What counts in the development of teachers' learning conversations?

A case study of a group of New Zealand educators working together to improve learning outcomes for students in Year 9 classes.

by

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Abstract

This research was undertaken in a New Zealand secondary school. Using case study methodology, it examines teachers' learning conversations as they work together in a group to improve outcomes for underachieving students in Year 9 classes. Participants include four teachers from different departments working collaboratively in a team teaching project, a member of the school's senior management team and an external facilitator. My role is as researcher, initially interviewing participants and observing meetings where they examine data and reflect on classroom practices.

My analysis of research data finds that learning conversations are complex. Multiple interdependent factors are at play in teachers' professional discussions. Three interrelated threads - beliefs, relationships and structures - provide the framework for the analysis and are examined in detail. I use a weaving metaphor to explain their interaction and to describe the development and outcomes of the teachers' learning conversations. As the groups' work evolves and the threads are woven together, two aspects are recognised in the cloth.

Firstly, contradictions arise and these reveal the two sidedness of the fabric of learning conversations. One side represents the ideal as described in current research literature, and expressed in the voices of educational leaders and in the hopes and dreams of participants in this

study. The other side represents the reality of such conversations in practice.

Secondly, the research describes an emerging learning community embarking on a new project. The fabric of its learning conversations is at times weak and fragile; threads tangle and fray, the texture is loose and lumpy. Previous structures have to be dismantled and old practices unravelled before new approaches can take hold. Developing learning conversations is found to be a complicated and complex process.

Finally, consideration is given to implications for researchers, educators and policy makers if planning to implement and support learning conversations is to be effective. Challenges for researchers include: building knowledge of the secondary school context, particularly factors which support learning for disadvantaged and underachieving students at junior levels; continuing the investigation of the nature of teachers' work in the new professional learning environment that is developing in New Zealand and internationally - and supporting teacher research into that development; and further examination of the factors that contribute to contradictions in teachers learning conversations so that practitioners can be more aware of them and develop interventions that are more likely to realise the potential that learning conversations promise.

Recommendations for educators and policymakers focus on strengthening the threads that build the framework of teachers' learning

conversations: beliefs, relationships and structural and systemic factors

so that professional learning conversations can be implemented

effectively.

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Chapter 1

Setting the scene:
Examining the existing fabric of teachers' learning conversations

This thesis explores the development of teachers' learning conversations[1] by investigating the professional discussions of a teacher group working to improve learning outcomes for underachieving students. The research was conducted in a New Zealand secondary school and focuses on the conversations teachers engage in as they come together in a team teaching project to support student learning in Year 9 (Y9) English classes.

The New Zealand Curriculum (2008, p. 19) advocates an inquiry into practice model. This requires teachers to investigate their teaching impact in an inquiry cycle. The process involves:

- Looking at evidence of student achievement and their own practice
- Deciding on an issue to investigate
- Implementing an intervention to address it, then
- Reflecting on the outcomes.

Teachers are encouraged to enter into this process collectively, which involves them in collaboration with colleagues (Ministry of Education, 2004). Such work can take many forms, but inevitably includes teachers engaging in regular professional conversations around their students'

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[1] Learning conversations: This term is explored more fully later in this chapter and is defined on p 18-19.

learning needs, and the teaching practices that will support improved student learning outcomes.

These professional discussions (which in this thesis are called learning conversations) are important in my work. As a facilitator of teacher development on the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Secondary Literacy Project I was expected to encourage and support teachers' participation in them. However, my experience is that such conversations are not as easy to establish and sustain as the literature suggests. I began thinking more deeply about this aspect of my work. What are learning conversations? What are the factors that support or challenge teachers' engagement in them and what are teachers' perceptions and understandings about these conversations? What motivates and sustains teachers' commitment to such conversations?

I present this thesis through the metaphor of weaving and cloth making. This chapter introduces knowledge about the existing fabric by exploring what is known already about teachers' learning conversations.

Background to the study

My study began early in 2008 when I enrolled to research a thesis to complete my Masters of Education (M.Ed.) degree at Victoria University of Wellington. I chose to specialise in professional development for my Master's qualification. My research topic combines work and study

interests, and explores teachers' professional conversations, where evidence is used to inform lesson planning and actual classroom practice.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this single case study in a secondary school context is to better understand participants' beliefs and experiences of learning conversations, and their perceptions of how those conversations impact on both teachers' practice and students' learning outcomes. I hope that my findings will identify practices that support teachers' participation in learning conversations. The aim is to help make such conversations effective. I also hope that findings will help to develop understandings about the complexities of learning conversations so that teacher educators, facilitators, and educational leaders in schools can work to overcome the challenges that threaten their implementation.

The research questions

The over-arching question of the research is:

'What counts' in the development of teachers' learning conversations when teachers in a New Zealand secondary school work together to improve learning outcomes for students in their Y9 classes?

The following sub-questions highlight the different aspects that are explored in the study.

- How does current research define learning conversations and suggest they might be more effective?

- In what ways do teachers of junior core classes in a New Zealand secondary school describe their values, beliefs and experiences about the learning conversations they participate in?

- How are these values and beliefs demonstrated in teachers' learning conversations?

- What impact does teachers' involvement in learning conversations have on their values, beliefs and practices and their perceptions of student learning?

Rationale and significance

New Zealand Government policy in education aims to improve learning outcomes for all students. MOE guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2004) state that teachers engaging in learning conversations around evidence are an effective way of addressing diverse student needs. This is reflected in MOE literacy and numeracy projects at national level, where facilitators of teacher in-service development are encouraged to build learning communities and to foster use of student achievement data and critical reflection on teaching practice.

National and international literature also suggest that, when teachers take part in learning conversations, based on student achievement data and the critical examination of teacher practice, they are better equipped to adapt classroom strategies, to meet their students' learning needs

(Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003; Timperley & Parr, 2004b). An important focus of this work is building teachers' knowledge and use of those tools, which assess student achievement. The New Zealand MOE's investment in the development and promotion asTTle[2] exemplifies this. At the time of this study the MOE was trialling an electronic version of asTTle Reading, in a number of pilot schools throughout New Zealand. The case study school was part of that trial.

Initial reading on this topic has identified a gap in the literature, which indicates my thesis has the potential to add to existing understandings. In the New Zealand context, most of the research about this kind of professional learning describes primary schools. I am interested in finding out what factors are at play in learning conversations within a secondary school context, where teachers come together from different curriculum backgrounds, and generally operate within different structures. Secondary teachers are usually subject specialists, work with a larger cohort, and have contact with individual students for much less time than their primary colleagues.

Assumptions and perspectives

It is important to identify basic assumptions of this research study. Qualitative research methodology acknowledges that much research is interpretative and so a researcher's background and experiences impact

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[2] AsTTle: Assessment Tool for Teaching and Learning. A tool developed by the NZ MOE to assess student literacy and numeracy needs in both English and Te Reo Maori.

significantly on the decisions made throughout the research process (including research design, data collection and analysis procedures) and the writing up of the research report (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b). As I read to deepen my understanding of teachers' learning conversations, I recognise that my thinking has been influenced strongly by the New Zealand MOE publications and presentations that I have experienced through my work.

My assumptions

First, I believe that teachers working together, in core class groupings (or team teaching partnerships in this case) is an effective approach for schools seeking to support Y9 and Y10 students in their learning as they transition from the primary to secondary environment. In my experience many students (and particularly those with lower literacy levels or specific learning difficulties) struggle with this move. I have taught in areas with high numbers of Maori and Pasifika students, where schools were trialling new structures to support student learning. I believe more integrated approaches support learning for these groups. This assumption is based on personal experience and is supported in some research literature (Education Review Office, 2003; Wylie, Ferral, & Hodgen, 2004).

Secondly, I believe that the secondary school environment provides different challenges for participants in learning conversations. Traditional secondary school structures, systems and size create barriers to

effective communication. This experience-based assumption is also confirmed by research (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Moje, 1996; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

Other assumptions relate to learning conversations and the professional learning context. One is that teachers' learning conversations should use evidence, of student learning and teacher practice, as a starting point. Another assumption is that leadership teams should provide suitable conditions to support their development. These conditions include developing a shared vision, allowing sufficient time for professional learning opportunities and providing the structures and systems to support any initiatives that are undertaken. These assumptions are supported both in the literature on professional learning I have read in my study, and the MOE documentation and advice, given to me as a facilitator of professional learning (Dufour, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2004; Timperley, 2005).

My perspectives

My experience as a teacher is largely in low decile[3] secondary schools, with diverse student populations. I have worked in both mainstream and Learning Support Departments, and have taken particular responsibility for literacy development. Also I have gained qualifications in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and have worked as

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[3] Decile - A term used by the NZ MOE to indicate the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of such students.

an ESOL teacher in schools. A long time interest has been how students with special learning needs can be supported to reach their potential in the mainstream classroom; and related to that, what aids teachers in achieving that goal.

In my facilitation work I became interested in the factors that enable effective teacher professional learning, and I sought development through postgraduate study. I enjoy robust professional conversations with my peers and I have learned a great deal from such discussions. They encourage me to reflect deeply on my own practice, and they constantly challenge my thinking. They lift my confidence, and I believe they have improved my practice. My work and study environment provide many opportunities for self-reflection, critique on practice and constructive feedback. Such factors are fundamental to the notion of learning conversations, and central to this thesis.

I acknowledge that these experiences have influenced my thinking and will contribute to bias in my interpretation of findings from this research study. Again, qualitative methodology encourages researchers to state any biases from the outset (Janesick, 2003). Some of my biases include my beliefs that:

- What works in the primary sector might not be as effective in a secondary context.
- The subject specialisations of secondary schools leads to a curriculum that is content focused. This is not necessarily

- conducive to supporting students' language and literacy acquisition for academic success.

- Teachers, working together across curriculum boundaries are a better solution to supporting student learning than the traditional sole teacher approach.

- Integrated approaches to learning and the curriculum can provide more appropriate support to learners, particularly in Y9 and Y10, as they transition from primary to secondary school.

I also believe that educators should be actively engaged in on-going professional learning throughout their working lives. We need challenge to develop and improve our practices as teachers, so that we can effectively support each other and our students (especially those disadvantaged by schooling systems). Part of that challenge is working for change in our schools, so that structures and system provide an environment for all students to experience success in learning.

Findings from the research literature

Context: Teacher professional learning

Conversations between teachers, where the focus is on the improvement of teaching and learning aimed at raising student achievement standards are increasingly common (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2003; Dufour, 2004; Graham, 2007). Such conversations are seen as key in achieving the

ideal of professional learning community (Dufour, 2004; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Smith, 2005). Some report that reflective conversations between teachers can be a means of "establishing externally introduced change" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 186). Others recognise them as contributing towards educational reform, so schools are better able to meet the needs of those disaffected and disadvantaged by traditional systems (Achinstein, 2002; Kincheloe, 2003; Sparks, 2005).

Given my interest in how learning conversations function in the secondary school environment, I want to identify some of the particular issues and implications for teacher educators and school leaders supporting teachers at this level. Another purpose for reviewing the literature is to learn how the concept of learning conversations is evolving both in New Zealand and internationally. As a result I expect to identify gaps in knowledge, which will impact on the focus of my own study but might also suggest areas for further research by others.

Current practice in teacher professional learning

In recent years, teacher professional development both in New Zealand and internationally, has moved towards what researchers and school reformers in the 1990's advocated as more effective in-service learning. There has been a move away from off-site professional development and one-off attendance at conferences and workshops by willing volunteers,

where participants receive few follow-up opportunities and new learning is seldom embedded into practice (Lieberman, 1995).

The increasingly common practice is to focus on the development of *professional learning communities*, where teacher learning happens predominantly on-site, and continues over time. School leaders are encouraged to establish a shared vision for their schools, and to provide opportunities for staff to meet and discuss teaching and learning issues. Also the school community collectively should develop goals and plan for improving teacher practice and ultimately raising achievement standards, for all students (Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, & Matthews, 2005; Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Graham, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). The opportunities provided in professional learning communities for teachers to discuss such issues are referred to in some of the literature, especially in New Zealand, as *learning conversations* (Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2004b).

Defining key concepts

What are professional learning communities?

Louis (1996) describes five elements of effective teacher learning communities and these are accepted as defining features. These elements are: shared values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, de-privatisation of practice and reflective dialogue (Louis, et al., 1996).

Wenger, who researches *communities of practice*, defines them as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The ideas of researchers like Louis and Wenger, when applied in an education context, represent a significant shift in how schools should operate, and have impacted the ways teacher in-service learning occurs.

Achinstein describes a teacher professional community as "a group of people across a school who are engaged in common work; share to a certain degree a set of values, norms and orientations towards teaching, students and schooling; and operate collaboratively with structures that foster interdependence" (2002, p. 421). Scribner (1999) argues for the insertion of the word *learning* into the phrase *professional community* to acknowledge that the principles of *double-loop learning* are also inherent in the concept. Double-loop learning refers to learning that goes beyond structural changes in organisations. It involves members continually questioning the underlying values and assumptions that their actions are based on. Learning organisations "continuously question the basic premises governing behaviour to ensure against systemic error" (Scribner, et al., 1999, p. 134). There is a strong reform agenda underlying the move to develop schools as professional learning communities.

The role of the learning conversation in learning communities is fundamental because it is through dialogue, a key element of professional community that this double-loop learning occurs. Dialogue involves teachers working in teams and engaging in an on-going cycle of inquiry that promotes deep team learning. Collaborative conversations expect team members to make public what has traditionally been private in classrooms - sharing goals, strategies, resources, questions, concerns and results (Dufour, 2004; Little, 1990). They involve joint work, which aims at improving teaching and learning (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). Ultimately such conversations can lead to school reform. Grossman (2001, p. 993) refers to a "growing collective moral purpose" in the teaching community she observed, with teachers demonstrating leadership in change initiatives.

This discussion foreshadows three aspects of learning conversations that have proven to be important as findings emerge from my study.

- The first is the key role that the drive towards improvement and reform plays in professional learning community and learning conversation development. This is articulated through a common vision shared by its members, which focuses on improved learning outcomes for students.
- The second is the human element. Relationships and collaborative teamwork at many levels are inherent in effective professional learning communities and evident in teachers' professional conversations.

- The final factor is the systems and structures that enable the community to function and that encourage the learning conversations to occur.

What is a 'learning conversation'?

Terminology

Research literature uses numerous terms to describe what this thesis refers to as learning conversations. These include: reflective dialogue (Louis, et al., 1996), dialogue (Johnston, 1997), deep talk (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and learning talk (Annan, et al., 2003). These terms describe the nature of the conversations that are a central element in the development of teacher professional learning communities.

Learning conversation implies more than just opportunities for teachers to get together and talk. Teachers have always held meetings at a range of levels and for different purposes; yet traditionally, the nature of that talking has not gone much beyond discussion around technical and administrative matters (Lieberman, 1995). A learning conversation is much deeper than everyday talk. Sparks, citing the work of Ellinor and Gerard, lists several qualities. "Suspension of judgement, release of our need for a specific outcome, inquiry into and examination of underlying assumptions, authenticity … and listening deeply to self and others for collective meaning" (Sparks, 2005, p. 172).

Researchers and professional leaders expect such professional conversations to contribute to change. Such talk promotes insights that result in improved teacher practice and raised student achievement. It also requires development at an organisational level resulting in different patterns of leadership, and new structures for staff management and student learning. Some literature argues that such change at multiple levels leads to reforms in the schooling system itself as well as transforming outcomes for learners (Achinstein, 2002; Timperley & Parr, 2007).

