

When I volunteered for the newly formed professional development committee at LCC in the fall of 2001, I observed that the members representing different levels of the school were sharing ideas and educating each other about what was happening in their particular grades. The committee chair mentioned in passing at one of our first meetings that we might want to try Critical Friends Groups, an interesting form of professional development she had heard about at a conference in the United States earlier that year. In January 2002, I undertook a personal change project for Leadership in Action, a Master's course at McGill. The professor asked us to isolate a problem in our school and enact a plan to solve it. By that time, I had learned a little more about CFGs and thought this would be the perfect opportunity to combine our committee's mandate with my course objectives. Upon reflection, I resolved to pursue a CFG pilot project as an antidote to the teacher isolation I perceived as the problem in my school.

To initiate the CFG pilot project, I obtained verbal approval from my professor and Headmaster and enlisted the support of the professional development committee. The committee chair volunteered to help me get the project proposal off the ground. When we pitched the idea at our monthly staff meeting, seventeen of seventy-eight teachers (about twenty per cent) volunteered to participate in the CFG pilot project. We formed two groups and ran monthly meetings from February to June, 2002. The pilot program was so successful that we decided to formalize CFGs. The following school year, we received twenty-seven volunteers (thirty-five per cent of the teaching staff). Our grass roots initiative was beginning to germinate.

This qualitative study focusses on the second half of the first full year of our CFG programme's operation, January to June, 2003. Although the programme is still in its infancy, it is clear that we have been pursuing an important professional development initiative. Since we inaugurated the programme in February 2002, our membership has almost doubled from seventeen to thirty-three participants. About forty per cent of the teaching staff is currently enrolled in the CFG programme. Some of those who are not involved say to me that if they could find the time to attend evening meetings, they would join in a heartbeat. A small minority remains indifferent. On the whole, however, CFGs have piqued people's curiosities. One of the most rewarding results of the CFG programme is that the administration is starting to view the CFGs as valuable generators of school policy. We are now growing in directions we had not even dreamed of two years ago.

### *Teaching, Learning and Professional Growth*

As a veteran teacher of English Language Arts and a department head, I have come to view student *and* teacher learning as socially constructed and situated within the multiple contexts of the learning environment. Literacy theorist Mary Maguire (1994) refers to the term *nested contexts*, which expands the traditional conception of the learning context from people, place, time and activity to include purpose and meaning (p. 120). Nested contexts take into account the internal or personal realities of learners, as well as the many layers of meaning reflected by external realities or the school, the sociocultural and linguistic community, and the national and global levels. Reflecting critically on why we learn and what our learning means to us increases personal relevance and the likelihood that we will pursue meaningful intellectual growth and transformation.

Arguably the two most important global aims of education are meta-cognition, i.e., understanding *how* we learn, and lifelong learning. Without these objectives, we are less likely to achieve individual autonomy and personal

empowerment. By extension, we will not be able to solve problems in a collaborative fashion at the local level as well as in the national or global contexts. As the societal problems we face become increasingly complex, the need to find workable solutions grows more pressing.

Language researcher, James Britton (1990) teaches us that if we are meaningfully *engaged* in learning, we are able to translate through reflective processes the *unfamiliar* into the *familiar* (pp. 108-109), i.e., solve problems and pursue change. As learning is a recursive and reciprocal process that occurs throughout our lives, this conception of *engagement* applies to adults (or teachers) as well as to children (or students). Critical theorist Henry Giroux (1988) contends that “education for adults is characterized by self-reflection, critical thinking, and teacher-student relationships in which both parties are actively engaged as learners in the pursuit of truth and social change” (p. 198). He defends teachers “as transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens” (p. 122). If we educators are to cultivate and transform our own intellectual garden, we need to sow the seeds of meaningful engagement in reflective practices, critical thought and collaborative dialogue. The more firmly rooted our knowledge and expertise, the more likely we are to grow professionally.

### *Summary*

In this introductory chapter, I laid the groundwork for my thesis by presenting the context in which I carried out my qualitative research study of Critical Friends Groups at Lower Canada College. In the next chapter, I present the literature on Critical Friends Groups and explain more fully the theoretical frameworks that support my inquiry into the impact of CFGs on teachers’ professional growth and classroom practices.

## Chapter Two: Sowing Seeds

*"Increasingly, we view collaboration as central to learning, to knowledge construction and transformation." (John-Steiner & Meehan, 2000, p. 43)*

*"We each build our own representation of the world, but we greatly affect each other's representation, so that much of what we build is built in common." (Britton, 1971, p. 19)*

*"I think it's [CFG participation] about sharing; it's important for people to get together on the ground, in the trenches, as it were, and to talk about practical things." (Ian, Interview #3, 04-15-2003)*

These three quotes sow the seeds for my argument about the need for collaborative and dialogic professional development. One's garden grows best when one selects the seeds to suit the growing climate of the region and sows them in rich soil, which will enable them to take root and flourish. In this chapter, I present my review of the literature on Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) and explain the theoretical frameworks underpinning collaborative communities. I sow the seeds for my thematic and theoretical analyses of the data in Chapter Four by examining the following overarching theories and their major theorists: *reflective practice*, *the dialogic imagination*, *social constructivist learning*, and *critical theory*. I conclude the chapter with my reflection on the implications of collaborative communities of practice for teachers' learning and school leadership. The sociocultural, sociolinguistic and social constructivist theories I present here serve as the theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the recursive cycle of professional growth and transformation that is cultivated within collaborative communities of teaching practice.

### *Critical Friends Groups*

By definition, the concept of a critical friend invokes the approach of what teacher researcher John MacBeath (1998) terms "a successful marrying of

unconditional support and unconditional critique” (p. 119). These twin pillars of support and critique provide the framework for a reflective practitioner to create meaning within the profession. MacBeath characterizes the role of critical friend as that of “knowledgeable broker and informed critic” (p. 126). In a spirit of caring and connectedness, a critical friend offers an objective and informed viewpoint and an opportunity for dialogue. This dialogue around professional practices allows teachers “to share ideas, to observe, critique and to learn from one another” (MacBeath, p. 124).

Critical friends researchers Peter Chin, Derek Featherstone and Tom Russell (1997) echo MacBeath’s views on the concept of critical friend and also observe that their critical friendships “have served as catalysts for [them] to re-articulate [their] beliefs and to re-examine how [their] actions support, deny and contradict them” (p. 140). Above all, “[o]ther voices can help you find your own” (Chin et al., p. 156). Critical friends offer each other constructive criticism. They challenge one another in non-threatening ways to be better practitioners. As teachers tend to work in isolation, educators need to create and formalize opportunities for practitioners to enter into critical friendships with one another. Within these critical friendships, colleagues can offer one another invaluable feedback, guidance and support regarding classroom practices. Just as a true friend offers her friends both support and critique, a critical friend provides her colleagues a balance between reflective encouragement and analytical criticism.

The National Coalition of Essential Schools pioneered Critical Friends Groups with the academic support of The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. According to the National School Reform Faculty (a program of the Annenberg Institute that supports teachers and principals who are pursuing significant change), their CFG “program has grown from an initial cohort of eighty Critical Friends Groups in sixty schools in 1995 to more than

1000 CFGs in nine hundred [schools] in 2002” (NSRF CFG Evaluation, 2003, ¶ 1).

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform carried out a two-year, theory-based, qualitative evaluation of CFGs in 1997-98 and published their findings in a report published in January 2000 (Nave, 2000). Nave argues:

Teachers join a Critical Friends Group and attend CFG meetings where they engage in various activities, such as examining student or teacher work, or engaging in text-based discussions. These activities lead them to become more reflective about their teaching practice and then to modify their practice in an ongoing effort to improve students’ learning. Teachers also engage in peer observations to gain further insight into their teaching and their students’ learning. The end result of this continuous process is improved student achievement. (Nave, p. 4)

Compared with other forms of professional development, CFGs were cited by teachers as valuable for the following reasons: “CFG work is ongoing [...]; its focus is on teaching and learning, and more specifically on their own teaching and their own students’ learning; the context is a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school” (Nave, p. 11).

The Annenburg study concluded that CFGs have an overall positive impact on a school’s culture and referred specifically to the following four areas of improvement and change:

- CFG work is associated with improved student skills.
- CFG work is associated with changes in teachers’ thinking.
- CFG work is associated with changes in teachers’ practice.
- CFG work is associated with a more systemic and deliberate school-wide focus on improving student achievement by improving teacher skills. (Nave, 2000, p. 31)

In addition, one of the most pertinent themes that arose from the teacher interviews in the study was that “many teachers became more thoughtful about the connections among curriculum, assessment and pedagogy as they participated in CFG activities” (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000, p. 4). One caveat about this study is that it does not mention students’ self-esteem, identity and socialization, which are the keys to any individual’s development. Reflective practice implies that the teacher is taking into consideration the development of the whole student, not simply her test scores.

In the following summary of the case study of a CFG participant, we see how a pre-service teacher benefits from her participation in CFGs as the group fosters her reflective growth. Her collaborative learning about the complex task of teaching creates more opportunities for her to reflect on her practices than if she were learning in isolation. Reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Norlander-Case, 1999) facilitates the problem-solving that, as a novice teacher, she encounters on a daily basis and expedites her professional growth.

Judith Franzak (2002), a clinical supervisor of English language arts pre-service teachers, writes in a very specific way about the impact of CFGs on the professional growth of a particular student teacher. Franzak focusses on the nurturing of a pre-service teacher’s professional identity and discovers that participation in a CFG is a transformative experience that helps teachers mitigate their feelings of isolation and build community (pp. 275-279). In her qualitative, phenomenological case study of Rebecca (a pseudonym), Franzak observes, “It is through her CFG experience that Rebecca found a safe place to grow both as a learner and a teacher” (p. 266). Franzak states more explicitly that

Rebecca’s experiences offer insight into the ways in which a collaborative study group can enrich a student teacher’s vision of the profession; it was through her CFG that she found a safe place

where her voice joined with others to foster change and a place to work through her own teacher identity crisis. (Franzak, p. 265)

According to Franzak, Rebecca also felt trusted, validated and supported by the positive atmosphere of her CFG (pp. 269-272). Franzak concludes that “[l]earning through inquiry is the basis of Critical Friends endeavors, and such models present a viable method of promoting the student teacher’s reflective growth” (p. 279). My study goes a step further by examining *several* teachers’ reflective growth through their involvement in CFGs.

Although no other studies have been conducted on CFGs, the existing literature consistently points to the efficacy of CFGs in cultivating professional growth, enhancing teaching and learning, developing a professional collaborative culture, and promoting reflective practice (see Cushman, 1998; Olson, 1998; Cromwell, 1999; Bambino, 2002). In brief, the Critical Friends process promotes the development of collegial relationships that provide opportunities for reflective, collaborative learning, and transformation through professional growth.

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that are relevant to Critical Friends Groups. In effect, I am planting the seeds that will grow to fruition in my analysis and interpretation of the data in Chapter Four.

#### *Teacher Inquiry and Reflective Practice*

In his book *How We Think*, philosopher, educational theorist and progressive educator John Dewey (1859-1952) wrote about the importance of *reflective thought* to the educative process. He defined reflective thought as constituting “[a]ctive, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends [...]” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Dewey’s phases of reflective thinking are “(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the

perplexity” (p. 12). In this sense, Dewey views reflective thought as an iterative process of doubt and resolution that could ostensibly occur throughout a teacher’s professional career. Although the frequency of doubt may be greater for a newcomer, the seasoned veteran continually faces new challenges. Teachers who engage in reflective thought from the earliest stages of their careers will find it easier to deal with the many changes they encounter.

As full participants in a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), teachers define themselves as professionals by inquiring and reflecting upon their social experiences within the school. Whether through mentoring, learning teams or peer coaching, teachers collaborate with one another and develop their identities as educators, i.e., come to terms with who they are within the contexts of schools. *Reflective practice* theorist Diane Brunner (1994) underlines the importance of creating meaning within the context of the profession: “[P]ersonal meaning...suggests self with other, not self in isolation, and it suggests self that is continually made and changed and made again depending on experiences with others” (p. 28). In creating personal meaning, reflective practitioners need to feel “in charge of their destinies and capable of creating change...[and must] create a space for that kind of freedom” (Brunner, p. 48).

Teacher research theorists Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1993) write about the importance of learning communities throughout the life span of a teaching career:

In communities that support teacher research, groups of teachers engage in joint construction of knowledge through conversation. Through talk, they make their tacit knowledge more visible (Polanyi, 1958) [citation in the original quotation], call into questions assumptions about common practice (Giroux, 1984) [citation in the original quotation], and generate data that make possible the consideration of alternatives. (pp. 93-94)

Personal meaning can be achieved through self-critique and dialogue with fellow practitioners in a spirit of caring and connectedness. Brunner (1994) writes that “reflective teachers make a conscious decision to actively engage in ‘critical thinking and authentic choosing’” (p. 64). This decision can be better realized through a combination of self-reflection and dialogic inquiry than through isolated attempts at creating personal meaning. Reflective practice researcher Kay Norlander-Case (1999) maintains that “[i]nquiry and reflection are essential pieces of professional practice” (p. 92). In order to effect change, as I will explain in the next three paragraphs, teachers need to examine through inquiry and reflection the underlying assumptions of their professional practices (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Philosopher Michael Polanyi (1964) distinguishes between one’s *focal awareness* and *subsidiary awareness* of practice in his example of the pianist who shifts his focus from the music (focal awareness) to his fingers (subsidiary awareness) and gets so confused he has to stop playing (p. 56). I would liken this scenario to a teacher who shifts her focus from the words in the book she is reading aloud in class to the quality of her reading voice. She may become so preoccupied with the subsidiary awareness of her voice that she loses the focal awareness of reading to her students. Polanyi (1983) also coined the term *tacit dimension* to refer to our internalized knowledge or “the fact that we can know more than we can tell” (p. 4). Veteran teachers have a great deal of tacit knowledge that they can become more aware of through reflection and can make explicit through collegial dialogue. Interview participant Ron says of his CFG dialogues that they “got me to break down, step by step, things that I’d been doing automatically because obviously I had to explain them to other professionals who had these questions. So to do that I had to think about them myself” (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003).

Reflective practice theorists Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974) build on Dewey’s and Polanyi’s theories of reflective thought in their discussion of

*theory in practice*, or determining one's intentional behaviour in professional practices (p. 4). Through *double-loop learning*, i.e., examining the assumptions that underlie one's actions, a professional practitioner can seek to resolve the doubts, tensions or conflicts that may exist in any workplace situation (p. 19). Argyris and Schön refer to this process as the espoused theory of action, whereby "[one] makes explicit theory tacit—that is, [one] internalize[s] it" (p. 11). This *tacit knowing-in-action* allows the practitioner to deal with recurring workaday problems. Therefore, reflection becomes an antidote to the practitioner's "boredom or 'burnout,'" as "he can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience" (Schön, 1983, p. 61). However, the danger in this is that "as practice becomes more repetitive and routine, and as knowing-in-practice becomes increasingly tacit and spontaneous, the practitioner may miss important opportunities to think about what he is doing" (Schön, 1983, p. 61). CFGs offer participants the opportunity to reflect on routine practices they may be taking for granted and provide them with a new lens through which they may view and adapt their pedagogical approaches. As interview participant Linda says, "[The CFG] makes me think about my own teaching. It makes me more introspective in terms of [my teaching]" (Linda, Interview #6, 05-12-2003).

Schön (1987) applies knowing-in-action to the concept of communities of practitioners. First, he defines "[a] professional practice [as] the province of a community of practitioners who share, in John Dewey's term, the traditions of a calling...and the conventions of action that include distinctive media, languages, and tools" (p. 32). (At LCC, teachers share print, audio-visual and technological media, the languages of English and French, and tools of the trade, e.g., chalk, blackboards, overhead projectors, and the like.) Then Schön states, "A professional's knowing-in-action is embedded in the socially and institutionally structured context [see *nested contexts* in Maguire, 1994] shared by a community

of practitioners (p. 33) [...] who are continually engaged in what Nelson Goodman (1978) [citation in the original quotation] calls ‘worldmaking’” (p. 36). Finally, Schön asserts:

When practitioners respond to the indeterminate zones of practice [i.e., uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict] by holding a reflective conversation with the materials of their situations, they remake a part of their practice world and thereby reveal the usually tacit processes of worldmaking that underlie all of their practice. (p. 36)

Likewise, CFG participants reflect on the shared context of the workplace by engaging in “reflective conversation” and making explicit the tacit assumptions and processes that “underlie all of their practice[s].”

According to Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), “[R]eflective practice is viewed as a means by which practitioners can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development” (p. 19). However, reflective practice theorist Barbara Jaworski (1994) contends “that reflection without some motivating, supporting, driving, external agent is very difficult to achieve and sustain,” and “a group of teachers working together could perform these critical functions for each other for their mutual support” (p. 201). This is what a CFG does, i.e., provides its participants with formal opportunities for shared reflection.

In their *credo for reflective practice*, Osterman and Kottkamp list the basic assumptions that underlie reflective practice:

- Everyone needs professional growth opportunities.
- All professionals want to improve.
- All professionals can learn.
- All professionals are capable of assuming responsibility for their own professional growth and development.

- People need and want information about their performance.
- Collaboration enriches professional development. (p. 47)

As teachers learn throughout their careers, veterans, as well as newcomers, need professional growth opportunities. Because it is human nature to desire competence and, ideally, excellence in one's profession, all professionals seek knowledge and improvement. Professional growth is highly personal in that the individual needs and traits of each teacher vary over time. Every practitioner must learn what she needs to cultivate personal growth and thus wants feedback on her professional practices. Collaboration deepens professional growth as teachers work together to improve, i.e., transform, their own practices and the learning culture within their schools.

CFGs' cultivation of reflective practice and collaborative inquiry encourages teachers to examine the underlying assumptions about their classroom practices, to make explicit their tacit knowledge, and to share their expertise with one another. In the last section of this chapter, I show how learning teams like CFGs impact on educational leadership by planting and cultivating the seeds of professional growth and transformation.

### *Participatory Action Research*

As a response to the 1980s' crisis of confidence in the professions, the reflective practice and action research theorist Donald Schön (1983) asserts "that professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice—the complexity, the uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice" (p. 14). The profession of education is no exception, and the desire to legitimize teaching, e.g., accountability and the renewed emphasis on standards, is just as relevant today as it was twenty years ago.

As educators, how do we go about creating a professional learning culture and space? One way is to collaborate as co-researchers on professional development in order to transform pedagogical practices within a school.

Reflective practice co-researchers Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1991) outline the nature of *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) as “a form of action research [taking its cues from ‘perceptions and practitioners within particular, local practitioner contexts’] that involves practitioners as both subjects and co-researchers” (p. 86). Within these “particular, local practitioner contexts,” teachers can not only create learning cultures but also effect change that may result in improved classroom practices. Students’ academic performance is one way to measure success in education, and teachers can further legitimize their professionalism by demonstrating the tangible student benefits established through communities of practice. However, perhaps even more important than academic success is the socializing aspect of schooling, such as Giroux’s (1988) assertion that schools must nurture “thoughtful, active citizens” (p. 122). Teachers involved in professional collaborative communities may be more likely to create similar communities of student inquiry, or socializing agents, in their own classrooms. They may also be more likely to address the tensions between students’ academic success and their socialization. After all, schools should cultivate within students the requisite skills, attitudes, values and critical thought that will enable them to grow intellectually, physically and spiritually throughout their lives.

Collaborative inquiry can help individual teachers become transformative intellectuals who reflect on their craft in order to improve their pedagogical practices. Teacher leadership theorists Ann Lieberman, Ellen Saxl and Matthew Miles (2000) observe that “[r]esearchers have found the building of collegiality to be essential to the creation of a more professional culture in schools” (p. 352). Collaborative research theorist David Hobson (2001) refers to the phenomenon of *teacher talk* as:

a means of diagnosis, a time to think out loud, to explore, to analyze, and to problem solve. Teacher talk involves time to listen, to share, and to interact. Given a safe place to air their

uncertainties, teachers love to talk together, to share practice, and to wonder out loud about what they do with many of the real issues they face in their everyday teaching lives. They can give each other a kind of feedback available from no other source that reduces their anxiety about being effective teachers. (p. 176)

Ideally, communities of practice like CFGs give teachers the opportunity to engage in teacher talk and to collaborate on strategies that enhance classroom practices. (In her book *Ways With Words*, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) coined the term *teacher talk* earlier than Hobson. However, Hobson is using the term *teacher talk* in a different sense. Whereas Heath equates teacher talk with the exclusionary discourse of the classroom teacher, as distinct from the discourse of her students, Hobson views teacher talk as professional dialogue among colleagues.) Just as students learn from one another through collaborative classroom activities, teachers can learn from each other through collaborative communities of practice that actively engage in action research.

By virtue of the organic development, or natural evolution, of CFGs and the collaborative nature of the inquiry process inherent in the groups, I would contend that my research tends toward Argyris and Schön's definition of PAR (1991, p. 86). In fact, the CFG practitioners can be viewed as co-researchers largely because they are co-constructing meaning in a collaborative setting and focussing mainly on improving their own classroom practices. As Cheryl says in her participant interview, "I come away, every time I have a CFG, with an idea to try the next day in class" (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). Argyris and Schön write that "[PAR] aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including the choice to participate), and generate internal commitment to the results of their inquiry" (p. 86). Participation in CFGs offers teachers formal opportunities to participate in collaborative research and reflection, which can lead to individual growth and transformation of the workplace.

### *Dialogic Imagination*

The sociolinguistic, literary theory of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) *dialogic imagination* (1981) underscores the importance of dialogue in the learning process. Bakhtin, like his Russian compatriot and developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky and the critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire (both of whom I discuss later in this chapter), was influenced intellectually by Karl Marx's theories of social, historical and economic development. Each of these thinkers focussed on the nature of the relationship between the individual and society. Like Vygotsky and Freire, Bakhtin understood that the collective, cultural realities of a society have a profound impact on the development of the individual. Understanding or internalizing the cultural discourse of a society empowers the individual and enables him to operate autonomously within the complex reality of the external world. This internalization of reality is achieved through language, the currency of knowledge. Literacy is the seed that has the potential to democratize society by empowering individuals.

Although Vygotsky was a developmental psychologist, Bakhtin, a literary theorist, and Freire, a critical literacy advocate, all three thinkers underscored the importance of language and social interaction in the learning process. They promoted the dialectical tension between teaching and learning by which educators may view individuals' growth within their sociocultural, political and historical contexts. They also lived the reality of oppressive political regimes, which heightened their awareness of the need for achieving democracy through the empowering force of literacy and education. Bakhtin and Vygotsky lived, studied and worked in Stalinist Russia, and Freire fought military oppression and promoted literacy in his native Brazil in the 1960s and elsewhere in South and Central America for about forty years. To varying degrees, each of these intellectuals was preoccupied with the political and cultural transformation of society effected through empowerment of the individual.

According to Bakhtin (1981), “The more intensive, differentiated and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance attaching, among other possible subjects of talk, to another’s word, another’s utterance, since another’s word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support, further development and so on” (p. 337). We understand ourselves and our relationship with the world through our comprehension of the other. As philosopher Martin Buber writes, “Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it” (Buber, 1970, p. 67). By extension, within the context of group dialogue, participants’ professional knowledge is co-constructed, shaped, refined and, ideally, expanded. Vygotskian researcher Gordon Wells (2000) explains that “[i]n contributing to a knowledge-building dialogue, then, a speaker is simultaneously adding to the structure of meaning created jointly with others and advancing his or her own understanding through the constructive and creative effort involved in saying and in responding to what was said” (p. 74). In other words, more participants make meaning through the collaborative discourse of the group. Engaged in critical dialogue, participants learn by listening to others, thinking about what they say, and articulating their own views.

The Bakhtinian concept of *utterance* is most pertinent to my research and is best expressed as follows: “The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intent” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Bakhtin scholar and translator Michael Holquist (2002) characterizes dialogue as a differential relationship in which each other’s utterances contribute to a deeper collective understanding (pp. 40-41). In a practical sense, the more I can engage in meaningful dialogue with other teachers, the better equipped I am to resolve the tension or doubt in my teaching practices. By encountering different pedagogical approaches through collegial dialogue, I expand my repertoire of teaching practices. As interview

participant Cheryl says, “[W]hen I’m sitting at the table with chemistry teachers and math teachers and phys. ed. teachers I find it very interesting how problems are handled, not only by the different personalities, but also how different teachers in different disciplines would handle the same problem” (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). By articulating different approaches to everyday classroom problems, collegial dialogue deepens a teacher’s knowledge and expertise and opens the door for reflection on her own practices.

Each profession has its own argot, jargon or idioms that the practitioner must “appropriate” in order to function in the workplace. To become an effective teacher, a newcomer has not only to understand terms like *curriculum*, *pedagogy*, and *classroom management*, but also to incorporate them into her everyday practices. Teacher educator Laurent Daloz refers to one of the mentor’s functions as “translating arcane codes,” or the discourse of education, for newcomers (Daloz, 1999, p. 29). Learning the language of the workplace allows the new teacher to assimilate the practices that will facilitate her functioning at a high level of professional competence.

*Internalization* (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 56-57) of the education profession’s argot is expedited by a new teacher’s participation in collaborative dialogue or dialogic inquiry, simply by providing formal opportunities for her to converse in educational discourse with her veteran colleagues. Collaborative dialogue also enables a new teacher to shape her professional identity by regular engagement with more experienced peers who are in a position to transmit their wisdom to a succeeding generation of educators (Daloz, 1999, p. 18). Bakhtin contends that “The ideological becoming of a human being...is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (p. 341). In selectively assimilating the words of her more capable peers, the newcomer transforms herself from an inexperienced neophyte into a knowledgeable teacher who understands the lay of the land. The dialogic process of inquiry facilitates the newcomer’s learning and professional growth.

### *Social Constructivist Learning*

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian developmental psychologist, “believed that the internalization of culturally produced sign systems brings about behavioral transformations and forms the bridge between early and later forms of social development” (Cole & Scribner, 1978, p. 7). His theories are based on the Marxist notion that historical changes in society transform human consciousness and behaviour. In other words, we are the products of our sociocultural experiences and thus our psychological development is socially constructed. In recent years, Vygotsky’s concepts of *mediated activity*, *internalization*, and *zones of proximal development* have had a powerful impact on education. Collaborative learning, multiple intelligences and differentiated instruction are just a few of the current trends in education whose roots can be traced back to Vygotsky’s theories of psychological development.

The central tenet of Vygotsky’s theories is that the individual interacts with the cultural signs, symbols and tools of his society and thereby mediates between his external and internal realities (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 52-57). This mediated activity brings about changes in one’s psychological processes—what Vygotsky refers to as “higher behavior[s]” (p. 55). Consequently, the process of internalization, or “internal reconstruction of an external operation” (p. 56), enables the individual to transform his psychological processes from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal level and to achieve autonomy. Within the context of my study, CFGs function as a tool for teachers’ professional growth. Through shared collegial dialogue, participants mediate between their external and internal realities and transform their teaching practices from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal level to achieve autonomy within their classrooms.

Vygotsky termed the stages in one’s psychological development as zones of proximal development: “[T]he distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In other words, these zones are human functions or behaviours in the process of maturation. Vygotsky says, “These functions could be termed the ‘buds’ or ‘flowers’ of development rather than the ‘fruits’ of development” (p. 86). He illustrates this idea through the example of two ten-year-old children who are eight years old in terms of their mental development (i.e., they can independently perform tasks standardized for eight-year-olds) when they enter school. Under the guidance of a skilful teacher who presents problem solving in various ways or with the help of more capable peers, one child can solve problems up to a twelve-year-old’s level and the other, a nine-year-old’s. This difference between the developmental stages of twelve and nine is what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development (pp. 85-86).

Adult learners, teachers pass through developmental phases (or zones of proximal development) in learning the complex craft of teaching, or what reflective practice theorist Donald Schön (1987) refers to as the “artistry” of professional practice: “adept[ness] at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict” (p. 16). Analogous to a child’s development, a teacher’s development involves internalizing the higher behaviours of professional practices through mediated activity. For example, a newcomer to the teaching profession must internalize the higher behaviours (sound judgment, diplomacy, and fairness, to name a few) associated with classroom management if she hopes to be an effective practitioner. I maintain that whenever one comes to a new learning experience, one moves through the developmental process from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal that Vygotsky delineates in his theory of psychological development. For instance, if I had no prior teaching experience and were required to teach a class, I would be highly dependent on the expertise of others more proficient in the craft of teaching. As I learned from more capable peers and mediated and internalized the cultural signs, symbols and tools of the teaching profession, I would be able to apply my knowledge to various classroom

situations and transform my pedagogical capabilities. I would become more proficient in the craft of teaching. If, on the other hand, I went through the same learning process in isolation from my peers, I would learn at a slower rate and would most likely be reliant on trial and error, a less efficient way of learning. Just as children may learn at a more rapid rate in collaboration with their peers, collegial collaboration may expedite teachers' learning of professional practices.

### *Communities of Practice and Situated Learning*

Situated learning theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) posit that “[p]articipation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world” (p. 51). Lave and Wenger conducted case study research in workplace settings by examining the apprenticeships of midwives, tailors, quartermasters and butchers, and their more recent studies have focussed on knowledge management in business organizations. Their concept of *communities of practice* refers to participants’ movement “toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (Lave & Wenger, p. 29). Communities of professional educational practice create opportunities for teachers to collaborate on initiatives that have an impact on pedagogy and student performance. Communities of practice also mitigate teacher isolation and foster professional growth by providing participants with “legitimate peripheral participation [...] [as] a way to speak about the relations between *newcomers* [my italics] and *old-timers* [my italics], and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge” (Lave & Wenger, p. 29). Lave and Wenger’s theory of situated learning emphasizes the idea that the most relevant learning activities occur in situ. In other words, learning is situated in the whole person’s meaningful *engagement* with real world activities (Lave & Wenger, p. 33).

A newcomer to the teaching profession follows a steep learning curve that includes a set of expectations that in any other profession would not be required on the first day, let alone in the first year. Canadian educator Charles Ungerleider articulates the reality of teaching in the following quotation:

The reality of teaching is that it is a management position of considerable responsibility. In a corporate context, no beginning employee would be asked to undertake responsibility for the supervision of others or for tasks as complex as teaching. A person with comparable responsibility in a corporate context would probably require ten or more years of experience before being promoted to such a position. Yet on their very first day in the classroom, teachers are thrust into this hidden world to organize people, material, and ideas to accomplish one of society's most important tasks. (Ungerleider, 2003, pp. 151-152)

Therefore, providing newcomers with opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers and to reflect on their own practices is of critical importance in their professional growth.

The theoretical roots of communities of practice can be traced back to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1978, p. 86). Although Vygotsky is referring to the learning and development of children, one can transfer his theory to the development of adults in new learning situations. Vygotsky's notion of social constructivism as carried forward by Lave and Wenger emphasizes the learning of the whole individual acting in and on the world. As such,

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of a broader system of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53)

Consequently, legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice allows the individual teacher to construct a professional identity (Lave & Wenger,

p. 53). In other words, new teachers are better able to come to terms with who they are within the context of the school.

Constructivist learning theorist Gordon Wells (2000) builds on the social constructivist theories of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Vygotsky (1978) with the following assertion:

[T]eacher colleagues constitute coparticipants in the community of inquiry, both teachers in the same school and kindred spirits in other institutions, both school and university. In such professional communities of inquiry, some of the most productive transformations of schooling are being carried out, often using a social constructivist framework to assist them. (p. 66)

Through inquiry, dialogue and community, teachers who collaborate with one another transform their professional practices.

One of the major tenets of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation is the newcomer “both absorbing and being absorbed in [...] ‘the culture of practice’” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95). As CFG interview participant Mike says: “Just by connecting with a small group, especially as a newcomer to the community [...] and getting to know them a little bit better, personally and professionally, I think it opens the door more to asking questions” (Mike, Interview #5, 05-06-2003). Theoretically, as the newcomer appropriates the cultural practices of the community, he becomes a full practitioner. However, this growth can only occur through the shared responsibility of the community to cultivate the newcomer’s professional identity. Of course, the social climate of the community must be conducive to the newcomer’s acculturation. In other words, the community must have in place mechanisms to welcome, nurture and mentor newcomers. More important, the *leadership* of the community must be willing to create opportunities for meaningful engagement between newcomers and old-timers. Just as the cultural heritage of a society is passed from one generation to the next, communities need to find ways for the elders to impart

wisdom, tradition and expertise to the generation of newcomers. Without this transfer of knowledge, communities cannot maintain continuity and are therefore in danger of fragmentation or dissolution.

Knowledge management theorists Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder (2002) add to the discussion of collaborative learning by addressing the contemporary necessity for communities to appreciate “the collective nature of knowledge [...] in an age when almost every field changes too much, too fast for individuals to master” (p. 10). In short, “organizations [such as schools] need to cultivate communities of practice actively and systematically, for their benefit as well as the benefit of the members and communities themselves” (Wenger et al., p. 12). The analogy of cultivation, central to my thesis, is also embedded in the following excerpt:

[Y]ou can do much to encourage healthy plants: till the soil, ensure they have enough nutrients, supply water, secure the right amount of sun exposure, and protect them from pests and weeds [...] Similarly [...] communities of practice [...] may require careful seeding [...] Creating such a context also entails integrating communities in the organization—giving them a voice in decisions and legitimacy in influencing operating units, and developing internal processes for managing the value they create. (Wenger et al., p. 13)

Furthermore, nurturing communities of practice “creates value by connecting the personal development and professional identities of practitioners to the strategy of the organization” (Wenger et al., p. 17). If one transfers this idea to the context of a school community, teachers’ professional growth should be intentionally cultivated in order to meet the needs of all constituents: students, parents, administrators, and teachers themselves. Professional growth, or “deepening knowledge and expertise” (Wenger et al., p. 4), can be fostered through comprehensive programmes of mentoring, peer coaching and professional

development. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes an entire school community to nurture a teacher.

According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), communities should not only be intentionally cultivated but also permitted to grow organically as “[t]he dynamic nature of communities is the key to their evolution” (p. 53). Through regular, collective inquiry into shared practices, communities build trust and openness and thereby enhance their learning atmospheres (Wenger et al.). Consequently, a community is better prepared to deal with perpetual change and transformation, both externally and internally. According to Wells (2000), “Vygotskian theory can serve as a tool for action research by providing a framework within which to make sense of a current situation, to identify contradictions, and to consider ways of making improvements” (p. 66). In today’s climate of rapid technological and societal change, proactive communities are better equipped to solve problems and adapt than communities that blindly follow their traditions without balancing them with current realities.

In the following section, I focus on the critical dialogues and cultural contexts in which teachers must engage with one another in order to bring about fundamental transformations in schools from a critical theory perspective.

### *Critical Theory*

Brazilian scholar and critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire (1921-1997) introduces the concept of the culture circle, wherein a coordinator facilitates group dialogue among participants who seek “to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification” (Freire, 1974, p. 42). The resultant ideas and actions empower the participants to effect creative change or to take “critical action” (Freire, p. 44) within their social contexts. Within the framework of education, Freire’s empowering views have positive implications for teachers’ professional growth. Teachers’ “critical consciousness” (Freire, p. 44) of professional practices deepens their knowledge and expertise of teaching and learning, as they reflect on their own pedagogical performances and receive

feedback from colleagues on how they can improve their approaches. Collective reflection offers the potential to transform the school culture because teachers are actively engaged in a process of clarifying their professional problems and taking action to solve them. As critical educator and philosopher Ira Shore says in his critical dialogue with Freire, “Teachers who want to transform their practice can greatly benefit from group support...a place for peers to engage in mutual re-formation” (Shor, 1987, p. 21). Later in the same series of conversations, Freire says that “[t]hrough dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can act critically to transform reality” (Shore, p. 99). Collaborative leadership theorist Helen Telford (1996) seems to pick up on this thread when she writes, “[Teachers in a collaborative work culture] are empowered personally and collectively, acquiring a combined confidence which enables them to respond critically to the demands of the workplace” (p. 21).