Inquiry into practice

Current practice in professional learning for teachers encourages teachers in inquiry into classroom practice. The Best Evidence Synthesis of Teacher Professional Learning and Development (Timperley, et al., 2007) and the revised New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008) describe the *inquiry cycle* introduced at the beginning of this thesis. Inquiry into practice is an expectation of teacher professional development initiatives supported by the MOE.

An example of the inquiry cycle is found in Timperley's work (2004). She describes how analysis of student work provides ways for teachers to lift results for those falling below national benchmarks. Through careful analysis, teachers develop robust criteria for evaluating that work, and are able to target particular skills when addressing the needs of lower achieving students. Targeted intervention leads to improved results for

them. Little's (2003) research also supports the use of student work to focus teacher action.

Shared understandings

Robinson (2006) outlines strategies that are typical of a learning conversation: Three steps are described.

- First the participants advocate their own point of view. Each describes his/her own position and is made aware of where the other stands, so they can evaluate whether they agree or disagree with each other.
- Secondly, they question and build a deeper understanding of other perspectives, showing respect for alternative positions.
- Finally, the differing accounts of a problem and how to solve it are treated, as competing theories. These competing ideas are evaluated, and the parties negotiate an agreed plan of action (Robinson & Lai, 2006).

Robinson (2006) makes a distinction between controlling and learning conversations. In the former, each participant convinces the other that his/her own position is the right one. However, in a learning conversation, participants work to understand other's positions. It is through dialogue that they come to a deeper understanding of the issues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Robinson & Lai, 2006). Time is taken to explore the meaning and quality of different perspectives. Points of

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difference are seen as opportunities to find better resolutions, rather than protecting personal or traditionally held positions.

Potential to transform

Cochran-Smith (1999) refers to this kind of professional conversation as deep talk. She acknowledges that the process requires time to develop but the outcome allows alternatives to be considered and change to happen. In describing her work, Johnston (1997) uses the term dialogue, and claims that through dialogue participants gain an insight into the problems they face that they would not achieve on their own. Dialogue is a "particular way of talking and learning from … differences" (p. 9) "a social negotiation of ideas – ideas shared freely, critically and in ways that nurture rather than destroy" (Johnston, 1997, p. 16). Dialogue is a type of talk that challenges entrenched positions and focuses on improving achievement for all students.

Such researchers are more explicit about a higher order goal in the development of teacher professional community and learning conversations (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman, et al., 2001). They seek school reform and the transformation of traditional school cultures. They aim to develop an education system that is more equitable and grounded in what is just (Levine & Marcus, 2007). In their vision, schools cater for more than the academically and socially advantaged. The educational environment itself is revitalised, invigorated, and fairer for all (Grossman, et al., 2001).

This raises the issue of teacher agency, which generally is not addressed in the literature on learning conversations. Traditional practice favours conformity and compliance from teachers, whereas new directions in teacher professional learning encourage teachers to take an active role by inquiring into their own practice and working collaboratively to solve issues they face. However, if teachers are to accept the primary responsibility for responding effectively to student needs, this challenges fundamental issues of power, authority, and control in schools (Wood, 2007). It demands new forms of leadership. Leadership teams would need to provide support which empowers teachers to make a difference (Frost & Durrant, 2003).

Learning conversations defined

In summary, my reading of research literature finds agreement amongst researchers that learning conversations require teachers to inquire into their practice. Learning conversations focus participants on understanding others' perspectives and challenging the assumptions of underlying beliefs and values to create shared understandings and build new insights. Ultimately learning conversations are aimed at improving teacher practice and student achievement, and promoting more equitable outcomes for all learners (Johnston, 1997; Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2004b). Some researchers believe that improving outcomes for all students through learning conversations has the potential to reform schools and the way learning happens

(Achinstein, 2002; Grossman, et al., 2001; Johnston, 1997; Kincheloe, 2003). They describe such practice as emancipatory and transformative.

There are three main reasons why school reformers advocate that teachers engage in learning conversations, and these are strongly inter-connected. They are: improving teacher practice, improving student learning outcomes, and supporting school reform and change. The focus for reformers is particularly on improving outcomes for those learners who are disadvantaged by conventional schooling systems. The aim is to create fairer, more equitable schooling environments that meet the needs of all learners, not just those that are the easiest to teach (Dufour, 2004). It is in meeting the needs of a school's most at risk students that learning conversations can play an important role. The key is to challenge assumptions that these students cannot learn or that the means for improving student learning is outside a teacher's control (Bishop & Glynn, 1999).

Factors identified as enablers and challenges to learning conversations

Since the mid 1990s, establishing professional learning communities has been widely advocated as a means of managing and sustaining learning in schools for students, teachers, and the wider school community. Learning conversations between teachers are central to building those communities. A decade later, some of the enablers and challenges to the

development of learning conversations are known and more widely
accepted.

Enablers

Shared vision

Professional communities need a shared vision and consensus around a
set of goals for leaders, teachers and students (Louis, et al., 1996).
Without a focus, teachers' conversations are unlikely to have a positive
impact on teaching and learning. It is agreed that the focus of their
conversations should be improved student achievement (Dufour, 2004;
Hattie, 1999).

Use of evidence

Using evidence, including student achievement data and evidence of
teacher practice as a basis for conversations, is also an important factor
(Little, et al., 2003; Timperley & Parr, 2004b). Evidence is also necessary
for monitoring the impact of interventions (Levine & Marcus, 2007; White
& McIntosh, 2007). Researchers are also finding evidence a valuable
tool in evaluating the quality of learning conversations and community
(Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Grossman, et al., 2001).

Time

Time is also an essential factor if learning conversations are to be
effective. Teachers need opportunities to meet over an extended time so

their work can be unhurried, complex issues can be addressed, and the sense of safety that allow individuals to take risks in a learning community can be established (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Timperley & Parr, 2007). Researchers acknowledge that effective learning conversations, involving inquiry into practice, take time and persistence to establish and have impact (Little et al, 2003).

Structuring the way learning happens

Many researchers also claim that establishing structures that foster interdependence among staff is necessary for collaboration and collegiality to flourish (Dufour, 2004; Levine & Marcus, 2007). Factors like block timetabling and common planning time, the creation of a range of teacher teams (interdisciplinary, subject and issue focused) and joint projects that promote active work around assessment and curriculum, help create a suitable environment for learning conversations (Little et al, 2003).

Relationships

Some researchers also acknowledge the crucial role that relationships and the building of trust play in developing learning communities. Respectful relationships are vital (Achinstein, 2002; Robinson & Lai, 2006), in which participants genuinely listen to each other and take different perspectives into consideration when actions are taken. Talking honestly about what is working or not working in one's own practice

makes participants vulnerable. Therefore without trust, genuine

conversations are not likely to occur (Byrk & Schneider, 2003).

Challenges

Lack of safety in collaborative work

Equally researchers have identified factors that challenge the

establishment of effective learning conversations. Little's work in the

early 1990s finds that teachers' collaborative work is relatively rare.

When it does exist it is fairly superficial in nature. Teachers avoid asking

for help, rarely share knowledge and strategies and seem uncomfortable

in offering advice to others (Little, 1990). Also teacher collaboration,

through joint work or research, is a risky venture. It can lead to loss of

autonomy, expose weakness and be seen as inappropriate behaviour.

This is especially so when a competent teacher is understood as being

self-sufficient, confident and independent (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992).

These conditions foster teachers' resistance to collaboration with

colleagues (Louis, 1996).

Superficial change

Many writers comment on the potential for superficiality in collaborative

professional learning opportunities. Cochran-Smith (1999) and

Hargreaves (1994) warn against mandated reform, where teacher

learning is packaged into a project and becomes a "substitute for grass

root change efforts" (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 293). Lieberman (1995)

notes that, even when teachers are excited about new ideas and are committed to acting on them, the everyday effort of coping with classroom reality and administrative demands can dampen their enthusiasm.

Lack of time

Lack of time is obviously a challenge because teachers need regular and sufficient time and space to develop the relationships and trust that enable learning conversations (Johnston, 1997). Teachers need both scheduled time and also more control over how their time is used, inside and outside the classroom, to allow the kind of flexibility collaborative ways of working require (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Hargreaves (1994, p. 192) argues that collaboration is "evolutionary, spontaneous and unpredictable … (and so) …should not be constrained by time and space".

Agreements and contradictions in current research on learning conversations

In preparing for this literature review I looked for research studies that would help me identify current key issues in teachers' learning conversations. I found seven empirical studies, which were published within the last decade. These include both New Zealand and international sources.

Five of the studies are from American researchers and report on either middle school or high school sites from urban contexts. One describes an ethnically homogeneous community (Graham, 2007) and others are of diverse populations (Grossman, et al., 2001; Levine & Marcus, 2007; Little, et al., 2003). Another, compares two ethnically diverse student populations, where one group of teaching staff is predominantly homogeneous, and the other, ethnically diverse (Achinstein, 2002). The American studies use either single or multiple case study methodology and predominantly qualitative methods of data gathering. In some cases, quantitative methods are used in analysing the results of survey data.

The two New Zealand studies focus on research in the primary school context (McNaughton, Lai, MacDonald, & Farry, 2004; Timperley & Parr, 2007). Both are of multiple, ethnically diverse and geographically representative schools. They use a mixed methods approach, including reporting of quantitative data showing how teaching interventions impact on classroom practice and student achievement. This reflects New Zealand MOE policy, which expects that teachers use the results of assessments and evidence from classroom practice to inform their next steps in teaching, and as a means of tracking student progress.

None of the American studies report evidence of improvement in student achievement. This is a significant point of difference between the countries, given the focus in much professional development literature in education on raising student achievement as the bottom line purpose of

teacher professional development programmes (Black, et al., 2003; Dufour, 2004). Another interesting point of difference is the lack of secondary school examples in the New Zealand context, although data from the Te Kotahitanga[4] project continues to be analysed and evaluated and will add to this knowledge over time. This is a gap in the New Zealand literature, which provides scope for further study. This thesis may contribute to developing that understanding.

My synthesis of recent research identifies three key issues, which reveal the complexity of developing learning conversations as an element of teacher professional learning. These are:

- Managing conflict, and maintaining diversity.

- The place of facilitation and protocols in establishing and maintaining effective conversations.

- The role of evidence in identifying learning needs and measuring that the changes implemented actually meet these needs and improve student outcomes.

Trust is emerging as an important issue as data from my own research is analysed and is also examined.

Embracing Conflict

Inherent within the concept of professional learning community are some fundamental contradictions. The notion of community implies

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[4] Te Kotahitanga is a major intervention undertaken to improve outcomes for Maori students in Y9 and Y10 in targeted NZ schools. The project has been independently evaluated but the report had not been released at the time of final thesis editing.

collaboration, working together to achieve common goals in a collegial and supportive environment. However, Hynds (2000) points to the contradictory meaning of collaborator – is s/he friend or foe? Some teachers recognise this ambiguity when they participate in collaborative work. They question the purpose and agenda of such work and often meet collaborative attempts with suspicion or resistance (Graham, 2007).

The ideal of learning communities described in the literature is that they are places of debate over professional beliefs and practices, where teachers engage in reflection, critique and challenge of their own and colleagues' practice, which often leads to conflict (Achinstein, 2002). Several recent research studies explore this notion of conflict. Grossman acknowledges that understanding conflict within community is essential in order to understand how professional communities come together, operate and are sustained in the longer term (Grossman, et al., 2001). Achinstein (2002) suggests that, if practitioners understand that conflict is an inevitable outcome of collaboration, explicitly discuss the kinds of community they want to establish and are open in addressing issues when they arise, they are more likely to sustain their learning communities over time.

Central to the ideal of learning conversations is that conflicts are openly discussed (Grossman, et al., 2001; Little, et al., 2003). Achinstein (2002) argues that conflict is a normal and essential dimension of a functioning teacher community. However, these and other studies suggest teachers

may avoid challenging their peers out of a fear of upsetting them (Achinstein, 2002; Hynds, 2000). Hynds (2000) suggests that participants in her study colluded in order to protect each other from the unwanted pressures and exposure, that open conversations might bring.

Many researchers find that typically teachers do not engage in conflict and are reluctant to challenge each other's practice. They are more likely to reinforce poor practice, in order to maintain their colleagues' trust and sustain a sense of collegiality within the working environment (Annan, et al., 2003; Hynds, 2000; Little, et al., 2003). Levine's study (2007) does not find one example of teachers' questioning or critiquing others, despite observing twenty-four meetings of a professional learning group. He finds that teachers avoid offering statements that might cause disagreement.

Grossman (2001) reports on the notion of pseudo-community where participants play at collegiality; conflict is suppressed, participants avoid imposing on others and there is no genuine follow-up in conversations. Timperley refers to a weak form of professional community where collaboration is incidental: a happy staffroom, the sharing of tricks and anecdotes and offering of help without critically examining the assumptions on which they are based (Timperley & Parr, 2004b).

Maintaining diversity of voice

Another important ingredient in maintaining effective learning communities is the acknowledgement and celebration of diversity. Some argue that the strength of learning communities comes from maintaining diversity, making them places of continual questioning and challenge (Johnston, 1997). Differences between teachers and within communities provide challenges to thinking, which are more likely to lead to change than where there is agreement and consensus (Johnston, 1997). Johnston argues that dialogue is dependent on differences. "If we all had the same opinions, or kept our ideas to ourselves, dialogue could not occur. It is because of differences that dialogue is possible, and this promotes our learning" (p. 16).

Johnston (1997) explains that within the group that she works, dialogue is a particular way of talking that keeps different points of view in tension. While maintaining a level of tension is difficult, the group understands that conversation without conflict does not promote learning. "Many of us judge the quality of a meeting and the strength of our collaboration by whether enough dialogue has occurred to make the collaborative work and its challenges worthwhile" (Johnston, 1997, p. 19). However, Hynds finds that teachers' professional and cultural identities strongly influence participants' willingness to engage in challenging practice (Hynds, 2007).

Achinstein's (2002) and Levine's (2007) studies also explore community in culturally diverse settings. In both studies, current practices are not meeting minority group needs, and such students are generally achieving well below their peers. Achinstein's study reports a staff that is culturally diverse and that has a culture, which encourages critical reflection and consensus-based decision-making. One staff member comments, "There's plenty of space for dissent here" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 436). Another explains, "It may be uncomfortable when we have conflicts. But we may need conflicts to resolve things. We can't just have the status quo (p. 436)."

Teachers at this school believe their school is an agent for change, and a purpose of education is challenging and changing existing social systems (Achinstein, 2002). Levine (2007) reports on a school that is less political in its approach, but the changes advocated by its staff result in changes to the way schooling is delivered, and the ways in which it interacts with its wider community. School and family partnerships are fostered and teachers cultivate a pastoral (as well as an academic) relationship with students. This is different to previous practice and is unusual in the secondary school context.

Maintaining diversity and differences, and conflict are interrelated factors that are key issues in creating and sustaining learning conversations. Researchers present differing perspectives on these issues, which further emphasise the complexity of learning conversations.