The most potent idea in Freire’s teachings is that of personal transformation brought about through one’s critical consciousness: “The more accurately men grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be” (Freire, 1974, p. 44). For example, a teacher who comprehends the causal connections between her pedagogical practices and her students’ learning could be said to possess a critical understanding of the reality of her classroom. In effect, a teacher’s critical consciousness can be raised by engaging in dialogue with peers and students, which Freire describes as “an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects” (p. 52). In the preceding quotation, Freire mirrors the central concept of reciprocity in Buber’s *I and Thou*. Freire’s appropriating of Buber’s words also illustrates Bakhtin’s observation that we construct our own discourses through the words of others. And ultimately, as Freire contends, “Critical understanding leads to critical action” (p. 44). Therefore, the theoretical implications for CFGs are that as teachers become critically engaged in collaborative, reflective dialogue the more comprehensive their critical understanding of reality will be and the greater the

likelihood that they will be able to transform the realities within their schools. Freire calls this process *conscientization*: “a process of developing consciousness, but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality” (Taylor, 1993, p. 52).

Critical theorist and educator Henry Giroux speaks of the potential of teachers to become *transformative intellectuals* who “educate students to be active, critical citizens” (Giroux, 1988, p. 127). Giroux emphasizes the critical importance of the mind, thinking, and reflection in his view “that teachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving” (p. 126). Giroux sees “schools as economic, cultural and social sites that are inextricably linked to issues of power and control” (p. 126). If we hope to maintain and develop a critical democracy that embodies the concepts of freedom and equality, Giroux contends teachers must be able to engage in critical thought that “combine[s] scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens” (p. 122).

By engaging in critical dialogue with one another, professional practitioners can collaborate in bringing about a transformation in their schools’ cultures from what Freire (2001) terms the *banking concept of education* (p. 67), which views students as receptacles in which teachers deposit knowledge, to a more egalitarian, democratic and humanistic concept of education.

#### *Learning Teams and their Impact on Leadership*

As one strand of the professional development equation, learning teams are rapidly becoming important agents of school change: “Learning in the workplace is being considered a new approach to teacher development” (Estebaran, Mingorance, & Marcelo, 2000, p. 139). Professional development theorist Ann Lieberman (1995) states, “In the traditional view of staff development, workshops and conferences conducted outside the school count, but authentic opportunities to learn from and with colleagues *inside* the school do

not” (p. 591). With a shift in emphasis away from external professional development structures to site-based forms of collaborative inquiry and learning, CFGs could be seen as an integral part of effecting school change. I maintain that collaborative communities are imperative in bringing about the transformation of teaching practices through shared knowledge and expertise.

In their research on teachers’ work groups, Araceli Estebaran, Pilar Mingorance, and Carlos Marcelo (2000) describe permanent seminars “as a continuing system of self-development and reflection in the practice of teaching” (p. 125). Within these seminars or learning teams, teachers can share their classroom experiences through ongoing dialogue. The primary aim of these groups is “professional growth: the interchange of experiences, the updating of scientific knowledge, and discussion and critical reflection” (Estebaran, Mingorance, & Marcelo, 2000, pp. 129-130). The secondary aim is “learning techniques that have an impact on teaching, such as changes in methods, the review of teaching-learning processes, and the importance of teaching practice” (p. 130). And the tertiary aim is “the desire to improve relationships between all sectors of the community, by learning to collaborate in groups” (pp. 130-131). For the most part, these three aims of permanent seminars reflect the global objectives of CFGs. However, I would add that in our CFG sessions, a number of our dialogues have focussed on how teachers can transform their classroom practices to motivate different types of learners. For instance, in her participant interview, Cheryl observes that teachers have “the responsibility to teach to different children [different types of learners, i.e., differentiated instruction] in different ways in the same classroom, and that’s one of the most useful aspects in terms of learning from each other” (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003).

Jeanne Wilson, Jill George, and Richard Wellins (1995), researchers of leadership in team-based organizations, articulate the implications of teamwork on leadership:

Leaders must help get teams off to the right start by ensuring that team members have a strong sense of purpose, challenging goals, and clear boundaries and operating guidelines. Effective leaders also help tie the goals of an individual team to the overall vision of the organization. And finally, they keep the team going—perhaps the most challenging skill of all. Good team leaders know when to offer support and when to let go; they're masters at keeping the team motivated and challenged, and they're able to get the team back on course when it has stagnated or is experiencing conflict.

(p. 76)

The current emphasis on learning teams marks a “shift in the distribution of power” (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996, p. 21) from a hierarchical framework to a cooperative, flattened and interdependent model. In the traditional hierarchical school structure, teachers were expected to follow the directives of the administration and normally were not involved in the decision-making process. However, as teachers become more empowered within their own schools, their input is valued as an important stage in the development of policies that impact on the entire community. Therefore, educational leaders will have to adapt to this new reality by building collegiality, facilitating team performance, and underscoring the importance of internal professional development initiatives, such as CFGs. Leadership theorist Max Sawatski (1997) argues that:

[M]ajor emphasis has been placed on creating and building high performance teams, on aligning reward and incentives with team performance and on adopting approaches to leadership and management which place responsibility for performance with the team and the individual; which encourage performance feedback and developmental planning; and which begin with the leadership team leading by example in search of a new, great tomorrow in the

truly high performing high school of the twenty-first century.

(p. 161)

The inquiry, dialogue and community generated by learning teams like CFGs should foster collegiality, collaboration and a shared culture of learning.

In her groundbreaking work on teachers in the workplace, teacher researcher Susan Rosenholtz distinguishes between “isolated” and “collaborative” school settings. The former offers “the lowest impetus for helping behaviors” and the latter, “the greatest impetus for mutually helping behaviors” (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 48). In summarizing the results of her research on collaborative schools, Rosenholtz states:

With teaching defined as inherently difficult, many minds tended to work better than the few. Here [in collaborative schools] requests for and offers of advice and assistance seemed like moral imperatives, and colleagues seldom acted without foresight and deliberate calculation. Teacher leaders were identified as those who reached out to others with encouragement, technical knowledge to solve classroom problems, and an enthusiasm for learning new things. (p. 208)

The notion of teacher leadership, or the ability of lead teachers to inspire colleagues to transform their schools’ cultures, is implicit in the work of CFGs and an important facet of my research.

Educational leadership theorist Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) writes, “There is widespread agreement that collegiality among teachers is an important ingredient of promoting better working conditions, improving teaching practice, and getting better [academic] results” (p. 49). The building of collegiality adds to teachers’ professionalism in the sense that they take responsibility for each other’s learning and encourage one another to become more effective practitioners. However, collegiality is best cultivated by teacher leaders, as teachers are naturally skeptical of top-down administrative directives and are more likely to

trust their peers. Marilyn Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller (1996), researchers on teacher leadership, define teacher leaders as those “who lead within and beyond the classroom, influence others toward improved educational practice, and identify with and contribute to a community of teacher leaders” (p. 6). School improvement theorist Roland Barth (2001) underscores the value of teachers who assume leadership roles:

They [teacher leaders] experience a reduction in isolation; the personal and professional satisfaction that comes from improving their schools; a sense of instrumentality, investment, and membership in the school community; and new learning about schools, about the process of change, and about themselves. And all of these positive experiences spill over into their classroom teaching. These teachers become owners and investors in the school, rather than mere tenants. They become professionals.  
(p. 449)

Moller and Katzenmeyer (1996) maintain, “Teachers in schools with a collaborative culture open to teacher leadership find that there are many more opportunities to help one another [...]; [t]hey accept professional talk as essential to their growth and development” (p. 8). Teacher researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (2002) characterize collaborative leadership most succinctly as “simply the development of communities who inquire, with deep commitment, into professional growth” (p. 184).

In their research on collaborative leadership and team development, Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter (2003) observe, “We learned how to get beyond ownership as a goal and how to develop professional communities of learners, focused on teaching and learning, that are able to take advantage of the multiple perspectives a community can offer” (p. 1). Other research (see Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) shows schools that cultivate professional communities enjoy higher student achievement (Mohr & Dichter, p. 2). However, to better

understand how professional communities of practice impact on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices, we need to examine the nature of the dialogic inquiry and determine to what extent collaborative communities can transform the working lives of teachers.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I presented my review of the relevant literature on Critical Friends Groups and explained the theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing collaborative communities. I sowed the seeds for my thematic and theoretical analyses of the data in Chapter Four by examining the following overarching theories and their major theorists: reflective practice, the dialogic imagination, social constructivist learning, and critical theory. I concluded the chapter with my reflection on the implications of collaborative communities of practice for teachers' learning and school leadership. The sociocultural, sociolinguistic and social constructivist theories I presented here serve as the theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the recursive cycle of professional growth and transformation that is cultivated within collaborative communities of teaching practice. Having described the central ideas of my research, in the next chapter I show how the study was undertaken.

### Chapter Three: Tending Gardens

*"Learning through inquiry is the basis of Critical Friends endeavours, and such models present a viable method of promoting the student teacher's professional growth." (Franzak, 2002, p. 258)*

*"I see it [CFG participation] as an overarching type of professional development because it's not only mental, but spiritual as well, because you can talk about personal ideas related to teaching, not only pedagogy and curriculum; it's more, like someone put it yesterday, the 'soul' of teaching you can talk about, rather than the nuts and bolts of how to teach." (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003)*

These two quotes reflect the importance of collaborative inquiry in professional development. In order to reap the harvest from the sown seeds, one must tend the garden with meticulous care, as one would teach a child or cultivate a professional teacher. In this chapter, I present the qualitative methodology I used in this research study, including a description of the school context, how I gained access to the participants, and the research topics, issues, and questions that framed my study. I also present the methods, including my dual roles as researcher and participant observer, the participants, the interviews, the questionnaire, and data analysis. This tending of the garden allows the reader to see how I conducted my research study and the rationale for my choices.

#### *Methodological Background*

My research study is rooted in the social interactions of teachers within the context of shared professional growth and transformation of classroom practices. I focus on the professional dialogue that contributes to teachers' ongoing learning. How do teachers learn from one another? Do teachers learn best within a social framework of collaboration? In what ways or to what extent teachers transform their classroom practices through critical dialogue and shared reflection? Are

teachers' feelings of isolation mitigated by their participation in collaborative communities of professional practice? These questions are best answered through qualitative inquiry, which lends itself to the study of naturalistic social phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2). Adopting a qualitative approach enabled me to unearth multiple layers of meaning and understanding in the data and deepened my understanding of how collaborative communities of practice impact on teachers' professional growth.

As I outlined in the previous chapter, I locate my study within the reflective, dialogic, social constructivist, and critical theories. I examine professional growth as a recursive cycle of transformation that occurs throughout teachers' careers. Teachers transform their professional practices through deepening knowledge and expertise. Teachers' learning is socially constructed within the context of the school's culture and expedited by shared critical reflection and dialogic inquiry. When the school creates formal opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue with one another, i.e., to teach and learn from each other, the entire community reaps the benefits. Learning and teaching become shared concerns of a community of professional practitioners.

#### *CFG Pilot Project*

*That Critical Friends Group meeting was the best professional development I've ever done. (CFG participant)*

*We now have something important to discuss around the water cooler. (CFG participant)*

These quotes emerged from a pilot project on Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) at Lower Canada College (LCC) I carried out from February to June 2002, as part of the course requirements for Leadership in Action (EDEM-610) at McGill University. Although LCC faculty are generally supportive of one another and relatively cohesive, the school consists of five distinct sections (Kindergarten, grades 1-6, grades 7-8, grades 9-11, and Pre-University Year or grade 12) housed in four different buildings. Therefore, my objective in this inquiry was to counter

the school-wide problem of teacher isolation by setting up an informal group setting wherein teachers could freely discuss issues related to their classroom practices and ultimately receive constructive feedback from colleagues. I wrote up my findings in a twenty-five-page report, which represents some of the exploratory ideas I pursued in my research.

What emerged from this initial inquiry was the importance for teachers to engage in ongoing, professional dialogue centred on classroom practices. CFGs' collaborative format for problem-solving engendered ideas, discussion and dialogue that aided all the participants in the pilot project. The enthusiasm generated by the project prompted several participants to say how much they had benefited and learned from the experience. The most gratifying response for me was a veteran teacher (thirty years in physical education) saying, "That meeting was the best professional development I've ever done." Another tangible benefit of the CFG meetings was an increased comradeship (and colleagueship) among the participants. The CFG members now had something in common, a shared experience of mutual trust and cooperation that helped them communicate better outside the confines of the group. As one of the French teachers said, "We now have something important to discuss around the water cooler." The initial soil sample represented by the pilot project revealed optimal growing conditions for the cultivation of CFGs at LCC.

Based on the success of this grassroots initiative, for the 2002-03 school year, I coordinated three CFGs comprising twenty-eight teachers of seventy-eight total faculty. My primary research objective in this study is to analyze and ultimately evaluate how teachers' participation in these collaborative communities impacted on their professional growth and classroom practices from their perspectives.

### *School Context*

Lower Canada College is a coeducational, bilingual, K-12, private, day school in the suburban Montreal neighbourhood of Notre-Dame-de-Grace (NDG).

Founded in 1861 as St. John's School in downtown Montreal and relocated to NDG and renamed Lower Canada College in 1909, the school went from being a boys' school to a co-educational institution in 1995. Over its history, LCC has evolved from a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community into a culturally and linguistically diverse one. Students' ethnic origins range from Quebec and other Canadian provinces to Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and the United States (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2002, pp. 529-530). Although the school offers scholarships and bursaries, the student body of 750 is largely economically privileged, with a median household income of \$110,200 (Cowley & Merceau, 2002, p. 57).

The teachers who voluntarily participated in the Critical Friends Groups represent a cross-section of experience, education, teaching levels and disciplines. In terms of its faculty demographics, LCC has a large contingent of teachers with fewer than fifteen years of teaching experience and another large cohort with over twenty-five years in the profession. In the next five years or so, much of the senior faculty will be retiring. These latter two realities present a host of problems for the continuity of professional expertise in the school. The salient challenges reflect continuity in curricular and pedagogical knowledge and expertise, the transmission of school culture and tradition, and the development of community. The administration must examine ways to promote professional growth and mentoring across teachers' levels of experience and ages. CFGs represent ongoing, site-based, relatively inexpensive professional development that may mitigate some of the challenges.

A fertile educational community for my proposed research, LCC offered a rich contextual background for the topics I addressed.

### *Gaining Access*

As a long-time employee of the school and a respected member of the teaching faculty, I experienced no impediments in gaining access to the school and the study participants. First, the Headmaster wrote a letter of support for my

MA application and supported both the CFG programme and my research study. Second, the voluntary membership of the CFG programme agreed to lend its support to my research. In fact, twenty-one of twenty-eight CFG members (seventy-five percent) gave their informed consent to participate in the research. All participants volunteered for the in-depth interviews, although I limited my selection to a cross-section of ten interviewees.

#### *Research Topics, Issues and Questions*

I addressed the following topics and issues in my thesis. I examined participants' reflections on the impact of CFGs with respect to professional growth and classroom practices. I looked at the CFG leaders' reflections on their roles as coaches and participants and on their leadership growth, in addition to their reflections on the notion of teacher leadership and on their roles as teacher leaders. I investigated groups' collective reflections on their functioning as collaborative communities of professional practice, on shared understandings of teaching and learning, on group dynamics, and on one-on-one versus group interaction. I analyzed CFGs' efficacy as dialogic contexts for discussions on teaching and learning and what emerges on dialogue and sharing from teacher conversations. I examined CFGs' ability to mitigate teacher isolation and CFGs as tools for mentoring colleagues.

I focussed my research study on several key questions that I have grouped into two overarching themes. The primary theme of my thesis is the nature of the relationship between teachers' participation in CFGs and their professional growth, both in the classroom and as potential teacher leaders. My secondary theme is the importance of creating communities of professional practice in combating teacher isolation and in cultivating mentoring relationships.

#### *Research Questions*

In what ways and to what extent do collaborative communities of professional practitioners impact on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices?

What shared understandings of teaching and learning emerge from the knowledge-building dialogue in collaborative communities of professional practice?

Are collaborative communities of professional practice effective dialogic contexts for discussions on teaching and learning?

In what ways and to what extent do collaborative communities of professional practice foster teacher leadership?

Do collaborative communities of professional practice mitigate feelings of teacher isolation?

Are collaborative communities of professional practice effective contexts for mentoring colleagues?

### *Methods and Participants*

The sources of data for this study are participant observation, in-depth and focus group interviews, focus groups, and a questionnaire designed for an evaluation of the original pilot project and modified for the purposes of this study. Although the CFG program continues to operate from its inception as a pilot project in February 2002, participant observation occurred for the duration of the study which ran from January to June 2003. Each of the three CFGs met once a month for two hours over the course of the 2002-2003 school year to engage in collaborative dialogues around classroom practices. I conducted audio-taped, in-depth participant interviews from April to June 2003 and my wife Edith Skewes-Cox, a professional translator (French to English), transcribed them verbatim in July 2003. I administered the questionnaire to the twenty-one participants in June 2003. From July to September 2003, I analyzed and interpreted the data from the questionnaires and the interviews by comparing the data sources and focussing on the impact of collaborative communities on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices.

I designed an in-depth interview and focus group questions and the questionnaire to address my research questions and the accompanying issues and

topics. Although I asked each interviewee the same series of prepared questions, in some interviews I pursued lines of interest that went beyond the questions themselves. For example, as the interviews progressed, I became curious about the social dynamics of each group, even though I had not prepared any questions that specifically addressed that topic. The social dynamics seemed to have the greatest impact on the newcomers who felt that connecting with a small group of colleagues opened the door for further dialogue and full participation within the community. As Mike says in his participant interview, “Just by connecting with a small group, especially as a newcomer to the community, by connecting with a small group and getting to know them a little bit better, personally and professionally, I think it opens the door more to asking questions” (Mike, Interview #5, 05-06-2003). This particular remark opened up for me the door that connects CFGs with the mentoring of newcomers.

I also included in the data sets opportunities for the participants to generate more open-ended responses that enabled me to dig more deeply into the nature of collaborative communities of professional teaching practice. For instance, at the end of each interview, I asked the participant if he or she had anything to add. At the end of her participant interview, Monica observes: “I think where we’re located might have an impact on what is being discussed. I think this is conducive to trying to remove ourselves from the pressures of the day. I don’t think it’s often that many of us use this space with other teachers. It is unique that way [...]. It’s almost like we’re making an effort to distance ourselves from something” (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). Monica’s observation took root in my consciousness, and upon further reflection I realized that the isolated setting of our CFG meetings allowed the participants to feel safe and free to express anything they wanted to share with their colleagues. I also found Monica’s choice of words telling, in that the “something” she refers to is the more public spaces of the school. The CFG participants crave a safe haven where they can privately enter into meaningful collegial dialogues.

The questionnaire was a combination of fourteen structured response statements fully anchored on a Likert scale (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 133) and five open-ended questions, with space for additional comments at the end of the survey. I discovered that although the structured responses of the questionnaire yielded quantifiable confirmation of what I already knew from my direct experience with CFGs (e.g., that they mitigated isolation and impacted positively on professional growth), the open-ended questions were much more revealing. For example, one of the questionnaire participants wrote that [CFG meetings have] “given me a chance to voice concerns, etc. I would like to see the group have the opportunity to be represented in some formal way with the administration.... I do not want to think of us as ‘blowing in the wind’” (Participant Questionnaire #1). This one observation allowed me to make the connection between CFGs and empowerment, a topic I pursue further in my last chapter. We are not simply voices blowing in the wind but a cohesive force that has the potential to transform the culture of our school.

Initially, when the participants consented to participate in the study in March 2003, I was going to use pseudonyms (for the interviews) and matched identification numbers with names that I would keep in a concealed envelope in a secure place (for the questionnaires). In addition, I protected all nominal information for confidentiality by assigning a random identification code to each respondent in the data set. I stored the code key numbers in a reference file separate from the data set used to analyze the survey results. However, in March 2004, the participants consented to my using their first names and the school’s name in my thesis. In April 2004, the Headmaster also consented to my using the school’s name.

#### *Dual Roles of the Researcher*

As participant observer and researcher responsible for data design, collection, analysis and interpretation, I played the central role in this research study. In addition, I am the co-founder and coordinator of the CFG program and

one of the three group leaders. Therefore, this study is informed largely by my dual roles of researcher and participant which I reflect on in the next chapter.

### *Interviews*

I used the following rationale for the selection of nine interviewees from the twenty-one participants in the study. First, I chose the three CFG leaders for the leader focus group interview, mainly to examine the issues of social dynamics and teacher leadership. I also wanted to determine the commonalities and differences among the three CFG groups. Second, to analyze the impact of CFGs on teachers at various stages of their careers, I selected two participants from each of the following categories: newcomers to the school with under ten years of teaching experience, teachers with ten to twenty years of professional experience, teachers with over twenty years of professional experience, and teacher-administrators. My primary reason for basing selection on experience was to see if teachers' professional growth does occur throughout their careers, and my secondary reason was to discover the different impressions of CFG participation among the varying levels of teaching experience. These interview selection categories facilitated my thematic analysis of the central research questions and also exposed some ideas that I was able to develop into conceptual frameworks I had not thought of when I was designing the study, e.g., my current conception of professional growth as a recursive cycle.

### *CFG Leaders*

The three CFG leaders have from seventeen to thirty years of teaching experience at LCC. Although they each began their careers with brief stints in the public school system, they have spent the bulk of their professional lives at LCC. Two of the three leaders have held administrative positions, and the third aspires to become a teacher-administrator. The senior member, John, joined LCC as a Junior School teacher in 1974, and he is currently a teacher and team leader in the Middle School, which he helped found about ten years ago. He obtained his M. Ed. from McGill. He is married, has three grown children, two of whom are

alumni of LCC. Steven began his career at LCC in the Junior School in 1987, and he has taught in the Middle and Senior Schools for the last ten years. He is married and has four children. I joined LCC in 1987, have taught exclusively in the Senior School, and have been English Department Head since 1998. I am married and have four children.

#### *Newcomers*

Mike is new to LCC but has seven years' teaching experience in two other independent schools in the United States. He teaches in the Middle and Senior Schools. A graduate of Selwyn House School, he is familiar with the Montreal private school community. Prior to earning his teaching credentials and his M. Ed. from Leslie University, Mike received an M.B.A. and worked in business for several years. He is married, with two young children. A teacher in the Senior School, Monica is new to LCC but taught her first two years at Appleby College. She is married, with no children.

#### *Ten to Twenty Years' Experience*

June has been teaching twelve years, five at LCC. Her previous experience was at two schools in Nova Scotia: one public, one private. She teaches in the Middle and Senior Schools and was also involved in the CFG Pilot Project in 2002. She is single and has no children. Doug obtained his Master's in Sports Psychology from McGill and has been teaching for ten years, three at LCC. His previous experience was at another private school in Montreal where he was a master teacher. He currently teaches in the Senior School. At the time of his interview, he had just been appointed to the position of department head. He is married and has two children.

#### *Over Twenty Years' Experience*

Cheryl taught in the Montreal public system for eighteen years before coming to LCC in 1990. After teaching in the Senior School for several years, she helped found the Middle School where she is currently a Team Leader. She obtained her M. Ed. from McGill and is married with two grown children. An

alumnus of the school, Ian has spent his entire professional life of twenty-six years at LCC. He has taught at every level (Junior, Middle, Senior, and Pre-University). He is married, with three children, one of whom attends LCC. Both Ian and Cheryl were involved in the CFG Pilot Project in 2002.

#### *Teacher-administrators*

Linda has taught for over twenty-five years in both the public and private school systems. She has also been a teacher-administrator for the past several years. At the time of her interview, she was a director in the Senior School and was appointed Assistant Headmaster shortly afterward. She has been at LCC for three years and has taught in the Senior School. She is married and has two grown children, one of whom is an alumna of the school. Ron has taught for over twenty-five years in both the public and private school systems. He has been a teacher-administrator in the Senior School for the past five years and has taught at the school in Senior and Pre-University levels since 1985. He is currently the Director of Academics and, at the time of his interview, he oversaw the professional development programme. He lives with his long-time female companion and helps raise her daughter. Both Ron and Linda were involved in the CFG Pilot Project in 2002.

#### *Conducting the Interviews*

I conducted each interview during the school day in the same seminar room where the CFGs held all their sessions. I chose this space to facilitate the participants' remembering specific details of their meetings and to put them at ease in a familiar and comfortable space. Fifteen feet square, with oak wainscotting and a large window overlooking the playing fields, the room is situated next to my office in the Webster Learning Activity Centre, a state-of-the-art educational facility that was inaugurated in 2000. We sat at an oval, oak seminar table of about ten feet by four feet. I would characterize the setting as conservative and quietly elegant. The room is reminiscent of a New England prep school, like Exeter or Andover. There is even a framed poster on the wall of the

doors of Exeter. Before audio-taping the interview, I asked the participant to try to ignore the tape recorder and to be as candid as possible. We also exchanged pleasantries and small talk, e.g., about the weather and our relative states of health, before we began the formal tape-recorded interview. I allotted sixty minutes for each interview, but the actual running time of each tape is closer to thirty minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

For the data analysis, I compared the data sources with respect to my research topics, issues and questions. I looked primarily for instances of CFGs' impact on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices. I also followed patterns that developed in participants' articulations of their experiences in the CFG programme. I analyzed the interview and focus group transcripts by reading through them numerous times and highlighting areas that reflected the major focus of my research, similarities in participants' observations, and any comments that piqued my curiosity. For instance, I saw a pattern developing when I noticed that five of the nine interview transcripts contained discussions of *difference*. Participants spoke of "different teaching approaches," "different teachers and personalities," "different disciplines," "different experiences to draw upon," "different feedback," and "teaching different children in different ways [differentiated learning] in the same classroom." These comments on *difference* enabled me to see that a key aspect of professional growth is teachers' comparing their own experiences with those of colleagues and using pedagogical methods that differ from the ones they have become used to employing in their classrooms; they incorporate the *unfamiliar* into the *familiar* (Britton, 1990, p. 109).

After my initial data analysis, I wrote forty pages of analytic memos (see Appendix H for a sample analytic memo page) that grew out of two more close readings of the transcripts. One reading was carried out chronologically (by the interview dates) and the other was done by pairing selection categories, e.g., newcomer with newcomer. The former reading showed me how my thoughts

developed over the course of the interviews. For example, I started to place more emphasis on certain areas, e.g., the role of the newcomer, as the interviews proceeded. The latter reading emphasized similarities in the interviews of teachers with similar levels of experience. For instance, the veteran teachers were regenerated by their participation in CFGs and newcomers felt a sense of community through their involvement in CFGs. The analytic memos enabled me to consolidate what I had learned from the transcripts before I connected the interview data with my theoretical frameworks.

I followed a similar process for the questionnaire data by grouping the structured and open-ended responses into categories that reflected my research topics, issues and questions. I used the secondary questionnaire data to validate the primary interview data. Although the structured questionnaire responses quantified participants' impressions of their involvement in CFGs, they did not offer the same depth of meaning as the open-ended responses or the interview data. The interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses had more heuristic potential than the structured questionnaire responses.

Once I had carried out my initial analyses of the data, I returned to my theoretical frameworks and categorized the literature with respect to my research topics, issues and questions, and any other themes I had seen emerging from the data. My eight categories were CFGs, communities of practice (including collaboration, collegiality and learning communities), professional development and teacher leadership, reflective practice, group and team activity, leadership theory and practice, mentoring and coaching, and Participatory Action Research. As I was re-reading the literature, I began to cross-fertilize my data analyses with my germinal theoretical frameworks and eventually cultivated broad conceptual frameworks for professional growth, learning, and teaching. After writing my first draft of Chapter Two (the first chapter I wrote), my supervisor suggested that I organize the literature according to the overarching theories of reflective practice, the dialogic imagination, social constructivist learning and critical

theory. This framework enabled me to present the theory underlying my research in a logical progression and situate my data within complementary schools of thought.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I presented the qualitative methodology I used in this research study, including a description of the school context, how I gained access to the participants, and the research topics, issues and questions that framed my study. I also presented the methods, including my dual roles as researcher and participant observer, the participants, the interviews, the questionnaire, and data analysis. In the next chapter, I analyze the data and interpret my findings as they pertain to the theoretical frameworks.

## Chapter Four: Reaping Harvests

*“Reflective practice, like an orchid, requires special conditions to thrive. One of the most important elements in the environment is trust.” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 43)*

*“The cross-fertilization, the cross-referencing between teachers at different stages of their careers is important; it underlines and reinforces more often than not what we do and makes us feel good about what we are and who we are and what we do.” (Ian, Interview # 3, 04-15-03)*

### Overview

These two quotes illustrate the trust that is cultivated by shared reflective practice. After carefully tending the garden during the growing season, one can reap the harvest and enjoy the fruits of one’s labours. In this chapter, I present my theoretical analysis and interpretation of the central themes that emerge from the participant interviews and link the primary interview data with the questionnaire data. I open my discussion with a self-reflection on my dual roles as participant observer in the CFG program and research study. I examine the data in relation to my thesis focus on the impact of collaborative communities on teachers’ professional growth and classroom practices. I conclude with my analysis of the secondary questionnaire data as they pertain to the central themes of the primary interview data.

### *Self-reflection as Participant Observer*

The following extract in italics from my CFG Pilot Project Report written for Leadership in Action (April 2002) gives an idea of what I experienced in the first CFG meeting at LCC which I led in March 2002.

*As coordinator, I was somewhat apprehensive about our first meeting in that I had no idea what to expect. However, I was able to keep the dialogue flowing and ensure everyone spoke freely. Also, aside from a few minor digressions, I kept the session on topic and on time. Everyone had prepared a*

*case study of a particular classroom problem that was recent or ongoing. In my case shown below, the group gave me at least five concrete suggestions as to how I could deal with my recurring problem. Although I have sixteen years of teaching experience, I had not considered the approaches my colleagues suggested. By the end of the initial meeting,, all participants felt their cases had been dealt with thoroughly and thoughtfully.*

#### *CFG Case Study*

*Although I feel I get along well with the majority of my students and am able to motivate most of them to learn, there are always a small minority of intransigent students who are difficult to connect with or to motivate. For instance, I have a student in my grade eleven class who is quite pleasant and willing when I talk with him one on one. He seems to have good intentions but really doesn't follow through on them. Despite countless interventions and continually extending a helping hand, the student simply doesn't respond. The problem is exacerbated by a neglectful single parent. Does one simply give up on such a student or keep banging one's head against the wall? Am I missing something or are there just some kids we can't help? Where do we draw the line between teaching and surrogate parenting?*

#### *CFG Responses:*

- *Do not give up on the student. In fact, never give up on a student.*
- *Some kids are harder to reach and to help. However, you must try your best to help all kids, no matter how intransigent or problematical.*
- *There is no line between teaching and surrogate parenting, especially in the case of children of divorced parents or busy, neglectful parents. As teachers, we must serve in loco parentis. This is certainly truer today than a generation ago, when the family dynamic and support system were much stronger than they are now.*

#### *CFG Suggestions:*

- *Engage student through his interests.*

- *Strike up a rapport outside class.*
- *Praise him in class.*
- *Attend his basketball games.*
- *Establish a relationship and sustain it.*

*The collaborative format of CFGs for problem-solving engendered ideas, discussion, and dialogue that aided each teacher in the group. Group dynamics theorist Peter Senge (1990) qualifies, "The discipline of team learning involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion, the two distinct ways that teams converse" (p. 237). In fact, the enthusiasm generated by that two-hour dialogue/discussion prompted several participants to say how much they had benefited and learned from the experience. The most gratifying response for me was a veteran teacher's (thirty years in physical education) saying, "That meeting was the best professional development I've ever done." Leadership specialist Warren Bennis (1989) quotes CBS executive Barbara Corday, "'Getting people on your side has a lot to do with spirit, a lot do with team atmosphere'" (p. 158). CFGs create a spirit and atmosphere of sharing, trust and safety that allows participants to articulate some of their most personal professional feelings and ideas.*

*Another tangible benefit of our first meeting was an increased comradeship and "colleagueship" amongst the participants. Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (2000) observe in "Teacher Leadership: Ideology and Practice," "Researchers have found the building of collegiality to be essential to the creation of a more professional culture in schools" (p. 352). The members of our CFG now have something in common, a shared experience of mutual trust and cooperation that will help us communicate better outside the confines of the group. As one of the French teachers said, "We now have something important to discuss around the water cooler." In fact, the day after our first meeting, several CFG participants underscored the positive atmosphere of our session and the residual benefits for our teaching practice.*

*At the end of our first meeting, we decided on the activity for the following session: sharing classroom practices that work. The other CFG, which had also started with the case study, resolved to discuss evaluation and assessment of student work. Our grassroots project had taken root.*

The preceding excerpt demonstrates the collegial value of CFGs that was apparent from the beginning of the programme at LCC. Through critical dialogue and shared reflection, participants resolved workplace problems in the ways John Dewey envisioned in the 1930s and gave each other instructional *tools* to adapt their classroom practices to new situations. As the CFG programme has grown over the past three years, my collegial relationships with the participants and the programme itself have evolved and matured. I liken my role in CFGs to that of a teacher in the initial few years of his career. The doubt and uncertainty I experienced three years ago were similar to the feelings I had in my first few years in the classroom. However, these feelings have given way to increased confidence and security in much the same way I became more assured as a classroom practitioner. In travelling uncharted terrain and taking risks, my role as a teacher leader has been transformed from my position as English Department Head to *de facto* leader of professional growth at LCC. By the time I began my research, my colleagues perceived me as someone who valued teaching practice and who could be entrusted with some of their most intimate professional problems. The mutual trust engendered by the CFG programme enabled me to carry out my research with few constraints.

As the co-founder and one of the three group leaders of CFGs at LCC, I am very close to this inquiry. In my dual roles as participant observer, I have been afforded the privilege of intimate insider knowledge of the CFGs at LCC. This position has enabled me to more readily understand the participants' words and some of the nuanced language of the interviews. As co-workers, my participants and I speak a common language embedded in the culture, history and politics of the school. I understand the terrain, or what Vygotsky refers to as our

shared cultural signs, symbols and tools (1978, pp. 52-57). Therefore, I have been able to avoid the contextual barriers that might normally exist between the researcher and the participants.

My collegial relationships with the participants ranged from recent to long-term and from acquaintances to friends. Our common bond as teachers who inhabit the same workplace united us in ways no other relationship does. We shared the same frustrations, taught the same students, and dealt with the same parents. However, the roots of my relationships with the participants grew deeper because we were actively engaged in a collaborative community of practice. We were co-constructing a reality that had never existed before at LCC, a collaborative community of professional teacher practitioners.

In analyzing data, the temptation of a participant observer is to inflict one's bias on the results with one's insider knowledge. However, in my study, intimate knowledge of the participants and the workplace allowed me to delve deeply into the rich soils of the social contexts and to unearth shared understandings I would never have seen had I been a detached observer. Therefore, I would argue my insider's knowledge furnished me with valuable insights that outweighed the limitations of researcher bias. For example, when interview participant Cheryl spoke of the "bored grade eight boy, who's very bright [but] not doing well" (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003), I could picture this student because I had taught students like him within the context of LCC.

As a participant observer, my greatest challenge was separating the participants' personal lives from their workplace lives. For instance, I knew Cheryl's son had encountered some of the same problems as the aforementioned "bored grade eight boy." Although he is now a successful musician, Cheryl's son did encounter difficulties in school because he was bright and bored. I did not want this to affect my view of what Cheryl had said, but the temptation to draw parallels between her son and the "bored grade eight boy" was very strong. In order to maintain a professional stance or distance from my colleagues, I tried to

not let my knowledge of their personal lives influence my analyses and I focussed as objectively as possible on the teacher's life at work.