The role of facilitation and protocols

New practices in professional learning encourage teachers to work together, yet often shared history that can make co-operation a challenge for them is not acknowledged. Teachers can bring long-standing conflicts to meetings and be expected to engage constructively, over sustained periods of professional learning, without any ground rules for discussion and participant safety being established (Graham, 2007; Hynds, 2007). Some researchers suggest that it is the way that conflict is managed that marks the effectiveness of learning conversations, and the maturity of a professional learning community and its ability to effect change (Achinstein, 2002; Johnston, 1997; Robinson & Lai, 2006).

Some see facilitation as a way of ensuring more effective learning conversations, and the productive management of conflict within them (Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2007). Timperley (2007) suggests facilitators need to build knowledge and skills that enable them to challenge not only teacher practices, but also leadership practices. Other current research claims that expert support is needed to ensure quality dialogue in a learning conversation so the kind of change that schools aim for might be achieved (Annan, et al., 2003). Yet the use of expert support comes with a caution. While outside providers might provide a catalyst for change, others argue it is individual teachers who

must adapt ideas to their own context, and put them into action in their classrooms (Black, et al., 2003).

Robinson (2006) argues for a particular construct of learning conversations that teaches practitioners how to manage disagreements in a way that strengthens, rather than damages, relationships. She considers that different ways of seeing a problem are a resource for actually thinking about and forging better solutions to that problem. Both teachers and managers need to develop skills to manage conversations, support participants to work through challenging issues, and deal with conflict productively (Louis, et al., 1996). Some researchers advocate the use of protocols to guide staff in managing conversations (Little & Curry, 2008).

Graham (2007) reports that leaders might have to manage challenges from staff who are hostile to open conversations. Hynds (2007) contends that some teachers hold deep-seated convictions about whether they have a right to challenge the beliefs and practices of others. Such views are often in conflict with the direction schools are taking for more open and challenging learning conversations. They can bring to the surface previously unexamined beliefs around culture, gender, sexuality, religion or race.

The research studies highlight the complexity of developing effective learning conversations. Some promote more technical supports, like the

use of expert help, guidelines and protocols to manage conflict. Some even suggest the use of tools to evaluate the quality of learning conversations (Gajda & Koliba, 2008). However, this stands in juxtaposition to the more open and challenging conversations others advocate.

The role of evidence

Use of evidence is recognised as a key factor in promoting effective learning conversations. Equally, the lack of evidence and its misuse could contribute to their breakdown. In New Zealand, an Education Review Office (ERO) report found that while teachers collect evidence of student achievement, they do not necessarily know how to use it to determine appropriate next teaching steps (2007). Inexperience and lack of rigour can result in inappropriate inferences being drawn from data, and result in poor interventions being put in place. This can be exacerbated further if monitoring of interventions to track progress is not in place (McNaughton, et al., 2004).

Timperley (2004) notes that, if data is not presented in a form that is appropriate to the needs of the group, (for example, teachers requiring data in one format and managers another), this can become a barrier to its effective use. She reports a role for facilitators, who might need to develop a higher level of skill to effect real change. The skills include

data interpretation, and using the inquiry process and data to challenge teacher and leader practice (Timperley & Parr, 2007).

Both Timperley (2004b), and also Levine (2007), caution that professional dialogue does not necessarily promote improved teacher practice and student performance. Teacher expectations might be collectively low, and ineffective practices left unchallenged. In that case, conversations and joint actions reinforce the status quo and lead to negative learning. A recent publication by Earl and Timperley brings together contributions from their own work and other international researchers (including Lai, McNaughton and Little, previously reported in this review), which demonstrate the challenges of using evidence effectively in learning conversations (Earl & Timperley, 2008).

However, despite the focus on evidence, particularly in the New Zealand studies, several of the recent studies do not provide statistical data to support shifts in teacher practice or student achievement. This suggests consensus is lacking over what counts as evidence.

Establishing relationships and building trust

Another factor emerging from data analysis is trust. Research shows that social trust in a professional learning community improves much of the routine work of schools, and is a key resource for reform (Byrk & Schneider, 2003). However, Byrk's research finds that trust is more

difficult to establish in larger, more complex systems. It notes that relational trust is less likely to flourish in larger schools, as they tend to have more limited face-to-face interactions and a more bureaucratic approach. Larger schools are less likely to sustain relational trust because their work structures are more complex, and they have more social networks (Byrk & Schneider, 2003). This has implications for the secondary school context.

Additionally, trust has a contradictory side. Robinson reports Ball and Cohen's work (1999), which finds that "too often deep learning is sacrificed in the interest of gaining and maintaining trust" (Robinson & Lai, 2006, p. 199). There is a real challenge in maintaining healthy and constructive dialogue in situations where teachers' strongly held beliefs and convictions are being critically examined. Hynds (2000) found that teachers who value and trust their partners may collude to maintain a sense of safety.

Summary of section

The complexity of the factors important in teachers' learning conversations becomes increasingly apparent, as I read the literature. There are contradictions in the findings and often a two-sidedness to issues. So while researchers report a need for teachers to feel safe in order to contribute openly in learning conversations, others advocate that challenge is an essential element and that conflict is an inevitable

outcome. Developing shared understandings is recognised by most as fundamental in creating effective conversations. Yet others recognise a need for maintaining diversity of voice so that multiple perspectives are listened to, alternative viewpoints are considered and acted on. Some advocate structured talk, guided by facilitation or protocols whereas others promote more open talk. Those who advocate trust as a key element in promoting effective relationships and facilitating learning conversations also recognise the potential for collusion and avoidance of challenge in order to maintain safety.

Learning issues in the secondary school context

A key aspect of my interest in the topic of teachers' learning conversations is how they function in a secondary school context. Much New Zealand literature focuses on research from primary schools (Annan, et al., 2003; McNaughton, et al., 2004; Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley, 2007; Timperley, et al., 2007). Can the approaches that are reported to promote learning conversations successfully in the primary school setting be transferred to a secondary context? This is a matter of debate in the literature.

Earlier research found that the phenomenon of professional learning community existed across a range of school cultures, and at the various levels of schooling, but that it varied considerably between schools (Louis, et al., 1996). Later studies have also reported that what works as

community for some teachers might not work for others, and that the

differences between elementary (primary) level and secondary need

further exploration (Grossman, et al., 2001).

How learning should be structured

Researchers do not agree on the best approach to structuring learning,

especially in the middle[5] years of schooling. Dufour argues that the usual

middle school structure of interdisciplinary teams does not allow teachers

to focus on instructional practices and student learning that are linked to

a common curriculum (Dufour, Dufour, Lopez, & Muhammad, 2006). He

suggests there is more value to be gained when teachers from the same

subject collaborate, develop a common curriculum and assessments,

and make instructional changes.

This view supports the traditional structure of schooling in New Zealand

secondary schools, but is contested by findings in both a New Zealand

study (Wylie, et al., 2004), and some American research on middle

schools (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman, et al., 2001). These studies find

that some groups, particularly those from diverse ethnicities and with

literacy and learning difficulties, are disadvantaged by traditional

schooling structures. They also find that teachers need to work across

curriculum boundaries in order to make learning more meaningful for

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[5] Middle school refers to the years beyond elementary and prior to secondary level
schooling.

students. Teachers also should share their knowledge of students, and best practice for meeting their learning needs.

Secondary schools are:

- Generally much larger

- Traditionally structured according to subject-focused, departmental or faculty interests with little inter-disciplinary collaboration

- Focus on content areas and issues of assessment and qualifications, rather than on individual learners' needs (Education Review Office, 2003).

Professional learning also has focused on departmental and content area curriculum, rather than being cross-curricular, learner centred and outcomes focused, or aimed at improving teacher instructional practices (Ministry of Education, 2004).

The New Zealand context

In the New Zealand context, there is a range of schooling options, but students tend to be educated in different systems over years 7-8 and years 9-10, and the structure of schooling in each is significantly different. In the earlier years, a more interdisciplinary approach is found; and in the latter, a more subject focused one. An Education Review Office (ERO) report finds that for many students, the transition to secondary schooling is not a traumatic one, and progress in achievement

is not affected (Education Review Office, 2003). However, another report notes that some groupings (particularly Maori and Pasifika students, and those in lower achieving groups) have more difficulty making the shift, and this impacts on their engagement in learning (Wylie, et al., 2004). This is an important finding, given that Maori and Pasifika students are targeted in MOE initiatives, because significant numbers continue to make the least progress in achievement, in national and internationally benchmarked tests.

Unlike Dufour's findings, (2006) the ERO report recommends secondary schools should find ways of connecting teaching and learning across curriculum areas for middle school students. Interdisciplinary teams are conducive to developing effective teaching and learning environments for this age group. However, others report the complexities of achieving this due to the fragmented structure of high schools (Louis, et al., 1996; Moje, 1996; O'Brien, et al., 1995). It is not only that knowledge is specific to the subject being taught, but as Moje (1996) explains, multiple cultures or sub cultures develop when students move from one subject to another, and expectations about what constitutes knowledge within a particular domain prevents ideas and strategies transferring between classes. O'Brien (1995) reports that, struggles for power between disciplines, and the wish by some departments to maintain status, block initiatives to encourage inter-disciplinary collaboration.

Differences between primary and secondary contexts

In a primary context, the examples of learning conversations are those between groups of teachers, usually at syndicate level, where the teachers of students of a particular age gather with colleagues to problem-solve issues for students who are not achieving at the level of their peers (McNaughton, et al., 2004; Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2004b). The teachers focus on student achievement data and self-reported observations of interactions in the classroom. Each teacher has responsibility for a maximum of thirty students; and even though they do not share the same students, classroom environments are similar. Lessons are based on the same curriculum, are often planned together, and links between teachers and the experiences offered to students are fostered so there are shared understandings about the way learning happens.

In my experience of the secondary context, teachers' discussions about learners can happen in multiple contexts. Often they occur in subject department meetings, which share many of the features of the primary situation, but where the focus of the learning is in one subject domain. These meetings might focus on one year-level, and one subject, but this represents only about 20% of the teachers' student load. Teachers might have responsibility for up to 120 students and any conversation around

the learning needs of students at one level needs to be repeated several times, to cover all students or year levels the teacher meets.

Alternatively learning conversations take place in core class groups, across curriculum boundaries. This adds to the complexity in that individual teachers have the same pressures in terms of workload around students as in subject related meetings, but they do not share the common subject discourse. Despite coming together with the purpose of discussing students' learning needs, much talking needs to be done, to ensure shared understandings, and to mitigate the power dynamics and subject hierarchies that exist between disciplines. There are also challenges at a personal level between genders and those in different positions of authority or with different levels of experience (Grossman, et al., 2001). Grossman's study (2001) finds that where two departments come together and spend time developing shared understandings a strong form of community develops. However, this requires a high input of time and commitment from the school and participants.

The implications of these research findings for developing learning conversations

Learning conversations - complex and contradictory

While common connotations of the terms conversation and dialogue imply friendly collaboration and building of consensus; equally, engaging

in learning conversations involves teachers in critical reflection, and critique about their own and others' practice that can be uncomfortable, create tension, and lead to open conflict. Alternatively teachers might feel suspicious of the intention of learning conversations and made vulnerable by the outcomes. Teacher resistance to them is not uncommon.

Learning conversations confront underlying beliefs and assumptions

Yet my synthesis of recent research reports finds that if learning conversations are to be effective, teachers must engage in personal reflection and critical and challenging talk with colleagues. They must explore the underlying beliefs and values that shape their practice and divide them. If learning conversations are to move beyond being a tool of compliance in the reform initiatives and programmed change desired by governments or authorities, teachers must confront the issues that inevitably arise from such discussion, and find new ways of doing things, to better meet the needs of their students and communities.

Teachers' learning conversations must create improved opportunities for all learners, especially those currently disadvantaged. "Change and transformation can occur only through collaborative partnership work which is unashamedly political; a collective learning process which seeks to uncover the hidden dimensions which underpin our mainstream schooling practices" (Hynds, 2007, p. 73). This type of learning is not

easy but it is the kind of work that is needed to change the injustices of current systems, which fail many students and communities, and lead to embedding disadvantage for them.

Learning conversations require common understandings and focusing on locally appropriate solutions

Kincheloe argues that self-reflection is required before attitudinal changes can be made. Reflection is necessary if teachers are to understand their own practices, and recognise the "ambiguities, contradictions and tensions implicit in them" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 39). He argues that when teachers come together, and share their learning through reflection and inquiry into practice, and question the assumptions existing practices are based on, they begin to understand the context of their own situations. Such conversations, and the ensuing growth of a collective understanding, empower teachers and communities, and create the potential for educational change.

But this kind of learning conversation requires an environment that is safe for teachers. It does not lead to easy decisions or even result in conclusions. Learning conversations require continual reflection and change (Levine & Marcus, 2007; White & McIntosh, 2007). There is not one right way of thinking and doing as might be assumed by some mandated professional learning opportunities (Levine & Marcus, 2007). Teachers engaging in learning conversations with colleagues about what

they are doing, reflecting on the impact of their work, and acting joint understandings and insight is more likely to result in locally appropriate practice, than programmes devised by experts where one size suits all (Kincheloe, 2003).

Learning conversations require teachers to have responsibility for making change happen

Levine (2007) reports on an investigation of a professional learning community that aims to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students. Rather than increasing control over teaching and curriculum by expecting staff to strictly adhere to proven interventions, the school empowers teachers to have more collective autonomy and responsibility for making the reform happen. Teachers engage in what he describes as "multiple trajectories of learning" (Levine & Marcus, 2007, p. 116). Increasing teachers' opportunities for professional learning and dialogue allows them to work collaboratively, in many directions. Rather than following a prescribed path, they create and continue to develop solutions appropriate to their own context that supports all students to succeed (Levine & Marcus, 2007).

Summary of findings: How understandings about learning conversations are evolving

In the New Zealand context the knowledge around learning

conversations has been largely informed by the research of Helen

Timperley, Judith Parr, Vivianne Robinson, Mei Lai, Stuart McNaughton

and Brian Annan in various collaborations, both with each other and with

other colleagues, and in partnership with schools, predominantly in the

Auckland area. These researchers emphasise the importance of

evidence as a basis for informing teachers' learning conversations. They

recommend that talk challenges teachers' existing beliefs and

assumptions in order to create new understandings and better solutions

to problems. They also suggest guidelines for the way learning

conversations might occur in a way that deals productively with conflict

and enables change to happen (Annan, et al., 2003; Robinson & Lai,

2006; Timperley & Parr, 2004b).

Although this work has focused in areas where school populations are

ethnically diverse, and large numbers of students are underachieving,

the focus of their publications seems to be in defining the craft of learning

conversations. These researchers seek to establish factors that enable

such conversations and minimise conflict. They also describe the role of

such conversations in reducing disparity by closing the achievement gap,

and rely heavily on quantitative data of student achievement as evidence

of progress in their initiatives. These actions reflect key goals of MOE

initiatives in New Zealand. Their purpose seems to be linked to achieving

the more technical goals of government policy. While they work towards

all students realising their potential, there is less focus on embracing

more idealistic goals of creating schools where students' needs and aspirations are met, and more meaningful learning takes place (Kincheloe, 2003).

Earlier this review commented on the ideal of teacher learning conversations as a vehicle for contextualised learning that meets the needs of a local community, personalises learning for students, and reenergises curriculum and teacher practice. This suggests learning conversations are not designed for technical purposes aimed at ensuring the implementation of reforms mandated by governments or authorities that maintain the status quo. Traditional systems continue to alienate and marginalise many learners (Grossman, et al., 2001; Kincheloe, 2003). My discussion of themes from current research reinforces this view.

The alternative perspective advocates more open conversations where differences are kept in focus so that multiple perspectives are recognised and maintained. Such conversations might explore a range of issues, but teachers' work focuses on challenging the structures and practices, which prevent students from achieving to their potential. They work to create educational environments that engage and inspire learners. For these researchers learning conversations transform schools and communities, create more equitable outcomes for diverse learners, and reenergise the teachers and leaders that work in them.

To conclude this chapter, my review of the literature has found some consensus among researchers in defining learning conversations. Commonly agreed elements include a focus on teacher inquiry that encourages the challenging of assumptions and beliefs, so that new knowledge and shared understandings can grow. Researchers also agree that outcomes should focus on equity and improved achievement outcomes for all students. However, there is a lack of agreement as to the purpose, nature and potential outcomes of teachers' learning conversations.

The idea of learning conversations is evolving and might be seen to be developing in different directions. On the one hand, some advocate a more technical approach, where evidence is analysed and used to challenge assumptions and patterns of practice (McNaughton, et al., 2004; Timperley & Parr, 2007). This approach prefers learning conversations to be structured and facilitated with the development of protocols to ensure common understandings are reached and conflict is managed (Annan, et al., 2003; Little, et al., 2003; Robinson & Lai, 2006; Timperley & Parr, 2004b). Evidence in the form of student work or student achievement data is used to focus teacher inquiry. Outcomes might result in improved student achievement, but the underlying systems and structures that produce inequities are not challenged.

On the other hand, others are more open and look for outcomes that are more likely to be transformative and democratic. These researchers

claim that conflict and tension are markers of effective dialogue and that the results of learning conversations are unpredictable. They recommend creative and context-specific solutions with varied outcomes (Achinstein, 2002; Johnston, 1997; Levine & Marcus, 2007).

Learning conversations will not be implemented easily. There are contradictions in many of the findings reported in the literature. My thinking continues to develop through this research process. Some experiences and reflections shared by my case study participants seem to link with what I find in the literature. But what will a more careful analysis of the research data show? What follows is an outline of the methodology of the study that provides the framework for that exploration.

Chapter 2

Methodology:
The process for examining the fabric of teachers' developing learning conversations

The over-arching question of my research study investigates ***'what counts' in the development of teachers' learning conversations when teachers in a New Zealand secondary school work together to improve learning outcomes for students in their Y9 classes.*** My purpose as outlined in Chapter 1 is to:

- Identify practices that either support or challenge teachers' engagement in learning conversations

- Develop understandings about the complexities of learning conversations so that teacher educators, facilitators and school leaders can better support their implementation

The sub-questions also outlined in Chapter 1 highlight the different aspects that I explore in order to better understand what counts in teachers' learning conversations. I want to know which factors enable learning conversations to occur effectively and what encourages participants to participate and sustain their commitment to them.

My understanding would develop by examining one group's experiences of learning conversations around a common group of students and as I:

- Reflect on information from various data gathering measures

- Consider the data in relation to current literature and my own experiences working in the field

- Report the findings and make recommendations that might inform future work in this area.

I am particularly interested in the role of evidence-based practice in this process and in:

- What constitutes evidence

- How teachers use information and knowledge

- How they measure and describe their interventions' impact.

Another key interest is how evidence-based practice and teachers' learning conversations operate in a secondary school context. Much New Zealand based literature on the topic describes primary schools, but my work is situated at secondary level, where different complexities operate.

The process described here makes the study sound relatively straightforward, but the reality is it is time consuming, and complicated. Some of what I find is expected; similar to my own experiences, and supports what I read. But as time goes on, and I reflect more deeply, awareness of the complexities of the issues I am studying grow. I experience occasional glimpses of new insights. I wonder if what I am learning will be of interest to others, and more particularly, whether it will provide new insights into the nature of learning conversations.

This chapter describes the research methodology used in the study and includes the following sections: a rationale for the research approach, a

summary of the research design, a description of the research participants and context, a detailed account of the methods used in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, and discussion about ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, and the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary statement.

Rationale for the research design and case study methodology

Rationale for qualitative research design

The research uses a qualitative approach and is undertaken within a constructivist paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln state, "Users of this paradigm are oriented to the production of reconstructed understandings of the social world" (2000a, p. 159). My reading of research literature and study at the time of developing the research proposal suggested a constructivist approach was most appropriate. I wanted to explore a particular context in depth, so I could better understand the development of learning conversations, and how they might be encouraged and supported within teachers' professional learning communities.

In reporting the study it was inevitable I would be selecting from the data that was gathered. My story would be reconstructed from the threads that formed the fabric that constituted teachers' developing learning conversations. My decisions regarding the selection of factors would influence that story, including the site that was chosen, the participants

involved, which parts of their stories I told, when I chose to begin and end my study and so on. The research record would be my construction of knowledge about the case, which I hoped would enrich understandings for those involved, and interested others. I also knew that in reading this thesis, readers would make their own interpretations, and construct their own knowledge and understandings from it.

Rationale for case study methodology

I investigated different approaches that might be used within the qualitative tradition and chose case study design as the theoretical framework for the research. A case study is "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, rich in context" (Creswell, 2003, p. 61). This definition seemed to match my intended process in that a particular site had been chosen, selected group interactions within this context would be explored in-depth, and data gathered within a set timeframe, using interviews and meeting observations that would be reported in detail.

My research can be defined as an instrumental case study (Yin, 2003) because I am examining a particular case for its insights into how teachers' learning conversations develop. While I explore the particular case, its context and the participants' values, beliefs and interactions in some depth, my primary purpose is to better understand the nature of

learning conversations and how they can be encouraged and supported. Research literature (Burton, 2000; Creswell, 2003) cautions that single case studies can be criticised for their lack of representativeness, as their findings cannot be generalised beyond the particular study. However, I believe there is value to be gained from exploring one case in some detail, and that insights gained from participants in this context will add knowledge to the literature on learning conversations.

I do not feel constrained by case study methodology, as Yin (2003) describes, and its "boundedness" suggests manageability. I am reassured that case study is an extremely flexible method (Burton, 2000) and that I will be able to employ many techniques I have learned about for gathering, analysing and reporting data.

Research design

In overview, the research design includes:

- Identifying and providing a rationale for the qualitative tradition, and methodology used in the study (outlined above).
- Processes for developing the proposal, gaining ethics approval and reading for the literature review (reported in Chapter 1).
- Finding a case, describing the site and research participants, and outlining data gathering and data analysis processes.
- A section on ethical issues in qualitative research (all included in this section).

Selecting a case

I decided to focus on schools recently involved in professional development where learning conversations were a feature of the work. Advisers were contacted, to support case selection. A priority was to identify schools where teachers were engaged in cross-curricular learning conversations aimed at improving student learning outcomes. The advisers identified a number of schools throughout New Zealand that they considered suitable, and I developed a shortlist from their recommendations. I decided early on, to approach only schools in my local region, to enable easier access. It would have been time consuming and expensive to travel extensively, and would have made the data gathering process unmanageable. I prioritised the remaining schools according to their time involved in professional learning where teachers were participating in conversations around the use of evidence to inform planning.

The first school I approached had been developing a professional learning community for some time and was considered by others to be a useful model. Teachers from around the region observed practices there, and sought the expertise of the school's staff. I was excited by the possibility of conducting the research in this school and gaining further insights into the area of my interest. But it was not to be. The school's

Senior Management Team (SMT) declined my request to research. I was disappointed, but there were other schools on my list and I began the approaches again. It was a case of 'second time lucky'.

The second school was a high decile co-educational school with a large student population. It was known for its innovative approaches to teaching and learning, and its plan for teacher professional learning was linked to the school's strategic direction. This plan was supported within the school by a professional learning committee that met regularly to plan, monitor, and evaluate professional learning opportunities. The school was in its third year of a professional development focus on using assessment to inform teaching programmes, and external facilitators supported this work. Its staff was also involved in professional learning around other issues, including supporting the learning of Maori students, and developing expertise in using Information Communication Technology in the classroom. Its professional learning team had established a range of learning opportunities for staff. These included some whole staff development sessions, cross-curricular reflection groups that met regularly to discuss topics related to the professional learning foci, and several specialist groups that met to explore one of the various foci in more depth.

Gaining entry

I began negotiating entry into the school by seeking the interest and consent of the school's SMT in the research project. My discussions

were with a Deputy Principal (DP) who had responsibility for professional learning. He was enthusiastic about the proposal and saw an opportunity for the school to gain some feedback or independent evaluation on the professional learning it was conducting. My first impression was of a comprehensive approach to professional learning.

Two potential opportunities for study were described. The first was the reflection groups, where all staff met regularly to discuss topics related to the key professional learning strands of the school's strategic plan. Groups were provided with readings selected by the professional learning committee, and an in-school facilitator, likely to hold a senior or middle management position led discussions. The second option was a group of teachers developing a special project. This involved teachers from the school's English and Learning Support Departments, working together to develop a team teaching model. At that time, the group was engaged in facilitated professional learning using student achievement data to inform teacher planning and learning about e-asTTle.

When a new cohort entered in 2008, the school's SMT, and English and Learning Support heads of department (HOD's), had identified a particularly large group, with lower than average skills in reading and writing. This core leadership group drew on other schools' experience, and decided to address these needs by adopting a team teaching

approach. Target[6] students were distributed among four of the school's Y9 classes, and in English, their learning was supported by team teaching. The English teacher and a Learning Support teacher met and planned for student learning needs, with their particular 'target students' as a focus. The teachers were provided opportunities to meet, with the English and Learning Support teachers of each of the four classes, and encouraged to meet regularly in the teaching pairs to plan for learning. Although I found that some of the teachers had participated in team teaching partnerships previously, team teaching was a new venture for the school.

I decided to approach the team teaching group because it seemed to more closely match the criteria I believed to be of interest. Teachers were working across curriculum responsibilities to support diverse needs, including underachieving students. I had been told that these teachers were using evidence of student learning to inform their discussions, and were involved in a professional learning opportunity that supported that work. Examining a team teaching scenario was not the initial intention of my study. However it met my criteria in other respects.

Meeting the participants

At the time of my entry to the project, the team teaching group was focusing on the 'assessment to learn' component of the school's professional learning programme. I was particularly interested because

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[6] Target students - the term used by the school to describe the moderate needs students the team teaching intervention was designed to support

they were embarking on a trial of e-asTTle[7,] and an external facilitator, contracted to the school was supporting their work. Although teachers were participating in conversations that used evidence to inform their teaching, this practice was not as well established as I had thought. I found out that teachers also had additional professional development responsibilities that they believed contributed to work pressures and learning overload. I was to learn that these factors and the 'newness' of the team teaching intervention itself would impact on the research focus and findings. Experiences at this stage of the research process were my first glimpse of what literature describes as the messiness of educational research (Goodnough, 2008) and its inherently political nature (Punch, 1994).

This was a political aspect evident in the complexities of relationships at many levels. There were difficulties at a micro-political level for myself as researcher and for the participants engaging in their work in everyday interactions with each other. There were issues between participants and managers as decisions were made that affected participants but happened without their involvement. There was also an external level of politics in that the school was involved in a contract with the Ministry of Education and that involved certain expectations. There were tensions between contractual requirements and the needs of the participants at that time.

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[7] e-asTTle – an electronic version of asTTle trialled in pilot schools throughout NZ in 2008. The pilot was extended in 2009.

Much later, as I reflected on what I was learning, I realised that teachers were being asked to improve outcomes for students but lacked the power to make some of the decisions needed to address student needs. Much is made in the literature of teachers' autonomy in the classroom and it is argued that they have the potential to make the biggest difference in student learning outcomes by the work they do there (Hattie, 1999). However, other literature (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Wood, 2007) reported that making a difference required more than changing classroom practice. Teachers needed to have a broader spectrum of responsibility so that they could work with a wider community: colleagues, parents, and other community agents, to address longstanding barriers to student engagement and achievement. I believed such changes were particularly challenging in the secondary school context, where there was less parental contact and involvement than at earlier levels of schooling, and issues of adolescence affected students' willingness to participate in interventions that set them apart from others.

Gaining participant consent

Although this was not the core class teacher collaboration that I had hoped to explore, the team teachers' work seemed like a reasonable alternative for me to investigate. It involved teachers from different subject specialisations working together and teachers were involved in various forums where learning conversations might take place. For example, teachers were expected to be using student achievement data

as evidence for their collaborative work. The DP agreed to seek the consent of the school's executive committee for the research, and to organise a group meeting where I could explain the research process, and gain participant consent. I was also advised of the meeting schedule and invited to observe these from the beginning of Term 3.

Initially I was happy with the meeting's outcome, but the entry process became more complex than first realised. Follow-up conversations with the DP confirmed decisions made at the meeting. A subsequent meeting of the executive committee gave approval for the school's involvement in the research. I forwarded an outline of the proposed research and a possible timeline for data gathering, so that teachers could be informed prior to my meeting with them. However, the intended meeting with teachers where I would outline the purpose of the research and seek participant consent did not take place. As I had been invited by the DP to attend the group's larger team meetings, it was agreed that the information sheets, and consent forms I had prepared for teachers would be distributed to teachers prior to that.

A first meeting in Term 3 was scheduled and the DP arranged for me to meet with another member of the SMT, also a meeting participant, who would introduce me to the group. I arrived for this first meeting in excited anticipation at this new step in my research journey. I asked to meet with my agreed contact, but when I did it seemed that he was unaware of my purpose. However, after a moment of uncertainty, he agreed to take me

and we walked the long corridors towards the meeting venue. As I entered the room, in a far corner of the school, others were standing around talking waiting for all to arrive. I felt uncertainty about how things would proceed. I was introduced to some people including the facilitator, who I had communicated with previously, as she was one of my advisers in selecting a case. Although we had not met, we had this prior connection. I also found I knew two or three of the teachers from previous encounters in other professional contexts.

The facilitator invited us to take a seat and as the meeting started, initial introductions were made. During the meeting the facilitator invited me to share my purpose and I tentatively outlined my research and touched on some of the details of the research process and how teachers could give their consent to participate. I felt reluctant to take too much of the teachers' valuable meeting time, and it was clear teachers had not been briefed on my project prior to the meeting as I expected. I began to feel uncertain of my standing in the whole process so indicated I would give more detail later.

Towards the end of the meeting the SMT representative returned and offered to collect teachers' consent forms on my behalf. This seemed like a constructive suggestion at the time, but later I reflected that the research process was being compromised, and my entry to the site was being managed by the SMT, and thereby linked to SMT interests. Following the meeting the SMT representative privately outlined his

concerns that the group's commitment to the team teaching project was tentative, and some members had expressed that they felt the professional learning process was 'top down'. It was felt that my research project might be seen as yet another demand from senior management on teachers' time.

Despite my efforts to provide potential participants with information prior to the meeting, including the handing over of information sheets and consent forms, and my brief explanation of my research intentions at the meeting, I felt participants had not had sufficient time to absorb information and ask questions. Fairly soon after the meeting it was reported to me that some members of the group were not prepared to participate in the research. Another potential participant had not been present at the meeting. I decided a more personal and direct approach was needed to prevent me losing this research opportunity altogether. Following the meeting I emailed information to those who had not received it, and followed up with phone calls, inviting potential participants to take part in the research.