Because I was preoccupied with my role as a group leader I did not take extensive field notes during our monthly CFG meetings. However, my central holistic observations were related to group dynamics and the growth of interaction among the participants. As the year progressed, individuals began to trust one another more and to feel safe voicing whatever issues were pertinent to their working lives. Younger teachers felt they had as much to say as older teachers and became less inhibited about expressing their concerns. For example, in our final meeting in May 2003, the rookie teacher in our CFG said how much she appreciated the support of the group in her first year at LCC. Most important, she was reassured that the doubts she felt as a new teacher were also voiced by seasoned veterans. In his participant interview, twenty-five-year veteran Ian says that he values CFGs because they help him feel he is not alone in what he does as a teacher (Ian, Interview #3, 04-15-2003). All teachers operated in a climate of mutual respect and caring for one another's issues and concerns. As opposed to everyday meetings held in school, the CFG meetings exhibited little territorialism or partisanship. They were not driven by an administrative or departmental agenda. No one felt their departmental "turf" was threatened. We sat around the table as equals. I observed in one of my interview memos that *the CFGs are about teaching, are led by teachers, and really do focus on issues of teaching and learning* (Analytic memo #1, 07-13-2003). Our purpose was to help each other think about what we do as teachers and transform our teaching practices.

My chief observation about group dynamics pertains to ease of communication. The non-threatening atmosphere allowed teachers to open up in ways they would not have normally during the course of a typical school day. Whereas in our early meetings, teachers were a little tentative and unsure of each other's motives and levels of trust, as the year progressed teachers became increasingly engaged with one another. In short, our dialogues flowed more

freely and were more productive. For example, Monica (a participant in my CFG) remarked about our final meeting:

It was very animated; people were throwing ideas back and forth; it was really refreshing, I thought...that was one of the best ones we had...people weren't afraid to say what they thought and once we found out that certain people were thinking more or less the same way, that opened the door for all sorts of ideas to be tabled.

(Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003)

I would infer from the above quotation that once teachers felt safe with their colleagues they were no longer afraid to articulate some of the most intimate concerns about their teaching lives. Shared dialogue opened doors to shared understandings. As teachers' comfort levels increased, the group's conversations became less inhibited and more ideas began to be exchanged. For example, in our final meeting of 2003, we started to talk about ways we could effect positive changes in the school in order to resolve some of the frustrations we were facing as classroom teachers. Our dialogic, reflective inquiry enabled us to cultivate a collaborative community of professional practice that held the seeds of our school culture's transformation.

#### *Thematic Analysis of the Interview Data*

In this section of Chapter Four, I present my thematic analysis of the interview data. (See Appendix A for the participant interview questions, Appendix B for the leader focus group interview questions, Appendix C for a sample interview transcript page and Appendix H for a sample analytic memo page.) I examine how the data links to my thesis topic of the impact of collaborative communities on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices. Using a comparative and contrasting strategy for data analysis, I unearthed the following thematic trends.

### *Collaborative Communities of Practice*

Within a collaborative community of practice, such as a CFG, a salient feature is communication among its members. In co-constructing knowledge, participants need to engage in a meaningful exchange of ideas. Consequently, the connectedness that is cultivated within the group allows the group members to feel a strong sense of belonging and of full participation in the community. The newcomer's integration into the community links with Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation, i.e., "full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (1991, p. 29). Interviewees articulate the central importance of listening to other people and sharing ideas. For example, Mike says, "Just by connecting with a small group, especially as a newcomer to the community [...] and getting to know them a little better, personally and professionally, I think it *opens the door* more to asking questions" (Mike, Interview #5, 07-14-2003). In providing a *forum* for sharing knowledge and expertise, CFGs create opportunities for newcomers to connect with colleagues and to seek answers to their many questions.

The successful integration of a new teacher into a school community is the desired result of any mentoring program. Professional growth, or "deepening knowledge and expertise" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4), can be fostered through comprehensive programmes of mentoring and peer coaching. Cheryl describes CFGs as "a sort of *small-m mentoring*" (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). Similarly, Linda voices the benefits of CFGs for teachers who are new to the school environment. In the following quote, she speaks of CFG participation as *opening doors* to newcomers' participation in the community:

If anything, it's *probably* just given me the confidence to know two groups of about ten people in the school, which is a start for a person who's fairly new, like me. So it does *open doors* and I would feel I could walk in to any of those people and just say, can

you help me, or what's your take on this. (Linda, Interview #6, 05-12-2003)

Additionally, Doug states:

And maybe there's someone in your group that you do have a *connection* with, that you could see more often than just once a month...it definitely creates those links that, in the beginning, are helpful for a new teacher in the school. At least hearing more experienced teachers going through the frustrations that you might feel.... It can be very reassuring. (Doug, Interview #7, 05-13-2003)

Perhaps Monica puts it best when she says, "And especially as a new teacher, I find it a wonderful *forum* to simply get to know the rest of my colleagues" (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). CFG participation *opens doors* by creating a *forum* for dialogue to occur between newcomers and old-timers and among teachers of various disciplines at different levels. The relationships forged through newcomers' participation in CFGs help them feel accepted in the school community, connected with their peers, and mitigate their sense of isolation.

The intimacy and camaraderie established through regular and ongoing communication with colleagues create a common bond, which *allows for discussion potential beyond the meetings* (Analytic memo #3, 07-15-2003). As Monica observes of casual conversation with participants outside the meetings, "Instead of talking about the weather [...] you can bring up a specific issue *because* you have this common bond" (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). Ron adds, "[A] younger teacher will see something or hear something they like from a veteran teacher and maybe would approach them" (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003). If a mentoring relationship develops, the mentor and protégé can learn from one another and enrich each other's professional lives. Through meaningful engagement with one another, newcomers and old-timers cultivate relationships that may otherwise lie dormant.

The implications of CFGs for mentoring are significant. As Ron says of the CFG, “I guess it just lets you get to know a teacher better, so you can decide whether you want them as a mentor” (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003). My following memo response to the preceding quotation reveals an insight I had regarding CFGs’ serving as a “pre-mentoring” program:

*This [Ron’s previous comment] ties in well with the concept of CFGs serving as a sort of pre-mentoring program. A first-year teacher could be involved in CFG and choose their mentor from within the group. They could begin working with that person in first year but also develop that relationship outside the group over time. This idea has tremendous potential for CFGs as a mentoring vehicle. (Analytic memo #3, 07-15-2003)*

As mentoring is increasingly viewed as an essential component of cultivating teachers’ professional practices, CFGs could be seen as a potential benefit in this area of professional growth. CFGs provide the opportunity for old-timers to make explicit for newcomers their tacit understandings of the community and teaching practices and for newcomers to cultivate relationships with old-timers who may become their mentors.

According to the interviewees, listening and being heard are important attributes of the CFG sessions. Even though this is the case for all participants, it is more pronounced and significant for new teachers. Monica says that as a new teacher “I think it’s important to listen...I’ve tried to spend my first year in observation mode. Because everything’s new, everyone’s new, every student is new. I’m just trying to take it all in” (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). She sees the CFG as “a safe environment” where “people are considerate of each other’s feelings and experience” (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). Critical friends offer the “unconditional support and unconditional critique” (MacBeath, 1998, p. 119) a newcomer needs to become fully integrated into a community of professional practice.

New teachers are especially vulnerable and insecure. Therefore, the more secure they can feel, the more their confidence grows. It is important for new teachers to hear about the school and “to understand different people’s perspectives,” as Monica says (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). As I reflect on my first couple of years at LCC, I remember I was very reticent and listened a great deal more than I spoke. With increased confidence and knowledge of the school and the people, I became more confident in my dealings with colleagues, students and the administration. I now know that having a forum like the CFG programme would have been a real asset for me as a novice teacher. Most important, my participation in a CFG would have facilitated and expedited my integration into the community of professional teaching practice at LCC. I would have had more tools at my disposal to deal with situations that arose in the classroom. For example, I might have known how to deal with the boy in my first grade nine class who suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder.

Collaborative communities of practice also mitigate the reality of teacher isolation. Although respondents mention isolation as affecting their teaching lives in varying degrees, the pervading sentiment is that CFGs break down the barriers of the classroom and enable teachers to share with one another their expertise as well as their doubt. This collaboration resembles Dewey’s (1933) phases of reflective thinking which enable practitioners to resolve doubt through inquiry. The shared reflection cultivated through dialogue opens doors for teachers to learn about their respective classroom practices. Ian says of his participation in a CFG that “[i]t’s been good for reinforcing sometimes what we do, also for feeling that we’re not alone in what we do, even though we’re teaching very different disciplines” (Ian, Interview #3, 04-15-2003). Similarly, Ron states about his involvement in CFGs that “[i]t actually gave me a little more confidence in the things that I’m doing” (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003). Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) view reflective practice as a means of cultivating “an awareness that

creates opportunities for professional growth” (p. 19). The awareness of collegial practices reinforces and, ideally, improves one’s pedagogical approaches.

As I reflected more deeply on the issue of teacher isolation, I began to view it as more *nuanced and more complex than I had originally thought* (Analytic memo #5, 07-18-2003). In the following memo excerpt, I was able to unearth a multi-faceted notion of isolation that went far beyond the classroom and that also resonated with my own feelings of teacher isolation as a new teacher seventeen years ago:

*There are degrees of isolation, different feelings of isolation, positive and negative isolation. As Mike says about isolation, “I think all of us feel [it] in varying degrees. Some weeks I don’t feel it at all, and some weeks I do feel it. Or sometimes I really feel it a lot. Sometimes it’s not a bad thing. You’re just sort of with kids” (Mike, Interview #5, 05-06-2003). In reading over the transcripts the first time, it occurred to me that more experienced teachers probably don’t feel isolation as regularly or as intensely as new teachers. I remember in my first couple of years at LCC feeling isolated from my colleagues, from the administration, from the parents, and, in a sense, from the students. There was a certain distance I had to maintain before I became established as a credible teacher in the school. Over my career, I have felt teacher isolation less and less. The more integrated I become in the community, the less likely I am to feel isolated. The more pervasive sense of isolation I’m more likely to experience now is my not knowing what colleagues do in the classroom and vice versa. I feel we are isolated from each other’s teaching experience, expertise and daily classroom practices. In this sense, I think we have a great deal to learn from one another. The CFG programme creates another professional development opportunity*

*for this kind of professional interaction, sharing and learning.*

(Analytic memo #5, 07-18-2003)

Consequently, I contend that CFGs mitigate teachers' feelings of isolation and cultivate participants' professional autonomy through the interdependence of the group members. This interdependence is fostered by teachers' full participation in a collaborative community of professional practice.

### *Teachers' Professional Growth*

In terms of their professional growth, the participants express a wide variety of viewpoints. The pervading sentiment is that CFGs offer teachers different ways of handling day-to-day situations, both in and out of the classroom. Through shared dialogue and reflection, CFG members cultivate their own professional growth and that of their colleagues, even beyond the CFG itself. Making explicit their tacit knowledge and expertise fosters their own professional growth and that of their colleagues. CFG participants cultivate their internalized knowledge that allows them to distinguish between their subsidiary and focal awareness of professional practices (Polanyi, 1964). The teacher-administrators are permitted valuable insights into classroom teachers' working lives and, as a result, grow professionally. Shared understanding among CFG members increases the opportunities for professional growth.

CFGs offer a supportive environment where teachers can share ideas, articulate frustrations and seek a variety of solutions for professional problems. For instance, June says about her participation in the program, "It's given me ideas to take into the classroom and it's given me a forum to *vent* any kinds of concerns or challenges I was up against and to help find a solution to them. [It's a] really supportive environment" (June, Interview #1, 04-07-2003). Likewise, Cheryl says, "I find it very interesting how problems are handled, not only by the *different* personalities, but also how *different* teachers in *different* disciplines would handle the same problem" (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). The notion

of “difference” arises in a number of the interviews; however, Ian voices it best in the following interview excerpt:

I think it’s been a good experience, a really positive experience, to come together with *different* people, *different* elements of the school, who are teaching *different* disciplines and have *different* approaches, *different* experiences to draw upon, and to share ideas and to talk about things. ...Also for feeling that we’re not alone in what we do, even though we’re teaching very *different* disciplines, there are a lot of things that are common to teaching, things that teachers of all types experience. And these are important things to find out. And within a group like Critical Friends, you find that out. (Ian, Interview #3, 04-15-2003)

Through the process of ongoing collaboration, CFGs facilitate the interchange of experiences among teachers and allow them to see different ways of solving everyday problems. The differential relationships cultivated within the CFG dialogic links with Bakhtin’s concept of *utterance* whereby “[t]he word in language is half someone else’s” (1981, p. 293). Holquist (2002) characterizes dialogue as contributing to a deeper collective understanding. I would say that recognizing differences within a learning collective cultivates some common ground in collegial relationships that has a resonating impact on teaching throughout the school community. The better I understand the utterances of the other, the more critical will be my understanding of my own reality (Freire, 1974).

Doug feels his connectedness to the CFG gives him a *sense of belonging* that helps him deal more effectively with his enriched math class. When I asked him in what ways or to what extent his participation in CFGs impacted on his professional growth, Doug offered this commentary:

Well, I think it’s impacted quite a bit. I think what I was interested in, mainly, in coming to the group, was basically getting the sense that what I was going through, *I wasn’t in a box, isolated*, that

other teachers were going through the same things, and so on. What I like about our group is there's a lot of experience. We've got a few department heads in that group, so to hear their thoughts about things, you know, I'd been sharing some of the same frustrations with regards to enriched groups, with regards to discipline in the school, all different kinds of things. It's just nice to get that sense that you're not alone. And it's also nice when we start discussing lessons that went well, and things like that, you pick up little tricks, little ways. You know, I hadn't thought about that, maybe I'll try that. It definitely, I haven't changed my teaching style very much, but it's just a little, you know, *you add a few tools to the toolbox*, basically. You can use those things. I think it's helped mostly with my enriched group, to hear how Bob works with his enriched group, how John has worked with some of his enriched groups, and things like that. It was nice to get that feedback. I think that's where it has helped me the most. I haven't really changed much the way I teach my other groups. But it's definitely nice, that *sense of belonging* to the group and sharing those ideas. That was good. (Doug, Interview #7, 05-13-2003)

A teacher with ten years of experience and in his third year at the school, Doug is still adding to his teaching repertoire and learning how to cope with challenging situations. He is still adding *tools* to the *toolbox* of teaching practices. Doug's CFG dialogue with more capable peers who have experience with enriched groups gives him teaching strategies and methods to apply in the classroom. Rather than remaining *isolated in a box*, perhaps in his own classroom, Doug feels a *sense of belonging* in the community that helps him deal with his own doubt and perplexity. Doug's CFG participation has provided him with what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the *cultural tools* to *mediate* between his *external and internal realities* and to operate at a higher level of competency.

Without valuable collegial feedback, Doug's professional growth in learning how to evaluate his enriched math students may have been slower or even non-existent. In the following excerpt from his interview, Doug explains in some detail how he learned in one CFG meeting to evaluate his enriched grade ten math class:

It [the CFG's impact on Doug's classroom practices] was mainly in how I was evaluating my enriched grade ten group. I think I was maybe aiming a little too high, in the beginning. And, after having discussed that, that was one of the things I brought to the table in our first meetings. And then I was hearing how some of the others were, some of the suggestions they were giving me, and one tangible suggestion that I took, that I have changed, is I mix up my evaluations. Some days, it'll be more of a curriculum-oriented evaluation, and then other times it will be more enrichment stuff. Even on tests, I'll separate now, Part A and Part B, where in Part A, I'll be going just for the curriculum and then in Part B, I'll stretch it a little bit. So that way, I can really see, because I wasn't seeing before, are they really understanding the core curriculum, because I think I was stretching them a bit too much, and they weren't having enough time necessarily to finish. So there were some questions they should have been able to do they weren't getting to, or maybe they were too stressed out, or for whatever reason. I don't think I was evaluating their ability in the basic curriculum. And there's a ministry exam at the end of the year so I have to make sure. I wouldn't be so worried if there wasn't a ministry exam at the end of the year, but since there is, I've got to make sure that they're grasping that stuff before moving on to other enriched stuff. (Doug, Interview #7, 05-13-2003)

Doug's words reflect some of the pressures he felt in teaching his enriched math class and how his participation in the CFG alleviated his stress by giving him tangible methods of effective evaluation. He learned from more capable peers how to handle situations of doubt and perplexity and was able to internalize classroom practices in order to operate at a higher level of competency.

Even during the interview process Doug gave me some ideas as to how I might accommodate *my* enriched students in a test situation. The following exchange shows that I was curious to know how in his test-setting Doug combined course content mandated by the ministry exam with enriched content that *engaged* his gifted math students:

Brian: So, just to explain, in Part A, you have the course content geared towards the exam, and then in Part B, it's enriched? Is that optional, or is that a bonus? How do you work that?

Doug: It's still part of the evaluation, but for me, it's mainly so that the Part A tells me, are they ready to move on to the next topic, or not. Or I can identify some kids, that I can give them a kick in the rear end and say, look, you're only getting seventy-five on section A, there's a problem. That's not acceptable, a seventy-five at the end of the year on the ministry test. For this group, anyway, it's not acceptable. So, it gave me, and that's what I was lacking. I didn't have that information before on some of my evaluations. So it's definitely helped me evaluate them. (Doug, Interview #7, 05-13-2003)

Not only had Doug learned and subsequently used a new approach to evaluating enriched groups, i.e., combining the requisite ministry course content with enriched content, but also he had been able to impart his new knowledge to another teacher outside his CFG. He had both internalized and made explicit his deepening knowledge and expertise. This one critical instance of sharing

pedagogical practices shows how CFGs have a ripple effect beyond the monthly CFG meetings in that they impact on the broader school community.