Fortunately, several involved in the team teaching project agreed to take part. However, because I was concerned at the messiness of the consent process, and the ethical issues this presented, I made sure that in my initial meeting with the participants, I reminded them of the research process, as I intended it to unfold, reinforced the measures that would be taken to protect their anonymity during the research process

and in reporting, and provided an opportunity for them to clarify concerns.

The research context

As may be gleaned from the information so far, this case involved some complexities, not initially surfaced. A number of external and internal pressures were impacting on the group that imposed some blocks, both to their work, and also their willingness to participate in the research process. As I later found, teachers approached to be part of the team teaching group believed they had been given an undertaking that they would be supported with planning time for this new venture, and the possibility of funding from a grant. Neither of these eventuated as teachers expected.

External and internal pressures

The school's external professional development provider supported team teachers in their work at times, but this support came at a cost when during the year, the group was expected to participate in the e-asTTle trial. At the beginning of Term 3 2008, when I began attending group meetings, teachers were beginning to develop tests and investigate resulting data. An external facilitator led these meetings, however, technical issues with test management were causing considerable frustration, for both the teachers and facilitator, and teachers seemed over burdened with new learning.

In addition to these external pressures, staffing changes had impacted the groups' work. A driver of the initiative, who also taught in three target classes, had recently resigned. Another teacher had opted out of meetings because of workload issues. At the time of seeking consent, at least two teachers in the remaining teams were relatively new to their roles, and the school. One HOD was reluctant to support any further demands on teachers' time, and as reported members of that department declined to participate in the research. Of the four target classes, only one team had maintained the same teacher combination throughout the year. This was a further indication that the learning teams were not as established as I had believed.

The research sample

However, despite my concerns with the initial process and the decision by some teachers to opt out, five gave their consent to participate in the research. There were teachers from three curriculum areas; two were directly involved in the teaching teams, and one taught a target class, but not as a team teacher. There was also a representative of the school's senior management team, and a facilitator from the professional learning initiative. Although not what I had expected and hoped for, this sample represented a wide range of perspectives within the constraints mentioned (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I decided to proceed with the study, and looked forward to getting the data gathering underway.

Much later, when undertaking a second phase of interviewing, I decided to approach a teacher who had originally declined to participate. Many conditions that had operated in the early data-gathering phase had changed, and some tensions that were evident then, had been resolved. I was pleased when, early in 2009, the teacher agreed to participate. I felt that this participation would add representativeness and that it provided a voice that had been missing from the sample.

Reciprocity

This willingness to participate in the research was perhaps an indication of a growing trust between myself as researcher, and the participants, and is an example of reciprocity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a). A further example was provided when one of the team teaching partnerships invited me to observe them for a lesson with their target class. Although for ethical reasons reported later in this chapter, I was unable to use this data in my report, it did indicate openness to the research process. Participants were generous with their time and interactions became more relaxed over time.

The research participants

This section gives some background on each of the six research participants. In order to protect their identity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this report and some other details have also been

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changed to ensure their anonymity[8]. I have named the participants

Bronwyn, Dean, Glenda, Jacqui, Jo and Wendy. They were pakeha; five

out of six were New Zealanders, female, and were experienced

educators, each having at least ten years teaching experience, and

some with management experience. Three of the five in-school

participants held positions of responsibility in the school. None of the

participants were under forty, the less experienced teacher having

trained later in life. They are introduced alphabetically.

Bronwyn, Learning Support leader and team teacher

Bronwyn had recently taken on a position of responsibility, and was

directly involved in a team teaching partnership. She was an experienced

teacher, but relatively new to the school, having previously taught

outside New Zealand. She had gained experience overseas working in

team teaching situations, and was a strong advocate for this way of

working, finding it personally and professionally more satisfying than

working in isolation. An aspect of team teaching that Bronwyn valued

was the ability to mentor younger teachers, and share her specialist

experience with them. She also valued what she learned from colleagues

when working collaboratively.

Bronwyn attended the larger team meetings, and also met at least once

a week with her team teaching partner to plan for lessons, discuss

students' learning needs and appropriate teaching practices. Time for

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[8] The Ethics process is explained on p 76.

this meeting was taken from the teachers' non-contact allocation. Due to staff changes, hers was the only partnership of the four to remain intact throughout 2008.

Dean, the SMT representative

Dean held a management position within the school, and had been given responsibility for overseeing the team teaching group, when he was asked to prepare a funding application to support moderate needs students in the school. The team teaching approach was the school's response (not initiated by Dean, despite his involvement with the application) to meeting the needs of a particularly large intake of students, with literacy and learning difficulties, and it sought a grant to support this initiative. Dean also had involvement with other special groups within the school, and this new initiative became part of that work. He attended the combined team meetings, and saw his role as problem-solving issues that arose, *"trying to encourage positive discourse,"* and at times questioning, *"trying to tease out"* teachers' meaning (Dean, interview, October 2008). He also participated in the Professional Learning Leadership Group, which met regularly to plan, monitor and evaluate the school's professional development programme.

Dean believed in the potential of the team teaching approach as an effective means of supporting underachieving students, but felt that the school had not yet got their model right. He was concerned about the role played by SMT in professional learning, and aware of teachers'

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perception that elements of the team teaching project were 'top down'.

Dean also saw potential in the e-asTTle tool that the team teaching group was trialling, but acknowledged teacher frustrations with technical and workload issues. He believed asTTle might provide the kind of evidence the school needed, to measure the impact of the team teaching intervention.

Glenda, team teacher

Glenda was also a teacher participant, and directly involved in team teaching from the beginning. She was new to teaching and in her third year at the school, in 2009. She taught in two curriculum areas, and believed this made her aware of some of the language processing difficulties students experienced, as they moved from subject to subject. She was keen to work in the team teaching project because of the knowledge and experience she believed she would gain from working with specialists in supporting underachieving students.

Jacqui, core class teacher

Jacqui began attending the larger team teacher meetings in Term 3 when the asTTle programme was introduced. She held a position of responsibility in a department, and was the core teacher of a target class, but not a team teacher. She was invited to attend the meetings by the facilitator because of her involvement in the school's formative assessment contract. She also attended the Professional Learning Leadership Group meetings, and was a reflection group leader in the

school's professional learning programme. The facilitator believed Jacqui's involvement in the team teaching group provided a useful link to other school initiatives. I was interested in her perspective as a representative of another curriculum area.

Jo, external facilitator

The fourth research participant was facilitating the larger team teacher meetings at the time I was observing. Jo was a member of an external team who had been working in the school over the past three years, as part of a focus on formative assessment practices. The team teaching group was one of the groups she worked with in the school. Earlier in the year, the focus of facilitated work was around establishing the team teaching teams, with an emphasis on developing portfolios as a source of evidence about student learning, and a tool for student reflection on their learning. Another member of the external team led the facilitation of that work. Mid-year, the focus of Jo's work with the team teaching team shifted to the trialling of e-asTTle. Contracted to the Ministry of Education's trial of e-asTTle, the school had a responsibility to use the tool; the target classes became the trial group, and Jo, the facilitator of that aspect of the work.

Wendy, a new-comer to the team teaching team

The final participant was Wendy who had joined the team-teaching group mid-year, coming from a position outside the school. She was an experienced teacher although the bulk of that experience was at primary

level. She had taken on the role of coordinating the team meetings, and was given particular responsibility for managing the asTTle-testing programme that became part of the work of this group about this time. She was also directly involved in a team teaching pairing.

Although all participating in learning conversations as part of the team teaching project, these participants represented different perspectives. They were team teachers, some new and some more established in the role, from different curriculum areas, and teachers with different positions of responsibility within the school hierarchy. The member of the school's SMT and the external facilitator represented alternative positions in the school's professional learning programme. This varied sample, along with the range of methods used to gather information would help ensure the credibility of the research (Creswell, 2009).

Data-collection methods

In line with the traditions of qualitative inquiry and a case study approach, a range of data gathering methods was employed. Data were collected through interviews with individual participants, and observations of both formal and informal teacher conversations, in whole team and team teaching partnership meetings. Teacher feedback about their learning conversations and documents teachers brought to or produced as a result of meetings were also collected. Using a range of

methods ensured data could be triangulated and supported the case's

trustworthiness (Creswell, 2001).

Interviews with the participants

Data were primarily collected in interviews with individual participants.

These occurred during the initial data-collecting phase in October and

November 2008, and as a method of member checking, as I met with

participants to discuss and confirm emerging trends and to consolidate

findings in March and April 2009. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted and recorded using a digital recording device. An independent

transcriber subsequently transcribed the recordings, and transcripts were

returned to the participants for checking. A transcriber confidentiality

agreement was required as part of gaining ethics approval, and this was

signed before any transcribing took place. The same transcriber was

used throughout the interview and member-checking processes.

Interviews were used as a means of gathering participants'

understandings of learning conversations, and their perceptions of the

impact on their own practice, and student learning outcomes.

Participants' values, beliefs and experiences relating to learning

conversations were explored. Interviews were a means of getting closer

to their different perceptions and perspectives, and an opportunity to

explore some of the complex interactions and processes of the team

teaching project, and teachers' conversations.

A schedule of questions was developed relating to the key questions of the research study (Appendix 1). This schedule was included in the Research Proposal and the questions were trialled in an interview with a colleague, who had recently been involved in supporting learning conversation development in her school. That interview was digitally recorded, and I transcribed it so that the questions and responses could be evaluated more easily. As a result of the trial some questions were modified, and others deleted or added, to make a more coherent schedule.

Once consent was gained participants were contacted, by telephone to setup the interviews, and by email to confirm the interview proceedings. All participants preferred to be interviewed on site, and the interviews were conducted in private, in small rooms adjacent to the participants' work areas. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded of the consent process and the steps that would be taken to ensure the confidentiality of their contributions. They were also reminded that the interviews were being recorded and informed of the process that would be followed to transcribe and confirm transcript accuracy and later the emerging findings from the research.

Observations of meetings

Four meetings were observed. These included two combined meetings of the team teachers, and observations of some participants in meetings with colleagues that they believed represented learning conversations.

One of these was a meeting of the school's Professional Learning Leadership group, attended by the SMT member and facilitator, and the other a meeting of a team teaching partnership. The purpose of undertaking observations was to collect data that would provide evidence for describing the experiences of teachers' learning conversations, and how teacher beliefs, articulated in the interviews, were enacted in practice.

A meeting observation tool was developed for the ethics application and this was used to record details of the larger meetings (Appendix 2). It included a record of the date of the meeting, attendees and apologies, and the purpose of the meeting. There was space for a diagram of the room layout and seating plan, a log of matters discussed, and a record of key interactions during the meeting. A list of evidence and documentation tabled at the meeting and key outcomes of the meeting were also recorded. It had been intended that the meetings would be digitally recorded, and this was an aspect of the consent process for participants. This would have allowed a full record of group interactions, but because the majority of attendees were not participants in the research, I believed it would be less intrusive to make notes and chose not to record these larger meetings. The observation of the team teaching partnership meeting was digitally recorded.

My role in the meetings was as an observer, and although there were some minor interactions with participants, I maintained this role. This was

a potential weakness in the research process as my observations were open to observer bias. Also I was unable to record all the details of the interactions because of the pace of the conversations at times, and because, on at least one occasion, some participants left the room to complete a separate activity, and I was unable to report both conversations. Also only certain material from the observations could be used as evidence for this project, as I did not have the consent of all the attendees to use their contributions.

Participant reflections

A template was developed as a tool for participants to record meeting reflections. Participants were given the option of using this tool with statements provided as a guide to responses, or to complete an open reflective journal with potential for outlining their responses over time. Their preference was for the former option. The purpose for gathering this data was to provide further evidence of participants' beliefs and understandings of their learning conversation experiences. Participants completed the sheets at some point after the meetings, and either posted them to me, or I collected them on my next visit to the school.

Collection of artefacts

Another form of data collected was documentation produced at or as a result of the meetings. These included notes provided by the facilitator at the larger team meetings, artefacts developed by participants to facilitate interaction between staff and students about the data produced by the

assessment tool, and some classroom resources developed for student use. There was also some correspondence between participants informing them of meetings. There were some documents produced at meetings that could not be kept as they included individual student achievement data, and these were collected in by the facilitator and teachers concerned, before the meetings ended. Staff also received photocopies of resources that were shared by the facilitator and other participants to support the use of new teaching approaches.

Data analysis and synthesis

Coding

Once data were gathered, and transcribed or written up, I began the process of analysis. Initially, this involved reading and re-reading the data to build familiarity with the content, and then beginning to code it. To start with I used in vivo quotes written in the margins of the transcripts to capture the sense of participants' voice (Creswell, 2009). I collated the codes for each transcript and compared them to get a sense of common threads and outlying issues. This process enabled me to collapse some of the codes and clarify others. I also began to group some of the codes as themes emerged.

This process took some time but I chose to work with the transcripts manually, rather than using a computer software package. I thought given the small number of participants, this would be manageable and

would give me a break from continual work at the computer screen. I revised some of the original codes on the transcripts, and photocopied them on coloured paper, so I could distinguish between participants. My next step was to separate the coded scripts into the themes that I had identified. This process also helped build my familiarity with the data, and with the themes I was using. The down side was that I had produced numerous piles of strips of information, and clearly they needed to be displayed more coherently.

Synthesising

At this point I decided to collate the strips by cutting and pasting comments from the original transcripts and recording them under the codes. Again this built familiarity with the data. I had been careful to label pieces of data at each stage so I could easily track which participant and which interview or observation they came from. Once I had collated the data, I printed it off and displayed it according to the codes in a clear file folder. Continual reflection meant that some data needed recoding; however I was able to mark these, and track changes. Although time-consuming and involving repetitive work this system of processing worked for me. I felt it helped me to become familiar with the data, and keep a sense of the participants' voices, while also gaining a sense of emerging themes.

The written report

This familiarity with the data and system of display provided coherence

to the data and enabled participant voice to be a feature of the report.

The research report focuses on describing the participants'

understandings of teachers' experiences of learning conversations, as

well as their beliefs and their perceptions of their impact through a

process of rich description (Creswell, 2003). In writing the thesis I have

used a metaphor to add meaning to the findings that arose out of the

data analysis. Metaphors are recognised in research literature as a valid

instrument in qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The

focus on participant voice, however, created potential ethical issues.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for this study was sought and given by the Human Ethics

Research Committee at Victoria University, in May 2008. Protecting

participant confidentiality was a significant concern throughout the study.

The school and potential participants were given information about the

project in both written form (Appendix 3), and through explanations at

meetings. They were invited to give their consent to the project by

signing a checklist of procedures that would be taken to preserve their

confidentiality and anonymity as participants in the study (Appendix 4).

These measures included maintaining confidentiality as much as

possible during the data-gathering phase, the use of pseudonyms for

participants, and not identifying the school site in any published records

of the research. I also made a commitment to participants that research data would be stored securely, and destroyed within a year of the project's completion.

During the data gathering process, participants were contacted individually and interviews with individuals were conducted in private, to prevent interruptions, and to preserve confidentiality. Throughout the process I endeavoured to maintain the anonymity of the participants by using initials in the data collation stage, and later pseudonyms, so they could not be identified. The same transcriber was used throughout, and had signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 5).

However, despite careful thought at the planning stage, ethical issues also arose during the research. An example of this was when I decided to proceed with taking notes at a meeting of the team teachers when I had not yet gained their consent as participants. At this point, I knew I should not record data with a digital recording device, but did not want to lose potential data for the research. I compromised by making notes of the interactions, deciding I could destroy these notes, if no teachers agreed to take part. Another example arose when participants invited me to observe one of their classes. During the design phase I had deliberately chosen not to include student voice, and individual achievement data in the study, to reduce potential ethical issues. When the opportunity did arise during the study to observe participants in a classroom setting, I was reluctant to turn it down despite knowing I did

not have student consent. In the event, I observed the class but did not report the data in the research report. My concern in both instances was to adhere to the ethical guidelines I had agreed to in undertaking the research.

During the observations of meetings I was aware that I did not have the consent of all those attending, and so could not use all the data that was gathered. I chose not to digitally record these larger meetings because it seemed intrusive to do so. My focus in the observations was on the interactions of the research participants who had given consent. Some student achievement data was also presented at meetings, but again this was not retained, and did not become part of the record of this study, as student consent was not sought. Participants did report some outcomes for the student cohort in subsequent discussions, but apart from general reference to target students, no individuals were identified in the research reports.

Ethical considerations surfaced again during the reporting of findings. Although I had agreed to use pseudonyms, I was not convinced participants' identities were adequately disguised, so I chose to alter some other details of their identity and roles.

Issues of trustworthiness

Establishing the validity and reliability of research data and processes

has always been a key concern of researchers. Creswell states,

"Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of

the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability

indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different

researchers and different projects" (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). The latter

aspect was less important in this research study as it involved only one

researcher and one site. In qualitative research, new terminology has

been developed to define these concepts more appropriately for that

paradigm. In this discussion I have used some of the terms developed by

the qualitative researchers Lincoln and Guba and now used extensively

in the literature, namely *trustworthiness, credibility, transferability and*

generalisability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The term *trustworthiness* encompasses the notions of validity and

reliability in qualitative research. Creswell recommends eight strategies

for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research and I have

endeavoured to employ a number of these (Creswell, 2009). They are

outlined below.

Credibility

Credibility relates to how believable, and sound, the processes and findings of the research are to those who read them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I used several approaches to ensure the credibility of the research. First I acknowledged the biases I brought to this research because of my personal beliefs and experiences; these were stated upfront, in Chapter 1. I was aware that my interest in the topic of the study, and my own pre-conceptions, were likely to influence my interpretation of events and conversations. However, I endeavoured to reduce the impact of bias by distancing myself from the events and examining the data objectively and critically. While it would not be possible to set aside these biases completely I endeavoured to make the reader aware of them and kept them in mind when I considered the data and potential findings. I kept a journal of my thoughts and experiences throughout the research process and this enabled me to monitor my perspectives as the research unfolded. I have reported findings that were different to the views that I held, or those that contradicted the perspectives of other participants.

Triangulation and member checks

In keeping with the traditions of qualitative research I have used a range of research methods, and data were collected from a variety of sources, so that evidence could be triangulated, and interpretations were

supported by different data sources (Creswell, 2009). To ensure data accuracy I have made repeated visits to the school, and visited participants in a range of settings, so that I could establish as full a picture of the context and teacher values, beliefs and experiences as was possible within the time-frame. Participants were invited to check and clarify statements so that what was transcribed and observed reflected their views. To ensure the account of the case was authentic, detailed description was used to convey the findings (Creswell, 2003). Often the actual words spoken in interviews and meetings were used so that the personal voice of participants strongly resonated throughout the study.

Transferability

Another aspect of trustworthiness is whether the reader can make sense of the findings in terms of their own experience. To do this they need a detailed account of the context and the processes undertaken at the research site so they can evaluate how that matches with contexts they know about. In qualitative research this is known as transferability – the extent to which the processes at work in the research context are found in the readers' own settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The purpose of this research was to inform educators including teachers, managers, and facilitators of approaches that supported or presented barriers to learning conversations, so issues of transferability were important. In order to ensure the transferability of this study, I have attempted to provide

detailed descriptions of the context, participants' beliefs, understandings, and experiences and the processes undertaken during the research.

Generalisability

Generalisability, the ability to generalise findings, to contexts and individuals outside those being studied (Creswell, 2009) is a less important concept in qualitative research, and I would acknowledge the uniqueness of this case. The experiences described and findings generated are particular to this situation, and these participants. A statement by Lather (1991) describing qualitative reports as, "open narrative with holes and questions and an admission of situatedness and partiality" sums up the nature of this report (Creswell, 2001, p. 288).

Limitations of the study

While there was significant investment of time and thought in making this study as thorough as was manageable, inevitably there were limitations, which have impacted on providing a complete record. These include limitations related to the design of the project, my inexperience and my own biases as a researcher, and the representativeness of the research sample. Although I have endeavoured to minimise the effect of these factors they have undoubtedly impacted on the findings and outcomes of the study.

As a single case study, this research has limited application to other sites. While some of the findings and details of the context will resonate with readers, it is unlikely that the experiences of participants in this study will be directly generalisable to other settings. The values, beliefs and experiences of the participants, and the context in which they occurred, are peculiar to these individuals and their school. However, as the findings reflect participants' perceptions and experiences in the light of current literature it is likely that they can inform those that are interested in supporting similar initiatives that develop learning conversations and learning communities in their schools.

Another limitation of the study was my inexperience as a researcher and the bias I brought to the data selection, analysis and interpretation phases due to my own background, beliefs and experiences. In the first chapter I reported my biases and assumptions up-front. I assumed that teachers' learning conversations were worth introducing, and MOE input and research literature suggested that teachers' engagement in them could have beneficial effects for students. However, as a researcher with time and space to reflect on the interactions I was observing, I began to recognise some pitfalls. I was reminded of the busyness of participants' lives and realised that what had been my primary focus as a facilitator was one of many responsibilities in their work. I became more aware of different perspectives and some of the complexities when distanced from the daily task of making teacher professional learning work.

Understanding and applying the research process was a huge learning curve. My inexperience contributed to the 'messiness' at times. I encountered contradictions in the literature and in the data, was confronted by ethical dilemmas, and was made aware of the political dimensions of qualitative research. Decisions were made in the research design and process based on my limited understandings of both the field and the site. I accept that for me, there is still much that remains undiscovered about both. While I acknowledge these shortcomings I have also aimed to complete as thorough a study as I was able. It is possible that in the future other researchers, or myself, may use the evidence reported in this study, and make new interpretations based on wider experience, deeper knowledge, and new insights (Wolcott, 1994).

Another factor limiting the study was related to the representativeness of the sample. While I endeavoured to gain the support of all teachers in the project and gained the consent of a varied sample, the selection of participants meant that some interests were more strongly represented than others. Initially only one of the departments involved in the team teaching project was represented. This had a further impact because data gathered from some observations and meetings were not available for the research because I did not have consent from all attendees to use it.

Another potential limitation was that the participants tended to be more experienced teachers and several held management positions. During

the interviewing it was reported that perhaps younger and less experienced teachers faced different challenges in the partnerships than the participants experienced. The sample itself was also a compromise in that it was not the core teacher group that I had initially envisioned. The final sample was limited in size, due to the manageability of undertaking a case study bounded by time, and workload issues, for one researcher also in fulltime employment.

Chapter summary

This chapter addresses the Methodology of the study with a focus on the purpose of the study, a detailed explanation of elements of the research design, an examination of ethical considerations and an explanation of the limitations of the study. The important learning is that the research process is inherently messy. Despite careful planning and attention to advice from academic texts and lecturers, the research process in practice did not run smoothly. The process did not act out as planned, events took unexpected turns, and unforeseen opportunities and challenges arose. The politics of the school situation interacted with the research process and added to its complications.

Chapter 1 indicated contradictions in the research literature about learning conversations. My introduction to the research context and process as outlined in this chapter, adds to my sense of the complexity and messiness of the research project. I wonder whether examining the

findings from the research data will add any clarity to the process and

how it will develop my thinking about learning conversations.

Chapter 3

Findings from participants' accounts of the development of teachers' learning conversations:
Two sides of the cloth

This chapter describes the findings from my analysis of the research data. Three interdependent threads of Beliefs, Relationships, and Structural and Systemic factors are found to be important in the development of the research participants' learning conversations. Both individually and in interaction these threads reveal that contradictions count in the development of teachers' learning conversations. These add complexity to the nature and development of such conversations.

The fabric of teachers' learning conversations:

In writing this chapter I use a weaving metaphor, which describes these factors as threads that are woven together to create a complex fabric. Webster's ("Webster's online dictionary," 2009) defines fabric with two meanings: as an artefact made by weaving fibres, and as an underlying structure. Both definitions are important in this chapter, as I use the imagery associated with the former, to give meaning to the latter.

In weaving, multiple strands are intertwined to make threads, which in turn are woven together to craft uniquely patterned and textured fabrics. Just as in thread, the strands that make up teachers' learning conversations are interconnected, difficult to separate, and in combination, multi-faceted. Woven together the threads form complex

patterns, varied designs, and a fabric with two distinct sides. Each thread also has its own colour and texture and to me these represent the various issues that arise in learning conversations. These add to the vibrancy and uniqueness of the fabric that is created. The two sides of the fabric represent the contradictions and dilemmas that are apparent in the make-up of teachers' learning conversations.

When the strands are woven together firmly, a strong thread is formed that has the potential to be crafted into the dynamic and sustainable fabric needed to support and further develop teachers' learning conversations. However, the strands do not always hold together. The developing threads can unravel and fray, and when combined, can form a weak and fragile fabric, which disrupts the growth of these professional conversations.

I could not explore all the strands that comprise each thread in my study - so I have selected key aspects that represent the complexity of data analysis. The following paragraphs in this section briefly introduce and describe the contradictions inherent in the chosen threads.

Contradictions count in the development of teachers' learning conversations

Beliefs

The key role of teacher beliefs in developing effective learning conversations was demonstrated through several strands. Participants' spoke of the importance of a shared vision for their team teaching project's success. However, they recognised early on that their project was lacking a shared vision and this hindered its progress. Other beliefs around conversation quality and the importance of having shared understandings over key concepts, like inclusion, and how evidence should be used, also presented contradictions.

Relationships

The significance of relationships became apparent as participants talked about their attitudes to and experiences of leadership, facilitation, and their interactions with each other. Distributed leadership and power sharing were identified as key factors in enabling effective conversations, yet participants looked for leadership and saw lack of consultation, and an unwillingness to share decision-making by SMT, as a block to their team's progress. Participants also recognised safety, honesty between peers, and lack of hierarchy, as key factors in building the trusting and open relationships that they believed enabled more effective

communication. However, they acknowledged many challenges in building such relationships.

Structural and systemic factors

Structural and systemic factors were examined through participants' perceptions and experiences of time and workload issues. Some factors enabled the development of learning conversations and others discouraged their formation. It was found that time and workload pressures, impacted negatively on the team's ability to function effectively. Addressing some causes of these issues allowed the team to move forward. However, other elements, such as structures for both teacher and student learning, emerged as key factors that were more difficult to change. They required old structures to be broken down and new practices to be forged which demanded more time and further effort from participants.

The following sections examine the contradictory nature of the three threads in more depth. They explore the strands that make-up those threads and describe participants' perceptions of their learning conversations and team teaching experiences as the threads are woven together in practice. Initially, I was not aware of the implications of these interrelated themes, but in hindsight they proved to impact considerably on the development of teachers' professional talk.

Contradictions arising from their beliefs count in the development of teachers' learning conversations

Contradictions around the quality of the talk

One of the first questions I asked participants was what they understood by the term 'learning conversation'. This produced varied responses. It was apparent that participants had no clear concept to draw on and that they lacked a shared understanding of the term. Initially, they were tentative in their explanations. However, as the data gathering progressed, it became evident that participants believed that the nature of the talk they engaged in was important. The quality of conversations was seen to depend on: their sharing and listening to each other, a focus on students, and their tolerance of conflict and challenge.

Sharing and listening

Four of the participants described learning conversations as sharing ideas with colleagues and planning for next teaching steps. For example, Bronwyn described them as the *conversations with colleagues about process and strategies we use, ideas we have and schemes of work developed and the sort of sharing that goes on* (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008). This reflected a focus on practical matters.

However, others recognised a deeper level of interaction. Two participants commented on the importance of teacher listening and

reflection during learning conversations. Jo referred to *the ability to listen and really unpack what is being said, or not being said* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008)*.* Dean mentioned *listening and hearing other people's views on the readings and hearing the examples they give of what they do in the classroom. And you have to pick and choose what you see fits your philosophy* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008). This highlighted how teacher's own underlying teaching and learning beliefs and philosophies influenced their decisions to engage, or not, with others' ideas.

Teacher inquiry with a focus on students

The importance of teacher inquiry was evident in several participant statements. Jo described learning conversations as a function of a *really on-going inquiry,* an important factor being that the conversations were *based on concrete information or data* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008). Dean described them as those conversations around *how are we going to end up with something that's going to be useful to the kids and us in terms of what we do next in teaching* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*?* Wendy explained it as *(You) sit down with person you're working with* (and discuss the students*)… where they're at, how we're going to get them to the next step, which path they're going to take* (Wendy, interview 1, October 2008).

However, rather than focusing on personal or team learning, other participants spoke about learning conversations, as the interactions they had with students about their learning. Glenda provided an example of

this when she said, *well I guess what it sort of brings up for me is when …we're giving feedback to students about their work or when we're questioning them about their understanding about what they're doing, as they're doing it, to see if we've got a bit of a parallel going on there* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009)*.* What some participants saw as important aspects of professional conversations with colleagues, others saw as necessary in the conversations they had with students. These represented different pathways to improving outcomes for students.

Tolerance for conflict and challenge

An aspect of the quality of teacher talk was challenging each other's beliefs and assumptions. Jo, talking about the role of facilitation in developing teachers' learning conversations, raised the importance of challenging preconceived ideas.

> *Well it depends ... on the extent of the change … that is required because if it's paradigm shift stuff, it's very difficult to shift outside your own mindset and to even consider something else. So external facilitation can bring in something from left field and then get the communication going ...* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008).

She believed that a facilitator might bring skills that enabled this challenge to happen resulting in an enhanced learning experience.

> *If you've got someone, whether it's a leader or a facilitator, who can notice what is happening they will pick out certain*

aspects of the conversation and they can recognise what does

that actually mean, particularly around beliefs...I think that's

very effective facilitation (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

However, most participants found challenging others difficult. Wendy

believed that engaging in learning conversations was necessary,

because otherwise you could be both pulling in different directions…

even if it's sole teaching you need to be able to talk with people about

what you're doing otherwise you get sort of locked into doing the one

thing. It might not always be the best one (Wendy, interview 1, October

2008)*. In a follow-up interview she reported teachers do have different*

philosophies of teaching and it's to try and reach a combination where

everybody feels comfortable and you get the best learning outcomes

(Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).

Her comments suggested a preference for negotiating a compromise,

rather than challenging, and creating discomfort or conflict between

teachers. Although Wendy acknowledged the benefits of speaking

openly she also reported *I've kind of taken a back seat in pushing those*

sorts of things … I don't want to rock the boat too much (Wendy,

interview 1, October 2008). Other comments also surfaced participants'

reluctance to raise concerns with the group. Dean reported not wanting

to confuse everything (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).

Jo also believed there was a lack of challenge in the wider team teaching meetings. *I felt there hasn't been a particularly good learning community because not enough is said across the table. You only hear it around the outside and that's frustrating* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008). It seemed that many issues were addressed outside the group and even then, indirectly. Participants avoided conflict and tried to resolve issues without directly challenging each other.