Several participants speak about the philosophical discussion generated by CFGs. Simply put, what do teachers do in classrooms and why do they do them? Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1993) write about the importance of teachers' talking to one another in learning communities about their practices. Through shared reflection, teachers make explicit their tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1983), examine the assumptions underlying their practices (Argyris & Schön, 1974), and look at ways to transform their pedagogical approaches (Shore, 1987). This critical reflection on teaching practices is illustrated well in the following excerpt from Ron's interview transcript:

So I came in originally just to listen and find out what was happening. But immediately, I think in the first session, we immediately got into a philosophical discussion about what we do in classrooms, and why we do them. And I guess what it made me think of, it's a bit like why teachers are so good at doing other things. It got me to break down, step by step, things that I'd been doing automatically because obviously I had to explain it to other professionals who had these questions, so to do that, I had to think about it myself. For example, I remember talking about what I like to do in a classroom. If possible, I like to be at the front of the classroom, at the door, when the kids come in, just to say hi to them each time. And I found that, having done that, if you do that with kids quite often, it makes a difference in the tone of the class. But I'd forgotten why I did that. And I had to remember where it came from, and it actually came from a film I saw at a professional development session in the public school. And it was a visual, and it was just there, and it worked. So it actually stirred up some old ideas and made me make sense of them. And it also helped me

listen to some other teachers and their frustrations. That was the original thing. This year's [CFG sessions] have been a little more intense, and a little bit more structured, I think. But last year's was pretty much an "*open mike*" kind of thing. (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003)

Ron's self-reflection offers a key insight into one of the most important goals of CFGs: creating formal opportunities for teachers to reflect on their professional practices. As a veteran teacher, Ron possesses a wealth of tacit knowledge. However, he rarely gets the chance to make explicit what he does in the classroom and why he does it, that is to "surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice" (Schön, 1983, p. 61). At least now he does have the occasion to do so once a month in his CFG sessions when he has the opportunity to speak into the *open mike* of shared reflection.

The two teacher-administrators involved in the study also address their professional growth with respect to their roles as administrators. Ron and Linda emphasize the importance of their listening to teachers' concerns, issues and frustrations. Hearing about teachers' daily working lives in the CFG meetings provides Ron and Linda with valuable insights and feedback they may not normally perceive in the hustle and bustle of a regular school day. Consequently, they become better equipped with the necessary information to more effectively manage the staff and help teachers improve their practices. For example, in the following interview excerpt, Linda speaks about the benefits of listening to people:

But, in terms of the CFGs, it's more listening to people. And understanding. For me as an administrator, for me to understand the big picture at LCC, what people's interests are, what their frustrations are, what the reality of their day is like, up in the Middle School or down in the Junior School, we've got two Junior

School teachers in our group. For me, it's given me a much better picture of what I'm trying to help *manage* at LCC. (Linda, Interview #6, 05-12-2003)

Linda sees her role as an administrator as that of a manager or someone who controls and directs teachers in the community. Although she is engaged in shared reflection in her CFG meetings, she is using the knowledge she gains from teaching "equals" to manage them from a more objective stance within the context of her daily responsibilities. On the other hand, as the administrator responsible for professional development in the school, Ron makes the connection between listening to teachers and helping them improve their teaching. Ron's approach is more collegial and nurturing than Linda's; it resembles what Buber (1970) and Freire (1974) describe as "an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two subjects" (Freire, 1974, p. 52). In the following response, Ron is replying to my question, "What understandings of teaching and learning have emerged from your CFG sessions?"

I guess the shared understanding [of teaching and learning] that we have to adapt constantly to our classroom. I've listened to people talk about that. I've also seen some teachers who don't know that, and it's been revealed by the way that they approach the lesson plans. And that's told me, that as an administrator, on another level, I have to help those people. (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003)

In both of the preceding instances, one can see how these teacher-administrators' participation in CFGs has enabled them to better understand the working lives of the people they are responsible for "managing" and helping to become better teachers. Administrators might then view their roles as *facilitators* of professional growth rather than as *managers* of human capital. Their deepening knowledge and expertise illustrates how CFGs facilitate professional growth, not only within the teaching ranks but within the administration as well.

The interview data support the idea that CFGs impact on the professional growth of teachers and teacher-administrators at LCC. Through ongoing dialogue and collaboration, CFG participants experience their own professional growth and contribute to the professional growth of their colleagues.

### *Classroom Practices*

The work of a teacher in the classroom is a complex task that requires a great deal of expertise in the subject being taught, in pedagogical approaches, and in social dynamics. Although it is difficult to determine the efficacy of a teacher's classroom practices, most teachers, experienced and inexperienced alike, have a strong desire to improve their craft, or what Schön (1987) refers to as the "artistry" of professional practice: "adept[ness] at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict" (p. 16). Ongoing, site-based professional development programs, like CFGs, that encourage teacher dialogue and collaboration, provide opportunities for teachers to learn within the contexts of their own schools and to deepen their understanding of classroom practices. Cultivating professional relationships among colleagues who already work together enables teachers to share classroom practices that would otherwise remain hidden behind the closed doors of their classrooms.

One central idea that all the interviewees articulate is the need for teachers to motivate and stimulate students through *engaging* classroom practices. Language theorist James Britton (1990) speaks of *engagement* as "a process of knowing, a process in which meaning is negotiated by constructing a version of the unfamiliar with the raw material of the familiar" (p. 109). Interview participant June says, "We [CFG members] were sharing teaching strategies and just ways to make the classroom environment more exciting" (June, Interview #1, 04-07-2003). She refers specifically to an approach she learned from a CFG colleague "who mentioned a lesson plan about getting the students to actually teach topics in the class" (June, Interview #1, 04-07-03). I sense June's excitement about the strategy when she exclaims, "I'm in the middle of it right

now, and students get up in front of me and they have to teach anywhere from forty to sixty minutes and they're blowing me away. I can't get over how well they're doing" (June, Interview #1, 04-07-2003). Although not all the participants are as enthusiastic about CFGs' impact on classroom practices, they each identify something they have learned, or they have been engaged by, in their sessions that they can apply in the classroom; they have constructed meaning of the unfamiliar with their understanding of the familiar.

With the current emphasis on multiple intelligences and differentiated instruction, there exists a need for teachers to vary their classroom practices. In identifying one of the common themes that emerged in his CFG, Mike voices an interesting insight about *engaging* students in a variety of meaningful ways:

I would have to say the most obvious one [theme] is the need and desire of all of us, as teachers, to *engage* our classes in meaningful ways that help them learn what it is you're trying to teach them, obviously. You've got, in some cases, you have set curriculum and in some cases you may not. But anyway, you do have a curriculum each time you go into the classroom, and being able to *engage* kids with a variety of ways, or in a variety of ways, I should say, was certainly the overriding theme of our conversations. (Mike, Interview #5, 05-06-2003)

Cheryl makes a similar observation regarding the understandings of teaching and learning that emerged from her CFG sessions:

Well, I think it underlies the idea of multiple intelligences and the responsibility to teach to *different* children in *different* ways [differentiated instruction] within the same classroom. And that's probably one of the most helpful aspects in terms of learning from each other. Where the auditory learner, the visual learner, the kid that is the all-star in math but not in my area, that's helped me in

my teaching and being aware of how kids learn. It's been very helpful. (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003)

The preceding observations show that from their perspectives CFG participants see themselves as actively *engaged* in teaching by constructing the unfamiliar out of the familiar and pursuing classroom strategies that meet the needs of students with varied abilities, interests and learning styles.

The stimulating learning environment of the CFG encourages some teachers to seek out knowledge beyond the meetings themselves. For example, Cheryl, a veteran teacher, says of her involvement in the program, “[I]t’s rejuvenated me to read more professional journals, because obviously there’s a lot more out there that I need to know, that I can use immediately as soon as I know” (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). She admits that she has had her “curiosity piqued about teaching again” (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003). Even though she is in the last few years of her career, Cheryl feels the need to stay current with her teaching practices, and her participation in CFGs has given her the renewed impetus to add to her considerable teaching repertoire.

Participants refer briefly to other classroom strategies, e.g., the use of film (Mike), collaborative learning (Linda), evaluation (Doug), and essay writing (Monica). However, a number of interviewees speak about the success of the CFG protocol Chalk Talk, which can be found on the Coalition for Essential Schools Web site (see [http://www.cesnorthwest.org/chalk\\_talk.htm](http://www.cesnorthwest.org/chalk_talk.htm)). In the Chalk Talk activity, group members respond silently in writing on the chalkboard to a particular prompt, e.g., “How can we improve student learning at LCC?” After the board is filled with ideas, the CFG participants *engage* in dialogue. Chalk Talk is an effective springboard for discussion on a particular issue and it also elicits responses from everyone in the group. Through shared dialogue, the participants build a common world out of what James Britton (1970) refers to as the collective “we” (p. 19); through meaningful, critical *engagement*, they co-construct the *unfamiliar* out of the *familiar* (Britton, 1990, p. 109).

Several teachers not only endorse the Chalk Talk activity for CFG dialogues, but also explain how they now use it in their classrooms. For instance, in the following interview excerpt, Cheryl explains how the Chalk Talk appeals to her grade eight English classroom:

Something I use often now is the Chalk Talk. And I use that a lot with my grade eight students who are [a] very active, very verbal, very hyper kind of group. And the Chalk Talk is such a quick way. They love it because it's different and it gets so many ideas up on the board so quickly. And they absolutely take to it. And they understand how important it is. And they can see the overarching of thematic ideas that we've been working on all year. So I use the Chalk Talk maybe once every two or three weeks. (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003)

And Ron illustrates how he uses Chalk Talk as a form of year-end evaluation for his grade eleven English course:

We use the chalk talk approach for evaluation. I always ask the kids to evaluate the course, and the chalk talk method is one way of doing that without having kids worry about accountability. I got a lot more information from that than I have having the kids write down in the last ten minutes of class their thoughts on the class. So that was kind of a neat idea. (Ron, Interview #9, 06-02-2003)

The two preceding examples show how teachers applied a classroom strategy that they had learned in their CFG sessions and thus indicate that their participation in CFGs has had an impact on their classroom practices.

#### *Supporting Questionnaire Data*

The supporting questionnaire data consist of fourteen structured response statements fully anchored on a Likert-scale, five open-ended questions, and a section for additional comments. (See Appendix D for the participant questionnaire, Appendix E for the questionnaire table E1 of survey responses by

numbers of participants, Appendix F for the questionnaire table F1 of survey responses by percentages of participants and Appendix G for a sample page of open-ended responses.) I designed the questionnaire to link to my interview data and to evaluate the CFG programme and to make improvements for the following year. However, my analysis of the questionnaire data focusses largely on their comparison with the thematic patterns that arise in the interview data.

Although the questionnaire data enabled me to see at a glance that the participants supported CFGs and were positive about their impact on professional growth, the numbers from the structured response statements did not provide me with the same depth of detail and shades of meaning that the interview data did. The descriptors for the structured response statements also limited my interpretation of the data. For instance, I found it difficult to assess what a “neutral” response indicated. Did it mean that the participant was neutral, indifferent, had no opinion, or was not in a position to respond either negatively or positively? The open-ended responses were more textured and gave me some more meaningful anecdotal feedback. I found the words shed more light on the value of CFGs than the numbers did. The questionnaire data were also limited by the small cluster sample size of teachers only from LCC, without random selection of participants, and contributed to the lack of generalizability of the study’s findings.

#### *Collaborative Communities of Practice*

The questionnaire data seem to support collegial collaboration and shared learning. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents “somewhat agree” that their participation in CFGs has increased their knowledge of other teaching levels (grades) and disciplines at the school, while thirty-three percent “strongly agree.” While only five percent of participants are “neutral” on the issue of CFGs’ facilitating professional collaboration, fifty-two percent “strongly agree” and forty-three percent “agree” with this category.

In terms of the open-ended questions, respondents address the issue of professional collaboration in a number of areas. Their comments range from viewing the CFG as “inter-collegial discussion designed to promote or sustain professionalism” to “professional support” to “learning from each others’ experiences” to the “development of camaraderie among staff” to a “scheduled opportunity to bond with colleagues.” Another respondent writes, “[The CFG] helps a teacher get in touch with his colleagues and exchange ideas about curriculum, classroom management and educational philosophy.” Another maintains that CFGs “allow for opinions, feedback and empowerment.” Several participants mention how CFGs promote team building, team spirit, trust, loyalty and collegiality. And one respondent writes that the CFG program “could be a catalyst for cross-curricular collaboration.” However, according to the majority surveyed, the salient feature of CFGs is communication. In the monthly sessions, teachers have the opportunity to speak with and listen to colleagues from “all sections of the school.” In addition to “venting frustrations with the ‘system’ in a non-threatening environment,” participants can “solve problems,” share “ideas for change,” and pursue “improvements” for the “benefit of the students.” As one respondent writes, “CFGs are a good vehicle for communication.” The general consensus is that CFGs promote collegiality and professional collaboration which supports the literature on collaborative learning within teacher groups. Estebaranz, Mingorance, and Marcelo (2000) describe the aims of permanent teacher seminars as professional growth, learning about teaching practices, and improving collegial relationships through collaboration (pp. 130-131). According to the questionnaire responses, CFGs provide participants with some collaborative tools to pursue professional growth and improve classroom practices.

The questionnaire data also address the complementary issue of teacher isolation, in that sixty-one percent of respondents “strongly agree” that “CFGs lessen their feelings of teacher isolation.” Twenty-nine percent “somewhat agree,” five percent are “neutral,” and five percent “somewhat disagree.” The

responses to the open-ended questions also support the idea that CFGs mitigate teachers' isolation. For instance, one respondent writes that participation in a CFG "fights thoughts of isolation." Another mentions how CFGs "help a teacher get in touch with his colleagues." The prevailing sentiment seems to be that CFGs "help with staff cohesion" and thus enable teachers to counter the isolation they may feel in the classroom. CFGs' functioning as a tool for mitigating teacher isolation supports Susan Rosenholtz's observations on collaborative school settings where teachers voluntarily offer their colleagues "encouragement" and support, "technical knowledge to solve classroom problems," and generate "an enthusiasm for learning" (1989, p. 208).

#### *Teachers' Professional Growth*

The questionnaire data appear to confirm that teachers' participation in CFGs supports their professional growth. I find it interesting that participants feel they contribute more to the growth of their colleagues than CFGs contribute to their own professional growth. Thirty-eight percent of those surveyed "strongly agree" that they "contributed to the professional growth of colleagues," while fifty-two percent "somewhat agree" with the statement. Another ten percent are "neutral" toward the same topic. In terms of their *own* professional growth, forty-three percent of respondents "strongly agree" that CFGs contributed to their own professional growth, while thirty-eight percent "somewhat agree" with this issue. However, fourteen percent are "neutral" toward the issue of CFGs' contributing to their own professional growth and five percent "somewhat disagree" with this category. Additionally, fifty-seven percent of participants "strongly agree" that the CFG program is a "valuable tool for mentoring," while thirty-three percent "somewhat agree," five percent are "neutral," and five percent "somewhat disagree" with this topic. The vast majority of respondents feel that CFGs are a "valuable method of professional development," in that seventy-one percent "strongly agree," while twenty-nine percent "somewhat agree" with this category.

The structured responses support the idea that CFGs cultivate professional growth through collegial collaboration and mentoring.

In terms of the open-ended questions, respondents' written comments vary from CFGs' being a "professional growth team" to "professional support" to a "learning environment" to "motivation to read professionally and think more creatively" to simply "professional development." Participants also voice support for CFGs as a valuable method of professional development, when posed the question, "If you were in charge of professional development at LCC, what would be your alternate visions of professional development to the status quo?" For instance, several respondents suggest expanding the CFG programme by actively promoting its benefits for professional growth. However, they are quick to add that CFGs should not become mandated or come under the control of the administration. In fact, ninety percent of those surveyed "strongly agree," while ten percent "somewhat agree" that the CFG programme should remain voluntary. One participant maintains that "if the administration gets involved and this [the CFG program] becomes a top-down-driven exercise, I'll drop out." On the other hand, a minority of respondents feels the CFG programme should be incorporated into the timetable or into the monthly staff meetings and thus given a higher profile as a form of professional development. The overwhelming consensus is that the CFG programme is a valuable method of professional development, as it contributes positively to teachers' professional growth. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) underscore the understanding that professional growth, or "deepening knowledge and expertise" (p. 4), can be fostered through comprehensive programmes of mentoring, peer coaching, and professional development, all of which can be cultivated by CFGs.

#### *Classroom Practices*

Although the questionnaire data strongly support the themes of teachers' professional collaboration and growth, they do not endorse unanimously the positive impact of CFGs on teachers' classroom practices. While the majority of

participants feel that their involvement in CFGs stimulates collegiality and professional development, they seem more tentative about the effects of CFG participation on their classroom practices. I would infer a couple of reasons for the questionnaire results. First, teachers might find it more difficult to gauge the effects of their CFG involvement on their students and learning. Second, teachers may feel that their participation in CFGs has little or no effect on their classroom practices. Third, teachers may be unable to *quantify* the effects of their CFG participation on their classroom practices.

As a CFG participant myself, I feel my involvement in the group does have a positive impact on my classroom practices. I have an intuitive sense that my involvement in CFGs “deepens my knowledge and expertise” as a teacher, although I am unable to establish a direct, quantifiable link between my CFG participation and my classroom practices. I find it difficult to isolate many specific examples from my classes that would support my visceral feeling that my CFG participation has a positive impact on my classroom practices. I have incorporated little tricks other teachers use. For example, I learned from Ron the value of greeting students at the door as they enter the classroom. For the last year, I have used this personalized approach which has made a difference in establishing a connection with every student before the class starts. Overall, however, my sense is that CFG participation contributes to classroom practices in more intangible than tangible ways. For instance, interview participant Monica refers to her CFG’s dialogues in on “intangibles: the ‘what if’ questions, the ‘why’ questions, the ‘is this right’ questions with more of an ethical spin” (Monica, Interview #8, 05-16-2003). CFG participants cannot quantify the impact of ethical discussions on their classroom practices.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents “strongly agree” and an additional thirty-eight percent “somewhat agree” that they “receive constructive feedback [from their CFG] on classroom issues.” However, twenty-four percent are “neutral” toward this category. Only nineteen percent of participants “strongly

agree” that their involvement in CFGs “helps with classroom practices” and has a “positive impact on students.” By the same token, forty-seven percent of those surveyed “somewhat agree” that their CFG participation helps with classroom practices, while twenty-nine percent are “neutral” and five percent “somewhat disagree” with the same statement. Similarly, forty-three percent of respondents “somewhat agree” that their CFG involvement has a “positive impact on students,” while thirty-three percent are “neutral” on the issue and five percent “somewhat disagree” with the same topic. Therefore, I would conclude from the preceding figures that there is qualified, but not unanimous support for CFGs’ having a positive impact on teachers’ classroom practices. Teachers have more of an intuitive than a definitive sense that CFGs impact positively on their pedagogical practices.

Although the written responses to the open-ended questions do support the theme of CFGs’ having a positive impact on teachers’ classroom practices, they are not as numerous as those cited earlier identifying professional collaboration and growth. Several respondents mention that CFGs provide them with new ideas they can use in the classroom and also make them more aware of other teachers’ classroom strategies. In addition, they view CFGs as a way to “improve the calibre of teaching.” One participant writes that the members of his CFG “help each other think about teaching practices.” Another respondent maintains that the CFG programme “improves and enriches the learning environment.” However, the following responses may best articulate what teachers seek from their participation in CFGs: “to strive to be a better educator on a day-to-day basis and bring benefits to the students” and “to evaluate myself as a teacher.” These views reflect two of the most important purposes of CFGs for teachers’ classroom practices: self-reflection and improvement. CFGs cultivate professional growth through shared reflection that focusses on transforming teaching practices.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I presented my theoretical analysis and interpretation of the central themes that emerged from the participant interviews and linked the primary interview data with the questionnaire data. I opened my discussion with a self-reflection on my dual roles as participant observer in the CFG programme and research study. I examined the data in relation to my thesis focus on the impact of collaborative communities on teachers' professional growth and classroom practices. I concluded with my analysis of the questionnaire data in relation to the central themes of the primary interview data. In the next chapter, I show how the complementary seeds of reflective practice, dialogism, situated learning and critical theory have taken root in our school and how they might flourish in future growing seasons and beyond these pages.

### Chapter Five: Rotating Crops

*"The seeds of knowledge creation already lie within the school system, ready to germinate if the right conditions can be provided...." (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 230)*

*"[My participation in CFGs has] rejuvenated me to read more professional journals, because obviously there's a lot more out there that I need to know, that I can use immediately as soon as I know." (Cheryl, Interview #2, 04-10-2003)*

These two quotes perpetuate the seeds of knowledge that engender professional growth and renewal. Rotating crops regenerates the soil and creates new opportunities for growth and renewal. Throughout my narrative, I have sown the seeds of theory and practice in the perennial garden of teachers' professional growth. In this chapter, I show how the complementary seeds of reflective practice, dialogism, situated learning and critical theory have taken root in our school and how they might flourish in future growing seasons and beyond these pages. I then reflect on my own growth as a teacher leader and some of the lessons I have learned in the last three years from my involvement with CFGs. I conclude with a commentary on the cyclical nature of professional growth and the importance of personal regeneration and transformation of professional practices throughout a teacher's career. As educators, we should plant perennial gardens of teachers' professional growth rather than annual gardens that require reseeding every year.

#### *Teacher Collaboration and Communities of Practice*

When I began my research into Critical Friends Groups, I was concerned primarily with mitigating teacher isolation through shared dialogue that focussed on classroom practices. As I peeled away more layers of meaning and understanding, I realized that creating formal opportunities for teacher dialogue is a compulsory component of any effective programme of professional development. Traditional forms of professional development, e.g., workshops,

conferences and guest speakers, play important roles in the learning that teachers pursue. However, periodic professional development rarely cultivates the ongoing, shared, critical and reflective learning that deepens a teacher's knowledge and expertise.

If school administrators want their teachers to be serious about their professional growth, educational leadership must support opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue that centres on classroom practices. Administrative support does not mean mandating programmes, but offering time, space and resources for teachers to create their own communities of practice. Teachers need to feel they are in charge of their professional growth and not being told what to do by administrators or external authorities. Teachers must be active agents in their own professional growth. The Advisory Board on English Education [in Québec] (2003) writes in its Report to the Minister of Education:

If teachers are to be recognized and appreciated as professionals, it seems reasonable for them to be allowed a considerable degree of autonomy, responsibility and accountability in the fashioning of their own education within accepted professional guidelines. For teachers to be able to sustain and reinforce the role only they can play in the school setting, there should be a more dependable support system. [...] Teachers need to be encouraged to assure their own continuing education and to convince their peers that keeping up their professional expertise is a form of pride in the profession. (p. 6)

In short, teachers must be permitted to cultivate their own gardens of professional growth through shared reflection, critical dialogue and collaboration, e.g., CFGs, Participatory Action Research, Action Research and narrative inquiry. If teachers feel responsible for their own education by engaging in meaningful reflection, shared inquiry and collaborative learning, they become empowered to transform their professional practices for the benefit of the entire school community.

*Empowerment: A Practical Example*

I would like to illustrate through a concrete example how CFGs can empower teachers to transform their own realities, much in the same way Freire (1974) describes in his Culture Circles wherein participants are empowered through shared reflection and dialogue, collective inquiry, critical action and social transformation. At the behest of one of our three CFGs, the group leaders initiated a proposal for overhauling our school's substitutions policy. All CFG participants were involved in this collaborative venture that was eventually adopted by the administration. I present the proposal, followed by my discussion on how the document empowers teachers and validates their professionalism.

*Spare Periods and Substitutions for Absent Colleagues:*

*A Proposal Initiated by the Three Critical Friends Groups*

*Presented by the CFG Leaders to the Headmaster*

*December 17, 2003*

*Introduction:*

*The Wednesday [John's] CFG discussed the ever-increasing demands on faculty members' time. This is a source of frustration for many. Some went so far as to say that with the ever-diminishing amount of "free time" it is getting harder to prepare creative and challenging lessons.*

*Spare periods are valuable slots of time which are used for class preparation, correcting and, on occasion, for stress-reducing "down time." The need for the first two is obvious to anyone, but it seems that there are those who are concerned when teachers, "Waste their spares sitting in the Staff Room or exercising." Given the predicted shortfall of teachers over the next decade, it is extremely important that we not lose faculty members, particularly over preventable situations including being stressed out. A little quiet time, conversation, or exercise may help some teach more effectively.*

*With MEQ reforms and new approaches, time is even more valuable now than ever. Spare periods are the only practical times to work together on cross-*

*curricular lessons or to share ideas from conferences and the like. This is particularly important when we have classes of twenty-two students. Limiting class size to fewer than seventeen students results in improved student performance according to a number of studies. On a personal note, I [John] can tell you that my first class of sixteen is a pleasure to teach and provides extra time because correcting goes so much more quickly.*

*Finally, many find it very frustrating to lose a spare when it had been slated for such things as setting up labs, putting the finishing touches on a lesson plan, laying out art materials, or rearranging classrooms to suit a debate or group activity. Teachers would enjoy having a little more control over their time.*

*Guiding Principles (Fairness, Predictability and Quality):*

*Spare periods are valuable, whether used for preparation, marking or "down time." If there are a few who take advantage unduly, they should be dealt with on an individual basis. It is time to discontinue the practice of establishing rules for the whole community when only a few are at fault.*

*Faculty members should be able to have some control over when they will be asked to substitute. When a teacher is absent for a day or more, outside substitutes should be hired. There should be a limited number of substitutions any teacher does before they are compensated or permitted to excuse themselves from this duty.*

*Proposal:*

*Preferred Substitutions*

*Faculty Members should submit a list of their spares, prioritized to indicate their choices as to which periods to give up first, second and so on.*

*The individual responsible for assigning the substitutions should have a list, based on past experience, of the number of teachers required for each period in the cycle. These two lists would be used to establish a spares list in which each faculty member would be given three or four periods when they could be asked to*

*substitute for an absent colleague. Making substitutions predictable will be considered a great advantage over the present arrangement.*

*That the person in charge keep track of substitutions to ensure that in each period, the designated Faculty Members share the load equally.*

*It may be determined that some teachers should do more substitutions than average. For example, individuals who have little or no involvement in extra-curricular activities could be assigned more days in the cycle to ensure equitable loads.*

#### *Hiring Substitute Teachers (on a more regular basis)*

*In the event that it is known in advance a teacher will be absent for a full day or more, an individual should be hired to do the substitution.*

*Ideally, we should have experienced teachers serve as substitutes. These could be drawn from part-time teachers presently employed at school or a list of permanent substitutes. Another source of potential substitutes could be retired teachers, although there may be pension repercussions.*

*The more radical approach would be to hire young teachers out of college to serve as teachers' aids and, when required, substitutes. This approach would allow the school to assess the ability of new recruits without placing them in charge of four or more classes for the year. Furthermore, these teachers could be used to relieve the pressure felt by Junior School homeroom teachers by providing them with a break from their classes at noon, particularly in the winter.*

*It is understood that there is a budget to pay substitute teachers. This budget should be increased.*

#### *Maximum Number of Substitutions*

*A maximum number of substitutions (about ten?) should be assigned over the year to any individual. Beyond that the replacement should have the right to refuse the coverage or should be paid.*

#### *Computer Program*

*It is suggested that the Middle and Senior Schools use the computer program developed to keep track of substitutions in the Junior School. With some modifications, it could help organize information needed to implement the proposals above.*

*Questions and Answers:*

*Will the substitute teachers we hire be as effective as the regular teacher in terms of presenting the assigned work and maintaining discipline?*

*In some cases perhaps not, but we would obviously look for the best available teachers and once we establish a solid core group, we will be better off than at present where most teachers do not teach when working a sub.*

*Will the choices made by the teachers always fit the needs of the school?*

*It is highly likely that there will have to be some compromise. There are certain unpopular periods (Friday period 6) and others where there may only be a few teachers available. However, is it not preferable to have some input into when your substitutions will be? It seems likely that teachers could count on having some of their preferences fit the requirements of the school. (Have each teacher give four or five preferred periods and one to be avoided. Surely in a staff of our number two or three will fit?)*

*Can one take into account involvement in extra-curricular activities in a given season and give fewer substitutions?*

*The computer program can be made to "flag" those who should be used sparingly, though there may well be times where numbers dictate the use of a flagged teacher.*

*Should there be a ceiling in terms of compensation?*

*Such a ceiling would help avoid a situation where a teacher, seeking to maximize earnings, might skimp on their own class preparation to take a paid substitution.*

*Are the proposals in this document complete?*

*No. Should the general principles be approved, a dry run should be undertaken. Only this will show how successful the suggestions could be.*

*What's the rush?*

*Several of the ideas require funding that must be budgeted by February. It would be ideal to begin the dry run in January as it is one of the busiest months of the year.*

*The sooner the proposals are considered, the more time for refinements to be made.*

Until 2003, LCC had always used internal substitute teachers. In other words, as a full-time teacher I was required to replace absent teachers in their classrooms. Internal substitutions are common practice in some private schools. Although a programme of internal substitutions creates continuity and stability and is less expensive than hiring external substitutes, it does create additional stress for teachers. For example, when I arrive at school at eight in the morning I might discover that I have to cover a colleague's class. This means that the spare that I planned to use for preparing lessons or correcting essays, i.e., serving the needs of my students, has been appropriated and I will most likely have to make up the time after school or at home. Last year, at the request of the Department Heads Committee, the Headmaster budgeted \$5,000 to hire external substitute teachers on days when several teachers might be away because of illness, field trips or sports excursions. Although the allocated funds relieved some of the stress of the substitution overload, the teachers felt that the administration had not gone far enough in addressing our concerns about the use of internal substitutions. In effect, the administration had not responded to continual verbal pleas from the faculty to reform the school's substitution protocol.

For example, a participant in John's CFG (one of three CFGs currently in operation at LCC) mentioned in one of his monthly meetings that he would like to see some changes in the school's substitution policy. After some critical dialogue on this issue, John brought his group's concerns to me and Steven. We then

approached our groups for feedback and reported back to John. John's group devised the written proposal, to which Steven's and my groups responded. John, Steven and I collaborated on the final wording and plan for presenting the document to the administration. All CFG participants had a say in producing the proposal, even though they may not have had their way. For instance, some participants did not want us to mention that teachers used spare periods for "stress-reducing 'down time.'" Although we listened respectfully to their concerns, we claimed that as trusted professionals we should have the right to use our spares for any activities we choose. If that means working out in the fitness room as opposed to correcting, so be it, as long as we are performing our professional duties to the best of our abilities. We were able to reach consensus through reflective dialogue that was rooted in trust, respect, honesty and compromise. We reflected critically on the root problem of substitutions, studied ways to mitigate the situation (including learning from the experiences of other schools), engaged in meaningful dialogue in order to produce our written proposal, and took a proactive stance in presenting our proposed changes to the administration.

This process I have just described mirrors the theoretical frameworks for professional growth and transformation that are at the root of my thesis: reflective practice, dialogism, social constructivism and critical theory. For example, as CFG participants who wanted to effect change, we began with Dewey's (1933) phases of reflective thinking: "(1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12). The perplexing difficulty we wanted to resolve was the issue of substitutions. We used Participatory Action Research to study ways we might solve the problem. For instance, we investigated what substitution policies existed in other schools. We engaged in meaningful dialogue that focussed on the problem and viable solutions. This process mirrored the words of Bakhtin (1981):

“The more intensive, differentiated and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance attaching, among other possible subjects of talk, to another’s word, another’s utterance, since another’s word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support, further development and so on” (p. 337). Through reciprocity and knowledge-building, critical dialogue, we co-constructed a new reality, i.e., the revised substitution policy. We used the sociocultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978) of critical reflection and shared collegial dialogue to mediate between the familiar status quo of internal substitutions and the unfamiliar ideal of external substitutions. As a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we negotiated and renegotiated the meaning of our collective initiative and our learning process was situated in our meaningful engagement with a real world activity: the development of a feasible substitutions policy. We were able to transform our reality through collaborative dialogue, shared reflection and critical action (Shor, 1987).

In the span of about a month, we generated the proposal outlined earlier and presented it to the school’s administration. Initially, we met with the Headmaster, who was supportive and enthusiastic about many of the proposed changes. He cautioned us that we would not be able to effect all changes, e.g., placing a ceiling on the number of substitutions for individual teachers, as they might not be feasible. However, he readily accepted the majority of our proposals which were then ratified by the administrative team. Finally, the Department Head Committee passed a motion to adopt the proposal and the administrative team is currently working on an implementation plan for the following academic year. As of this writing, the Headmaster has allocated \$15,000 in next year’s budget to support the new substitutions programme.

The narrative example illustrates how CFGs can actually transform the realities of the workplace. Through the process of shared reflection, critical dialogue and situated learning, our teachers were able to proactively effect change

within their community of practice. Constructivist learning theorist Gordon Wells (2000) says, “In such [teachers as coparticipants] professional communities of inquiry, some of the most productive transformations of schooling are being carried out, often using a social constructivist framework to assist them” (p. 66). The collective knowledge of our three CFGs, or professional communities of inquiry, combined with positive action empowered us to bring about a constructive solution to a persistent problem and transform the reality of our workplace. The residual benefits should affect students, as well, because the new substitution policy should allow teachers more time to prepare their lessons, reflect on their practices, and relieve some of the stress of their demanding work.

#### *Self-Assessment and Lessons Learned*

As a teacher leader, initiating and running the CFG programme at LCC has been an invaluable experience for me and I have grown as a leader. By taking a risk in spearheading this professional development activity, I have learned that people respond well to others’ risk-taking and that a leader’s enthusiasm can be infectious. I am overwhelmed that the CFG programme has grown from seventeen to thirty-three voluntary participants in under three years. However, upon further reflection, I realize there is a need for ongoing, site-based collegiality in education. Teachers are thirsting for ways to collaborate and thereby reduce the isolation of being a solitary classroom practitioner. Even at LCC, where professional development is fostered and supported, there is a lacuna of professional collaboration available to only CFG participants. For example, most professional development opportunities still exist outside the school at conferences, workshops and graduate schools. Without being facile, I have observed that teachers *can* learn from teachers and that some of the best professional development resources, i.e., fellow teachers, *can* be found within the school itself. As teacher researcher Helen Telford (1996) says, “[Teachers in a collaborative work culture] are empowered personally and collectively, acquiring

a combined confidence which enables them to respond critically to the demands of the workplace” (p. 21).

One reflective understanding has been the potential of teachers to be proactive in changing the school climate. Why let the administration dictate change when the persons “in the trenches,” i.e., the classroom teachers, are best suited to initiate and effect change? As trusted professionals, teachers should be granted the power and authority to exercise greater control over change processes. Administrators should not be the sole arbiters of transforming the school culture. Ideally, teachers and administrators should collaborate on the change process. If new policies are simply mandated, teachers will resist incorporating them into their professional practices. Teachers need to understand the benefits of new policies for their classrooms in order for effective changes to be realized in schools. Teacher researcher Virginia Richardson (1990) addresses the appropriateness of teachers to make decisions regarding change:

*Who is in control of change?* We have found [...] that teachers exercise considerable control over the decision of whether and how to implement a change. In addition, because of the situational nature of teaching, there are strong arguments for the notion that teachers should make these decisions [...]. Thus, any change process should both acknowledge this control, and help teachers understand and be accountable for the pedagogical and moral implications of their decisions. (p. 13)

Furthermore, I came to understand that “changing the intellectual environment in which teachers work” (Wineburg & Grossman, 1998, p. 350) should be a key goal of an educational leader. If one empowers one’s staff, the benefits to student learning can be significant.

The major lesson I learned was that collective action inspired by committed individuals can transform the learning environment. Freire (1974) says, “Critical understanding leads to critical action” (p. 44). This critical

understanding has led me to certain agency in my school. As an educational leader, I can serve as an active, critical, and intellectual guide and facilitator to my colleagues, in much the same way as I do in the classroom. I can be a transformative intellectual who educates colleagues and students alike to be “active, critical citizens” (Giroux, 1988, p. 127) within our school. I can provide the tools, e.g., the moral compass of collegial collaboration, to read the road map of change. However, rather than having only a captive audience of students, I need to create more opportunities to share with my colleagues my knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm for learning. I must learn continually about my profession by studying ways teachers can share their practices with one another. Teacher researchers Bruce Joyce, Carlene Murphy, Beverly Showers, and Joseph Murphy (1989) observe that “the charisma of the most inspired teachers should dominate the environment. Where it does, the learning climate can change quite rapidly—far more so than conventional wisdom would predict” (p. 77). If the enthusiasm generated by our CFG participants continues to grow, we can cultivate a perennial garden of teachers’ professional growth that will effect positive change in the education of our students.