Participants also spoke about the issue of conflict in relation to their partnership meetings. Bronwyn expressed concern about openly addressing conflict. She spoke about the need to maintain a working relationship.

> *I don't enjoy conflict and I like to resolve things in another way. We can challenge what we do … like from her being a specialist English teacher and me being a special needs teacher, I think we have given each other ideas that have challenged the way that we work. That challenges our thinking and … I know that she may have taken some of the ideas that I've given across into other realms of her teaching. But it's difficult to have conflict when you work with someone … for three or four hours a week (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).*

The situation Bronwyn described was participants working together towards improving practice while maintaining a positive relationship.

We've actually let part of our, what we call learning conversations … to be quite candid really, and assess how we're going. … We review at the end of each term … how's it going for you … am I overbearing, am I doing too much? Generally I think there wasn't a lot of negativity. We had some issues around … classroom expectations … but generally we weren't … scared to ask some questions about how it was to be in the classroom with each other, so it was quite useful really (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).

There was an indication that this level of openness had taken some time to develop; but Bronwyn believed as they grew more at ease with each other, teachers were more likely to challenge each other.

I mean initially there's the sort of … are your ideas valid and maybe a little bit timid about expressing your opinions and … sharing ideas with someone but then as you get to know them that's sort of dissipates … in some ways I think we've been quite willing to egg each other on, to take like a few risks and some of them have backfired. But generally we've said shall we try this, well why not ... or let's do this (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).

Within these comments the issue of trust is implied as being an enabler in developing more open and challenging talk. Jacqui was more explicit about this aspect.

... That's a hard one because I'm not great on criticism and

can easily be prickly but it's something I've had to get over

really...and it's the way it's put... if it's from somebody that you

trust then that adds to it. But it is hard … and we're probably

as a profession maybe we're not so great at handling it

(Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008).

Jacqui also suggested that, as well as accepting feedback, challenging colleagues' practice was not easily done. *As soon as you talk about different ways of doing things, some teachers get quite offended, they feel they are being personally challenged, that they have to throw out everything they do and start all over again.* However, she also spoke enthusiastically about observing others and receiving critical feedback and commented, *so I think that (learning from other people)… kind of fits in with the learning conversation idea … it should be easier … often we're a bit defensive of what we do but it's a positive thing* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008). She believed her experience was an example of learning from critical feedback in a professional conversation. Yet this was not a typical experience.

In the 2009 interviews some participants believed there was more openness to critical feedback. For example, Glenda described learning from others' feedback in a combined team meeting.

It was good … because you get six other teachers giving you

feedback … and as teachers normally when you're in the

classroom on your own (a) no one ever gives you any

feedback on what you do and (b) you never listen to your own

repertoire of things that you do. So in this sort of case I am

able to give that form to other teachers and they will improve

it…and someone will make a mark 2 version and report back

on how that went (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).

For Glenda, engaging in this kind of learning with colleagues contributed to her sense of collegiality, and self-efficacy. It reinforced positive aspects of her teaching but also encouraged reflection on aspects that may have needed to change.

So I think it gives you a much greater feeling of

connectedness within the teaching group because I often felt

as if I was an island in my class. It was like I wonder if I've

been doing this wrong all the time and no one's ever told me -

or for someone … to say that was working really well (Glenda,

interview 1, April 2009).

I did not observe participants in team meetings in 2009 and so am unable to confirm whether an increasing level of critique was evident.

Contradictions relating to shared vision and shared understandings

Having a common purpose or a shared vision was a factor mentioned by four of the six participants as encouraging learning conversations to develop. For example, Jo reported *having a direction and a focus and*

knowing what you're trying to achieve with it as being important (Jo,

interview 1, November 2008). Yet early on, participants acknowledged

that shared vision was lacking in their situation. Bronwyn believed that

having specific objectives allowed teachers to work together more

effectively. However, she recognised that the team teaching group at that

time lacked clarity over what they were trying to achieve.

> *I don't think there's been enough opportunity for the team to*
> *actually get together and explore what we're doing. Set*
> *objectives, set goals, reflect ... it's been sort of muddled by*
> *working around assessment for learning and asTTle…. I think*
> *probably if the team teaching pilot and the learning*
> *conversations with colleagues were going to be really effective*
> *then we probably need to actually have a clearer focus that*
> *this is what we were aiming towards which is developing ...*
> *team teaching … but I think there were too many things*
> *thrown in…we didn't have clear enough objectives at the start*
> *(Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).*

She explained the impact this had on developing learning conversations.

Yeah we actually have to have shared objectives but we haven't had

those shared objectives so therefore those conversations have gone

round in circles in some ways (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).

Responsibility for developing shared vision

Although building a shared vision was considered important, interviews revealed differing beliefs about the underlying responsibility for its development. Jacqui pointed to senior management as having responsibility for providing clarity over goals. *The senior management need to make sure their vision or whatever …they're doing is clear* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008). However, Dean saw developing vision as a broader responsibility and believed all staff should be involved. He reflected that this was something that was not yet achieved.

> *It's negotiating a shared vision that isn't necessarily the board charter vision… I feel that it's our responsibility to make sure that … within the staff we come up with a shared vision about where we're going and then tying everything to it. So it's the platform that underlies everything. I think we're still struggling with that at the moment* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).

Jo suggested why clarity was lacking within the team teaching group. *I think the main drivers, the people who understood what they wanted to achieve and the philosophy behind it, pulled out. Within the group there were different understandings of what it would involve or what it would have needed* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

Returning to the weaving metaphor, Bronwyn describes two sides of the fabric of learning conversations. One side is where teachers share a focus and have clear objectives and goals. The other side is muddled

with too many things thrown in and going round in circles. One side represents the ideal of teachers' learning conversations and the other side their reality. As I began investigating, the team teaching project lacked a shared vision and defined goals. The SMT's vision was unclear to some participants, and staff members as a whole had not developed a common understanding of their direction. Personnel changes and new expectations from SMT had disrupted the focus of the group.

Sharing a vision and developing common understandings and practices

A belief shared by the participants was that learning conversations should have benefits for students. As Dean put it, *having at the heart of it that you want to make a difference for the students.* Bronwyn agreed students were central to the vision, and linked team teaching to the school's goal of inclusiveness. *The philosophy of the school … is primarily that all kids are in classes most of the time* (not withdrawn) *so it* (team teaching) *seems like a natural way to address their needs* (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008). The school espoused an inclusive vision but, prior to the team teaching project, had catered for students with special learning needs in withdrawal programmes. The team teaching intervention was aimed at including these students in mainstream classes and providing differentiated learning programmes to meet the wider range of needs.

However, at first, some participants believed that not all team teachers practised inclusiveness, and they were not addressing target student needs. In his first interview Dean commented,

> *And then I don't think enough had been done in terms of the philosophy behind it. So as the year progressed it became evident that the attitude of two of the teachers was, it's the Learning Support department's responsibility to look after the target students. That's not what the model is supposed to be (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).*

Following one meeting, Dean expressed concern that some teachers had been unaware who the target students were in their class. *I think when you get to the end of Term 2 and teachers don't know who, say, verbalise they don't know who… that's a pretty good clue.* He was concerned at what this meant *… that's why when some of those teachers had difficulty identifying the target group in the meeting we had …I thought oh the kids weren't at the heart of it (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).* He was also concerned about some teachers' attitudes to differentiation. *They say they can't actually manage it and that's when they see that group down there, needing to be taken away. So the exclusive model starts operating and that's completely at odds with the whole philosophy behind team teaching (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).*

In his second interview, Dean reflected on how teachers were changing in their view of how underachieving students' learning needs might be met.

> *The (Learning Support) teachers were getting to the point where they were feeling quite stressed about the attitude of other staff. The learning support students are yours so you give us a programme and you take them away and you do this. So the team-teaching model was helping them because that was a model where they were actually working (with teachers) … it's making the departments and teachers responsible for all of the kids (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).*

One reason given for maintaining and extending the team teaching project in the second year was the school's commitment to inclusiveness. Bronwyn strongly supported that view.

> *They recognise that … the school does have a commitment to kids with learning needs and moderate needs ... that this is an inclusive school rather than running extraction programmes for these kids or literacy classes and so this is the way we want to go (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009).*

Dean reinforced this perspective. *There was a significant improvement for us in that programmes before have had kids taken out and worked with in terms of literacy. And now we've got a programme that's within the classroom, the kids aren't being removed and (there's a) differentiated teaching model* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Glenda commented on how being involved in the team teaching project was supporting her towards more inclusive practice.

> *We're not given any specific training as to how we would work with …(students with learning needs) so it is something you need to be proactive about and I thought being involved with team teaching with particular learning support teachers would help me in working with those kids (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).*

Participants' changing perceptions of the extent of inclusiveness in the team's practice suggest that over time, teachers' beliefs evolve. Also implicit is that it is not enough that the school has a vision, but that the vision needs to be shared with teachers, understood by them, and acted on by them. In the case study school, teachers needed to learn how to be more inclusive in their practice.

Contradictions relating to the use of evidence

Teachers using evidence to inform their planning was one of the criteria I looked for when selecting a case. I was interested when I learned the team teachers were using e-asTTle and they were beginning to have conversations around understanding and using its data. But I learned that e-asTTle contributed to confusion over the group's focus and caused tension.

Lacking a shared focus

Part of the difficulty with introducing e-asTTle was that some participants saw it as taking the group away from what they considered to be their main focus – learning how to work together as team teachers. Whereas Jo reported using evidence as *fundamental to what they* (SMT) *were trying to achieve* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008) others saw it differently. Glenda commented, *the whole team teaching thing basically got a bit hi-jacked by asTTle…and so we had this time available and then…instead of using it to plan for our team teaching classes we were learning about e-asTTle* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).

Dean remembered an earlier focus on evidence and was concerned that portfolios and reflective journals were no longer talked about. He commented *it's like those two things I don't know where they are. But I don't want to bring those up because that's going to confuse everything* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008). He was also concerned with teachers' failure to follow through with students about e-asTTle results. *I think that's the learning but we're sort of stuck now. Are we going to come back to that? What are we going to do* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*?* There was tension within the group over this issue and yet participants were reluctant to address it with colleagues in an open forum and I did not see it raised in the team meetings I observed.

Lacking purposeful use of evidence

An expected outcome of using evidence was monitoring student progress. Jo suggested the team teachers needed to track whether they were making a difference to student outcomes, and whether that progress was better than what students might normally make.

> *Whatever information you're gathering the point of what we were trying to do was say, 'Well we've got this information that tells us that we should be working on these things, and when we do put the effort into those things, is it making a difference down the track and … is it accelerated or is it as expected?' (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

Dean commented, *it's hard isn't it because the only way to really measure it is if teachers have tracked where they're at and where they've moved them to and I'm not sure …* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008). At the initial stage of the project participants had evidence from student portfolios and reflection logs to draw on, but no follow-up testing had been conducted. Participants were uncertain, and yet believed they should know, whether their practice was making a difference to student achievement. *I'm not sure that's something we've all got a handle on really…I couldn't say that myself I think and that's something I'm concerned about* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008).

Bronwyn reported, *some students … have developed beyond recognition and others haven't made any progress* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March

2009). Glenda agreed *there would be groups of students in my classes where… I'm not really making an impact on them at all* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009). Jo summed up the situation saying, *we didn't get the information we wanted and needed…to know whether any changes were making ... a difference and that was a frustration for everybody, I believe* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

Purposeful use of evidence was also absent in observations of a team teaching partnership. No particular focus on the target students was found in either the teachers' moderation meeting or in the follow-up classroom observation. For example, when Glenda reflected that the instructions given to the class had not supported learning for all students there was no discussion about how or when any further guidance might happen, and the teachers moved on to discussing another student's work.

> *What I've learned from this…because I wanted to do a ... multilevel task…then I needed separate instructions for the higher level and separate instructions for the…I try to make it here's the instructions for everyone, you five bright kids go off and do your own thing and I'll hope that it's alright…and they didn't get enough guidance (Glenda, meeting observation, November 2008).*

Also the teacher's concern was for the higher achieving students yet the project's focus was underachieving students. This observation suggested

the teachers' thinking was not completely oriented towards the team teaching vision. Challenge was missing from the conversation.

What to count as evidence

By the later round of interviews, some follow-up testing had been done and participants were more confident that progress was being made. Dean commented, *well in terms of the PATs and those results they're very promising…there was a significant raising of level for almost all of the students* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009). Bronwyn noted *it worked out the target group had made slightly better increases in comprehension and vocab than the rest of the class. Although there were some anomalies with that it was …a general trend* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009).

Also participants looked beyond improvements in student achievement data as the only measure of the project's success. Student engagement in learning was another important consideration.

> *They had some tricky classes … with these groups of kids who were identified as very definitely not fulfilling their potential …if that's the case and those kids are still switched onto learning then for me that's a success. If they believe they are learners and they are seeing some progress and it is meaningful to them and they are building on that for the next year then they have done a heck of a lot better job than if those kids are turned off basically (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

Some were confident progress had been made in terms of engagement. Bronwyn said *well we made a positive difference for them in that they were engaged in the learning to a much higher degree.* She also commented on a survey that had been done in a team taught class that was *about 95% positive, that the kids actually enjoyed having two teachers in the class* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009)*.*

Another positive achievement reported by participants was teachers' improved motivation due to perceptions of the project's success. Dean emphasised the correlation between making an impact on student learning and teacher motivation.

> *You know it's collegial (the team teaching) and it's OK to have lots of people coming in and out of their class and that makes them feel they're part of a community…But the other side of it is that you don't get that feeling unless you can actually see significant changes in the kids' results and in the kids' attitudes* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Participants also recognised changes in others' practice, which contributed to the sense of improvement. Wendy said

> *I think I'm beginning to see bits of it this year…more in the planning side. More the being aware of different levels of learning, … particularly when they're setting assessments… is this going to work, how could we make this accessible – that sort of thing (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

Quality of the evidence and its use

However, two participants expressed doubts about evidence quality and its analysis. Wendy said *I mean there was nothing in-depth. It was just …this percentage improved …by this much* (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009). Dean said *I felt they were a bit woolly…and we've talked about that in terms of this year* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009). Glenda commented on the absence of a control group. Even though I did not observe learning conversations where participants' raised these issues openly, there is some evidence that they became more aware of the importance of gathering data both to inform their planning for students, but also as a measure of the impact of their interventions.

In the second round of interviews Dean described the importance of a focus on evidence at the beginning of 2009. *They spent the first month actually knowing, who they had in front of them before they started talking about what they needed to do* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009). Glenda hoped that the data might be a bit more reliable this year allowing more thorough monitoring. *Hopefully because our classes are a bit more representative of a normal Y9 class we should be able to do a bit more of a controlled comparison at the end of the year* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).

Bronwyn described the support the RTLB[9] was providing in tracking
student progress in 2009.

> *** *is doing a much more detailed ... quantitative analysis ...*
>
> *trying to monitor the progress ... she's done quite detailed*
>
> *PROBE[10] assessments on the target group and the kids on*
>
> *the fringe and that's planned to do at the end of term two and*
>
> *term four so we can actually have … more detailed feedback*
>
> *on progress if any.*

She explained how having that information and monitoring student
progress would impact the programme.