### *Implications of the Research*

Professional communities of inquiry offer teachers opportunities for ongoing dialogues with colleagues on pedagogical practices. The implications of this dialogic process for professional development are various and potentially far-reaching. Teachers who collaborate with one another can learn from each other’s experiences and thereby solidify their own professional identities (Franzak, 2002). As collective knowledge may be broader and deeper than individual knowledge, professionals involved in communities of inquiry are likely to enhance their understandings of teaching and learning. Teachers engaged in formalized dialogues with colleagues can feel connected, supported and empowered by their collective experiences and consequently transform their realities. Freire says, “Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can

critically transform reality” (Shore, 1987, p. 99). Teachers who are supported professionally by one another develop an important sense of community that mitigates the isolation of the classroom and ultimately increases their job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. This support is vital for newcomers to the community. Providing newcomers with opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue with old-timers and to reflect on their own practices is of critical importance in their professional growth and for carrying on the sociocultural traditions of the school. Cultivating communities of practice like CFGs allows newcomers legitimate peripheral participation, that is, integration into the school community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teachers who lead communities of inquiry may have the potential to become educational leaders themselves. Prospective teacher leaders are able to flourish in a safe climate of collegial sharing. In creating a collaborative school culture, teacher leaders can encourage others, provide knowledge and expertise, and generate an enthusiasm for learning (Rosenholtz, 1989). Collaborative work groups reflect the growing tendency toward a flattened model of leadership, as opposed to the traditional hierarchical structure. In a collaborative workplace, professional practitioners share in the decision-making processes that benefit the broader school community. CFGs provide opportunities for administrators *and* teachers to share in processes that effect change in the school culture. Perhaps most important, communities of practice contribute to teachers’ understandings of professional expertise; they deepen teachers’ knowledge of professional practices; and they enable teachers to pursue the recursive process of professional growth throughout their careers as their learning is situated in meaningful engagement in real world activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

My study has major implications for the Quebec Education Plan, i.e., the MEQ Reform, which requires teachers to work collaboratively to transform their practices and the cultures of their schools. In its Report to the Minister of Education, the Advisory Board on English Education (2003) speaks about “the

fundamental change the reform requires of teachers. It is a process that will require ongoing reflection, fine-tuning, perseverance and the wise choice of pedagogical approaches” (p. 5). The report goes on to say that “individual teachers will not be able to meet the long-term challenges of transforming their teaching on their own...[but will need]...to share their ‘best practices’ with their colleagues” (p. 5). Through ongoing, reflective dialogue of the type engendered by CFGs, teachers are enabled to communicate in a collaborative environment that cultivates renewal, regeneration and reform.

Although my study is limited to a particular institutional context, I think it also has implications for professional development in other educational settings, such as public schools, colleges and universities. The relatively inexpensive nature of collaborative communities like CFGs means they can be established feasibly in a wide variety of schools. Although communication may be more difficult in multicultural settings, the dialogue engendered by CFGs can break down some of the sociolinguistic barriers that may exist in Allophone schools, for example. Furthermore, communities of inquiry can be networked among different schools and levels of education. For instance, private schools in the Montreal region could network interscholastic CFG programmes to share knowledge and expertise on the MEQ Reform and McGill University’s Faculty of Education could create CFGs for pre-service teachers to share ideas and collaborate on their experiences as student teachers.

CFGs have broad implications for teachers, administrators, researchers and policymakers. Teachers can deepen their knowledge and expertise about educational practices that may allow them to become better classroom practitioners and perhaps enable them to transform their workplaces for the betterment of themselves and their students. Administrators can delegate the development of curriculum and pedagogy to CFGs or share in decision-making processes through their own participation in CFGs. Researchers can work collaboratively in CFGs to generate knowledge and expertise in their fields of

study. Policymakers can work collaboratively in CFGs to develop policies that reflect real world practices. Most important, all those involved in education need to find time and space for engaging in meaningful dialogue about the purposes of education, teaching and learning.

My research merely scratches the surface of the broad topic of teachers' professional growth within collaborative communities of practice. Future research could include studying in greater depth the ways in which teachers collaborate with one another in both formal and informal dialogic settings in diverse multicultural and multilingual contexts. It would also be interesting to compare teachers' conversations in mandated meetings with those in voluntary CFG meetings. In light of Quebec's educational reforms, researchers could focus on the nature and effectiveness of teacher teams in constructing the new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. The potential for growth in this field of study is great, as teacher collaboration is a rich and varied topic and issue whose seeds have just begun to take root.

### *Conclusion*

I now come full circle and draw my thesis to a close by bringing you back to my Foreword. The epigraphs by Voltaire and Proust embody for me the importance of teachers' taking responsibility for cultivating their own professional growth and of the need for cross-fertilization of ideas engendered by collaborative communities of professional practice in enriching educational gardens. As educators, we have a duty and an obligation to cultivate our own terrain and to nurture newcomers to the teaching profession by creating the optimal forms for professional growth. If we listen to each other, learn from one another, and grow together in collaborative communities of professional practice, we may transform our schools into fertile gardens of knowledge for the intellectual sustenance of students and teachers alike. However, we need to make some sacrifices in order to create beautiful perennial gardens of teachers' professional growth that may flourish for generations. Critical Friends Groups

enable us to share the sacrifices and apply our collective wisdom to the problems we face, so that we may grow individually and collectively. Collaborative communities of practice lessen the burden of the individual teacher and help make the journey of teaching a shared road to enlightenment.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Interview Questions

1. In what ways or to what extent has your participation in Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) at Lower Canada College (LCC) impacted on your professional growth?
2. In what ways or to what extent has your participation in CFGs contributed to your classroom practice?
3. In what ways or to what extent has your involvement in CFGs lessened your feelings of teacher isolation?
4. What are some of the benefits of CFGs for professional development at LCC?
5. What are some of the common themes that have emerged from your CFG conversations/dialogues?
6. How are your informal teacher dialogues different from your CFG dialogues?
7. What understandings of teaching and learning have emerged from your CFG sessions?
8. How do you feel CFGs promote mentoring at LCC?

## Appendix B

### Leader Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Has your role as CFG leader impacted on your leadership growth at LCC?
2. In what ways or to what extent do you think teacher leaders shape the school culture?
3. In what ways or to what extent has your involvement in CFGs had a positive impact on professional growth at LCC?
4. What have you learned about yourself in your role as CFG leader?
5. How do you perceive the social dynamics within your group?
6. In what ways or to what extent do these dynamics differ from the other groups?
7. What are some of the lessons you have learned as group leader?
8. In what ways or to what extent do see yourself as a mentor to the teachers in your group?

## Appendix C

## Sample Interview Transcript Page

Interview #9 (06-02-2003)

Brian: In what ways or to what extent has your participation in CFGs at LCC impacted on your professional growth?

Ron: Well, originally when I got involved, I was not reluctant, but I wanted to be low-key, because, coming from the administrative side of things, at that time, I didn't want to be someone who looked like they were imposing administrative goals on a group that was developing its own persona, its own thrust. So I came in originally just to listen and find out what was happening. But immediately, I think in the first session, we immediately got into a philosophical discussion about what we do in classrooms, and why we do them. And I guess what it made me think of, it's a bit like why teachers are so good at doing other things. It got me to break down, step by step, things that I'd been doing automatically because obviously I had to explain it to other professionals who had these questions, so to do that, I had to think about it myself. For example, I remember talking about what I like to do in a classroom. If possible, I like to be at the front of the classroom, at the door, when the kids come in, just to say hi to them each time. And I found that, having done that, if you do that with kids quite often, it makes a difference in the tone of the class. But I'd forgotten why I did that. And I had to remember where it came from, and it actually came from a film I saw at a PD session in the public school. And it was a visual, and it was just there, and it worked. So it actually stirred up some old ideas and made me make sense of them. And it also helped me listen to some other teachers and their frustrations. That was the original thing.

## Appendix D

### Participant Questionnaire

Identification number:

The data from this questionnaire will be used as part of an MA research study on Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) at Lower Canada College (LCC). In addition to the questions, there is space available at the end for additional comments, criticisms, observations and/or suggestions. Thank you for taking the time to fill in this valuable feedback tool.

For statements one to fourteen, please circle the number (1-5) that best corresponds to your response.

1—strongly disagree / 2—somewhat disagree / 3—neutral / 4—somewhat agree / 5—strongly agree

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. CFGs have increased your knowledge and understanding of other teaching levels and disciplines at LCC. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. CFGs have facilitated your professional collaboration with colleagues.                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. You were able to speak freely and candidly at the meetings.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. The group respected your viewpoints.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. In terms of your own classroom issues, you received constructive feedback from your CFG colleagues.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. You feel you contributed positively to the professional growth of your colleagues.                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. You feel you grew professionally within the CFG.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. The CFG helped you with your classroom practice.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. The CFG had a positive impact on your students.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. CFGs are a valuable method of professional development.                                    |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Your involvement in CFGs lessened your feelings of teacher isolation.                      |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. The CFG programme is a valuable tool for mentoring.  |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. The CFG Pilot Project should remain a voluntary professional development programme at LCC. |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. You will continue to be a CFG participant next year.                                       |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

For questions fifteen to nineteen, please write in your responses.

15. What changes or improvements would you suggest to improve the CFG format next year?
16. If you think CFGs are a good vehicle for professional development, how would you suggest we expand the programme?
17. What do you think is the purpose of CFGs for both yourself and the school as a whole?
18. If you were in charge of PD at LCC, what would you do concretely in the short term about the CFG programme?
19. If you were in charge of PD at LCC, what would be your alternate visions of PD to the status quo? What might you do to implement your visions?

Additional Comments:

## Appendix E

Table E1

*Questionnaire Survey Responses by Numbers of Participants*

Question number	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	0	0	0	14	7
2	0	0	1	9	11
3	0	0	1	3	17
4	0	0	1	1	19
5	0	0	5	8	8
6	0	0	2	11	8
7	0	1	3	8	9
8	0	1	6	10	4
9	0	1	7	9	4
10	0	0	0	6	15
11	0	1	1	6	13
12	0	1	1	7	12
13	0	0	0	2	19
14	0	0	4	2	15

## Appendix F

Table F1

*Questionnaire Survey Responses by Percentages of Participants*

Question number	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1	0	0	0	67	33
2	0	0	5	43	52
3	0	0	5	14	81
4	0	0	5	5	90
5	0	0	24	38	38
6	0	0	10	52	38
7	0	5	14	38	43
8	0	5	29	47	19
9	0	5	33	43	19
10	0	0	0	29	71
11	0	5	5	29	61
12	0	5	5	33	57
13	0	0	0	10	90
14	0	0	19	10	71

## Appendix G

### Sample Questionnaire Open-Ended Responses

17. What is the purpose of CFGs for both yourself and the school as a whole?

- Professional support
- Getting to know other teachers
- Having views of other teachers on current issues
- Contact with teachers from all sections of the school
- A chance to voice feelings/attitudes/thoughts on current issues
- Partly to get together and blow off steam, but then to move on to the positive
- Learn from each other and from selected readings as long as they aren't too long
- I want a few small ideas I can actually try out
- Help each other think about teaching practices
- Establish and publicly state learning goals
- Look closely at curriculum and student work
- Communication
- Support
- Team spirit
- Shared successes
- To evaluate myself as a teacher
- To get new ideas that I can use in the classroom
- To see if my concerns about school life are my own or a group consensus
- To get a group of ideas or approaches to a particular problem
- For me to develop an awareness of others' strategies
- For the school to develop camaraderie of staff
- For me it's a scheduled opportunity to bond with colleagues (something that often gets pushed out of our schedule)
- I would like to think this participation improves the school as a whole
- Networking/communicating with colleagues

## Appendix H

## Sample Analytic Memo Page

Memo 2 (7-14-2003)

Transcripts #5-7

Listening to other people and sharing ideas are keys. As Mike says, “So the more different conversations you can have, that can yield benefits in a few different ways. It can yield positive benefits because you can come up with new pedagogical ideas, what to do in the classroom, how to present material [...] .” As an administrator, Linda gets to listen to other people, something she might not have a chance to do during the busy school day. Doug says it’s nice to have “that sense of belonging to the group and sharing those ideas.”

Connectedness is important (also in light of mentoring): Mike mentions, “Just by connecting with a small group, especially as a newcomer to the community, by connecting with a small group and getting to know them a little better, personally and professionally, I think it opens the door more to asking questions and so that type of mentoring is a very good thing.” Linda echoes this thought, “If anything, it’s probably just given me the confidence to know two groups of about ten people in the school, which is a start for a person who’s fairly new, like me. So it does open doors and I would feel I could walk in to any of those people and just say, can you help me, or what’s your take on this.” Similarly, Doug states, “And maybe there’s someone in your group that you do have a connection with, that you could see more often than just once a month...it definitely creates those links that, in the beginning, are helpful for a new teacher in the school. At least hearing more experienced teachers going through the frustrations that you might feel, it must be me, it must be me. It can be very reassuring.”

## Glossary

*Banking Concept of Education:* Freire's (2001) term for viewing students as receptacles in which teachers deposit knowledge (p. 67).

*Classroom Practices:* Pedagogical processes that facilitate learning.

*Community of Practice:* A cohesive group or collective of practitioners who collaborate on issues related to professional practices and engage in social practices that cultivate learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

*Conscientization:* Freire's "process of developing consciousness [...] that is understood to have the power to transform reality" (Taylor, 1993, p. 52).

*Critical Friends Group:* A collaborative community of six to fourteen teaching practitioners who meet once a month for two hours to engage in meaningful dialogue focussed on classroom practices and professional growth.

*Critical Theory:* The philosophy that society can be transformed through increased intellectual awareness, critical consciousness and collective action.

*Culture Circle:* A learning group led by a coordinator who facilitates dialogue among participants of the same cultural background who seek "to clarify situations or to seek action arising from that clarification" (Freire, 1974, p. 42).

*Dialogic Imagination (or Dialogism):* Bakhtin's (1981) philosophy of the individual's interaction with meanings, linguistic or literary *and* internal or external, that contribute to one's own language, knowledge and perceptions of reality.

*Difference:* Depending on the context, *difference* may mean unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, otherness or differentiation.

*Double-Loop Learning:* Examining the assumptions that underlie one's actions to resolve the doubt, tension or conflict that may exist in any workplace situation (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 19).

*Education:* The processes of self-reflection, critical thinking and growing awareness of the emerging individual consciousness. The movement toward autonomy, self-possession and the re-perception of reality through one's active engagement in the pursuit of truth, problem-solving and meta-cognition.

*Engagement:* Britton's (1990) term that refers to one's ability to translate through reflective processes the *unfamiliar* into the *familiar* (pp. 108-109), i.e., solve problems and pursue change.

*Focal & Subsidiary Awareness:* Polanyi's (1964) distinction between one's primary activity (focal) and secondary activity (subsidiary). The example he uses to illustrate this distinction is of the pianist who shifts his focus from the music (focal awareness) to his fingers (subsidiary awareness) and gets so confused he has to stop playing (p. 56).

*Internalization:* The "internal reconstruction of an external operation" that enables the individual to transform his psychological processes from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal level and to achieve autonomy (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56).

*Integrated Professional Culture:* "Ongoing professional exchange across experience levels and sustained support and development for all teachers" (Johnson & Kardos, 2001, p. 15).

*Learning:* Socially constructed autonomy, personal empowerment and intellectual transformation through the development of one's critical powers.

*Legitimate Peripheral Participation:* Refers to a participant's (newcomer's) movement "toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

*Mediated Activity:* Any activity in which an individual interacts with the cultural signs, symbols and tools of his society and thereby mediates between his external and internal realities (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 52-57).

*Nested Contexts:* Maguire's (1994) term which expands the traditional conception of the learning context from people, place, time and activity to include purpose and meaning (p. 120). Nested contexts take into account the internal or personal realities of learners, as well as the many layers of meaning reflected by external realities or the school, the sociocultural and linguistic community, and the national and global levels.

*Newcomer:* A neophyte in a particular community of practice.

*Old-Timer:* A veteran in a particular community of practice.

*Participatory Action Research*: “A form of action research [taking its cues from ‘perceptions and practitioners within particular, local practitioner contexts’] that involves practitioners as both subjects and co-researchers” (Argyris & Schön, 1991, p. 86).

*Professional Growth*: The transformation of one’s professional practices through the processes of deepening knowledge and expertise, critical reflection, individual and collaborative inquiry, dialogue and social reflection.

*Reflective Practice*: A process of critical reflection on teaching practices that leads to increased awareness, professional growth and the transformation of professional practices.

*Reflective Thought*: “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9).

*Situated Learning*: Learning that occurs *in situ* or within a particular socio-cultural and historical context.

*Social Constructivist Learning (or Social Constructivism)*: The philosophical study of humans in their individual and collective constructions or interpretations of their social worlds within sociolinguistic and historical contexts.

*Tacit Dimension*: Refers to our internalized knowledge or “the fact that we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1964, p. 4).

*Tacit Knowing-in-Action*: One’s espoused theory of action made tacit through internalization (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 11).

*Teaching*: Facilitating the transformative potential of individuals through their critical engagement in personal growth, reflection, life-long learning and meta-cognition.

*Teacher Leader*: A teacher who leads by example and inspires colleagues to improve their teaching practices.

*Teacher Talk*: Hobson’s (2001) term for professional dialogue among teaching colleagues.

*Theory in Practice*: Argyris and Schön’s (1974) theory of determining one’s intentional behaviour in professional practices.

*Transformative Intellectuals:* Teachers who transform their students into thoughtful, active and critical citizens by engaging in critical reflection on their own teaching practices (Giroux, 1988).

*Utterance:* Bakhtin's (1981) term that refers to the specific social, historical, cultural and dialogized speech of the speaker. One's utterances contribute to a deeper collective understanding of reality.

*Veteran-Oriented Professional Culture:* Serves the needs of established and independent veteran teachers and does not create opportunities for new teachers to engage with the veterans in meaningful and productive ways.

*Zone of Proximal Development:* "The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).