> *…I think having the RTLB who's very interested in collecting*
>
> *the data for us to … analyse any successes that we're going*
>
> *to have. I mean that is going to be really important because if*
>
> *there's no tangible success then … we will review and maybe*
>
> *change our direction (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009).*

Participants believed that evidence was necessary to monitor student
progress and to track the impact of teacher interventions. However, they
did not all agree that the investment in e-asTTle had been useful for
them at that time. They used various tools to monitor progress and were
developing awareness that more thorough practices were required to
track that effectively. Teachers were implementing new systems and

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[9] RTLB Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour – RTLB's operate in clusters and
are assigned schools and a case load and are available to local schools to work with
students with special needs
[10] PROBE an Informal Prose test, administered individually and used to assess
students' literacy level

having on going training to improve data gathering and analysis processes.

Section summary

In this section on the thread of participants' beliefs, four strands have been examined. Shared vision, the quality of teacher talk, shared understandings, and the use of evidence have all been shown to count in the development of teachers' learning conversations.

A complication is that some strands are closely intertwined with others and it is difficult to separate them. For example, in this case, a lack of shared vision contributed to confusion about the use of evidence and participant's commitment to the e-asTTle trial. A lack of challenging talk prevented shared understandings of key concepts like inclusion and even the basic purpose of participants' learning conversations from developing. Sharing a vision and developing common understandings are not separate strands that can be examined in isolation. Their development is closely linked, one strand dependant on the other.

Openness and trust also influence the quality of teachers' learning conversations. Individual participants report that trusting relationships with peers enable them to engage openly in talk and changing practices. On the other hand participants also report limited openness in the functioning of the team meetings. The level of trust that encourages open

discussion was not present in the group contexts in this case. My observations at team meetings confirm that many participant concerns were not addressed there.

Participants' beliefs and the reality of their practice are juxtaposed, presenting two sides to the fabric of teachers' learning conversations.

Contradictions related to relationships count in the development of teachers' learning conversations

Leadership

Closely linked with participants' beliefs about shared vision was the leadership issue. Participants believed leaders played a key role in making the vision a reality. Jo said *if you've got someone there who … has a vision of what has to be achieved and then can tap into people and continue to drive it, even when people are overcome by all the other things going on in their lives, that's huge* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

Unravelling these threads was also difficult as leadership issues intertwined with those of creating a shared vision. The contradictory nature of participants' beliefs about leadership was also foreshadowed and will be discussed more fully later in the section.

Changes in personnel impacted leadership

Changes in personnel impacted on the groups' leadership. From Jo's perspective absence of clear leadership had significant consequences. *In a secondary school there's a lot of conflicting and competing demands and unless you have leadership from within the group then it makes it very difficult and they've lacked some key leadership* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009). Bronwyn described the impact as a lack of confidence. *We need to be led towards it…like any learner you need to be confident in where you're going and what you're doing.* The team teaching group did not function as well as it might. *The conversation took place but then the practicality of it being followed through didn't…I think that's primarily because we didn't actually have someone to ... put us through it* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009).

Although group leadership was seriously impacted when key personnel resigned mid-year, this was an issue that teachers believed was not sufficiently addressed by SMT.

> *I think there was recognition … as the first term wore on and it was quite clouded as to how the team teaching was going to progress, who was going to be leading it, what really were our objectives…These anxieties were passed back to the executive and in some ways they tried to address them and create opportunities for us to meet as a team teaching group but it never really seemed that we were given the specific…Tuesday morning is yours, this is a new project, this*

is a pilot project, this is your time, you get together, you plan
(Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009).

School leaders needed to consult with teachers

Participants expected to be consulted by managers about decisions that impacted on their work. Dean reported the consequences when the school's leadership team failed to consult staff or act on decisions at various stages of the project.

> *The teachers felt they'd been consulted (and) told that as part*
> *of the professional learning programme, they were going to be*
> *given time on the Tuesday mornings and that was not what*
> *Exec had understood and that didn't happen. So they felt*
> *hard done by in that they thought they would be given time to*
> *plan together outside of non-contact hours.… So there was*
> *resentment there about that (Dean, interview 1, October*
> *2008).*

Later he reported another major issue that arose when the school *signed up for the AsTTle pilot and it was assumed that the team teachers would take that over without any consultation…So there was even more resentment* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*.* Jo, commenting on this e-asTTle trial said *it was seriously problematic because they* (the team teachers) *saw it as an add-on…whereas the DP and the people who had been involved in designing it saw it as fundamental to what they were trying to achieve* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008)*.* The management

team's failure to clearly communicate the trial's purpose, and gain teachers' support for it before it was introduced, was indicative of a breakdown in that relationship, and a setback to the project.

Leadership roles and responsibilities

As with their beliefs about developing a shared vision, participants differed in their view of where the responsibility for the project's leadership lay, and SMT's role in that. Again the threads of beliefs and relationships were closely linked and the strands difficult to examine in isolation.

Jo saw SMT's role as modelling the process.

> *Model the process of learning, model the process of being part of the conversation, recognise bits they do well and recognise and share the bits that they don't do well. So they are creating the culture, saying we're all in this together (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

However, this did not mean SMT should be responsible for everything.

> *(SMT) have the responsibility to make this work but … can't do it all for them and don't want to be responsible for the whole thing. Internally I think there's got to be somebody with the space, and the enthusiasm and the expertise to make it work, who also is driving it from a knowing point of view (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

She believed SMT should not take the leadership role *because they're not in the situation of being … truly part of that group, because they don't have to learn how to work with somebody else in their classroom, and to try to find the time to make it work* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

Others saw teachers as having a key role to play in leadership, and taking responsibility for the group. Dean suggested the SMT's role was in *encouraging leadership by those teachers who want to try more and do more and teach others about what they've done* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009). He strongly believed there needed to be commitment and buy-in from teachers. *Unless there's investment and ownership you're actually wasting your time, that's probably one of the most important things* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Sharing the leadership

In the project's second year some leadership issues had been resolved. In addition to the team teachers, HODs of the core departments were also participating in the meetings and the SMT representative had maintained a role. Also, a teacher had offered to take over a coordinator role, and other participants had stepped in to fill leadership gaps.

Several participants appreciated having a coordinator, as Bronwyn commented

> *Glenda has stepped up and is actually sort of like the team*
>
> *leader. So she does the organisation and the advanced*

warning on Tuesday we're going to be doing this, this and this.

…It needed some cohesion with someone having a sort of

holistic view that knowing what was happening (Bronwyn,

interview 2, March 2009).

Other participants reported actions by team members that supported the team teaching project and represented leadership. Dean valued a participant's positive approach to other team members, despite their negativity towards the project at times.

And what I see is absolutely critical is that the …experienced

team teacher has, the security in that philosophy of inclusion

and differentiation … as well as the personality to work with

someone in a positive way… to not get negative and

demoralised when someone makes ... comments that you

think that where is that from in terms of our model (Dean,

interview 2, March 2009).

Another factor related to leadership was that SMT entrusted participants with finding the direction. Dean reflected on his learning as SMT representative in the project.

So I guess mostly it's self-directed and mostly it's

opportunities to identify themselves what they want and what

they need … I think you know that's the biggest learning for

me about this … you cannot say look this is what we're doing

and you're going to have input into it unless you actually mean

you're going to have input into it.

He explained *having a professional learning programme that allows*

people the opportunities to be self-directed is critical, absolutely critical

(Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Jo also raised the issue of SMT trusting teachers more fully.

> *I wonder if there is a need for the school to have faith that a*
>
> *group of teachers can go down a track and try something.*
>
> *And provide the resources for them to do that and not expect*
>
> *that then they have to go off to this one and that one and that*
>
> *one (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

This reflected the SMT approach to the team teaching project in 2009

where the team seemed to have more time and autonomy to make its

own decisions. She had mentioned the leadership team's role as

modelling the process of developing a learning culture (see above) and

reflected on the impact leaders' mistrust might have on the outcomes of

the project.

> *And maybe that lack of trust you know if you as the head, the*
>
> *lead learner or the lead teacher in the school don't trust your*
>
> *learners to do it how can we expect teachers to trust their kids*
>
> *to go off and do it (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

Over time, participants developed clarity about their various roles and

responsibilities as project members. An important factor was that the

school's management team began to hand over some leadership responsibility to the team teaching team.

> *(Some) of the teachers are going to go to the e-asTTle workshop in May and then from there they will decide what they're going, what fits. They'll bring that back to the meeting and they will decide how it's going to work and what they want to do (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).*

While providing structured time and people resources, SMT were also encouraging the project team to take ownership, and members were demonstrating their willingness to take on responsibility in a range of ways.

Facilitation

Another aspect of leadership that was raised in the interviews was facilitation. When I began data gathering, an external provider was introducing e-asTTle and leading the team meetings. Earlier in the year some of the team's meetings had been facilitated. Teachers also participated regularly in reflection groups, facilitated by colleagues, as part of their professional learning programme. In discussing this aspect participants reflected on their varied experiences.

Is facilitation necessary?

Some participants believed that facilitation was not a necessity in teacher professional development. By 2009 more confidence in the in-school

leadership of the project was evident. Jo commented *it depends on the teachers involved because if they're truly effective learners they don't need anybody. And if they need somebody they will go and seek them out and they will get what they need* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009). Glenda, describing the operation of the team teaching group in 2009, believed the school had the expertise required in its Learning Support specialists, HODs and RTLB.

> *We've got a lot of people there with a lot of knowledge and it's about giving them opportunities to step up and share that when they can…I haven't felt that we've missed having a leader as such (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).*

Dean commented on a type of facilitation that reflected the model of leadership that was reportedly used in the team teaching project in 2009.

> *I think facilitation is important but … in other group initiatives that I've been in the facilitator can change. You know it's like that group thing where it's the role of someone to just manage the time so if you set out to do something …they keep you on track for doing that (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).*

Skills a facilitator could bring

A particular skill that some participants said they valued was a facilitator's ability to model effective practices. This was something the facilitator in this case reported trying to do, but believed was not always what teachers wanted to hear.

I really am trying very, very hard to model what I would expect

of them in the classroom. And the interesting thing is … very

often teachers come back and say we just want to be told how

to do it. You're telling us that this is, this is what we should be

doing but we want to know how we do it. And it is about

strategies. They want strategies and tricks (Jo, interview 2,

April 2009).

Again the issue of facilitation suggested an evolving perspective. As the group became more confident in its role, the need for facilitation was lessened. Participants were willing to take responsibility for coordinating the meetings and using the expertise within the group to support its learning. They also spoke about seeking others' expertise when required. A more distributed style of leadership was operating and its importance became evident when participants talked about safety in the learning environment.

Safety – "no hierarchy"

The issue of feeling safe and knowing that others would be accepting and non-judgemental of members' contributions were factors common across participants. Jo believed it was important that all viewpoints should be listened to. *One of the biggest enablers I think is acknowledging that wherever somebody's at and whatever they've got to say on that thing is as valid as where somebody else is* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008). Dean agreed *It's OK for you to share what you think*

and listen too. But he commented that teachers should not get defensive if others seemed to be criticising their ideas.

> *If people disagree with you …listening to that but not seeing it*
> *that you're being judged as a bad teacher or you're not doing*
> *your job properly or you're not committed to the sort of*
> *pedagogical thrust of what …you think the school is trying to*
> *develop (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).*

Hierarchy in relationships contributed to tension

Clearly participants were acknowledging potential for conflict in their interactions with others. Participants who held management positions were aware that hierarchy could influence others' sense of safety. Dean who facilitated reflection groups in the school's professional learning programme commented

> *It always seems to come back to appraisal. So there's a fear,*
> *you know the fear thing. So one of the things that has to*
> *happen, is if you're the facilitator that's all you are. And so*
> *there's no hierarchy operating because that can kill it (Dean,*
> *interview 1, October 2008).*

Jacqui acknowledged this when explaining how she valued feeling safe when receiving feedback on teaching issues. *And it wasn't anything except for me…she took notes for me but it was just for me. It wasn't for appraisal. It wasn't for the boss…it's quite a safe thing to do* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008). However, at least initially, the team

teachers did not report this sense of safety. Jo explained *I don't think they felt comfortable trying stuff. You know no matter how much you entreat them to take this one thing, go away with it and see what you make of it. That was something that was missing* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008).

Emerging from this description of participants' beliefs about leadership and facilitation are issues around hierarchy and safety and the importance of trust. Without trust participants are reluctant to participate freely or openly. Trust is built through positive relationships with others, over time, and in partnerships where there is no fear of appraisal or judgement.

Interactions with colleagues

Participants believed that positive relationships enabled them to work well with each other.

> *I think it depends on the relationship you have with the person too. If you don't get on with that person then those conversations aren't going to take place at all. If you get on well with them then they're more likely to take place and they're more likely to be in-depth conversations too (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

Developing partnerships required effort

In the second phase of interviewing, participants emphasised the impact of relationships and personality, and acknowledged that these factors needed working on. *The team teaching side of it is really the key in that if there are two people …they have to have a working relationship and they have to spend a lot of time getting to know each other and sussing it out* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009)*.* Some recognised that the team approach required adjustment. Glenda reported *I've sort of got used to there being another adult in the class but I know one of our new teachers…is finding it quite difficult to not be the only adult in the class* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009)*.* Bronwyn acknowledged personality differences *like personalities sometimes don't gel* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009)*.*

Also requiring effort was making things work in a cross-curricular context. Wendy reported difficulty in sharing the teaching load in one class. *I'll take the lead for some things but it's probably about a 70/30 split there.* Wendy linked this to the other team teacher needing to have confidence in her ability to contribute. She acknowledged that she lacked experience in some specialist subjects but there were other areas where she was able to contribute. *And you know we did ... a lot of work on working together in cooperative groups and I was able to bring the skills that were needed for that sort of thing.* She believed the teaching load would be shared more equally *once they've got more confidence in my ability to cope with the (subject)* (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009)*.*

Teacher ownership encouraged commitment

A factor seen as impacting on teachers' willingness to contribute to the team meetings was whether their participation was voluntary or whether they were co-opted. Wendy thought volunteering for the team was important. *All the science and social studies people are new but they've come in by choice so that … makes a difference I think, when people want to be there* (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009). This may reflect her discomfort at coming into the team teaching group halfway during the previous year, when systems were already set up. At that time she was reluctant to challenge existing practices. However, it also indicates the importance of teachers' ownership of their work.

Dean believed that buy-in was a key factor in developing depth - *the quality of the conversations is so dependent on the buy-in.* He emphasised the importance of developing the team teaching partnership and gaining teachers' commitment to that.

> *So the focus is on the fact that it's team teaching and that it's about the relationship between the two teachers and that has to be set up significantly in the beginning and it has to be commitment and buy in. So if you don't want to do this don't do it* (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Allowing teachers' choice in whether they participate or not, indicates power sharing by SMT and fosters teacher ownership. Yet this

contradicts participants' belief that leaders have some responsibility for developing a shared vision.

Team approach built motivation

Another relational aspect that was more evident in the second interviews was the sense of a team approach. This was particularly evident in the wider team context. Wendy commented enthusiastically,

> *You know if you don't work well as a team then it's never going to be successful. So it's actually team ethos and feeling like you're all headed in the same direction and you're all aiming for the one thing (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

This also highlights the importance of shared vision in building an effective team.

Bronwyn agreed that a team was building, *there's team planning, a team approach* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009). Reflecting on the project in 2008 Wendy said,

> *I don't think they ever created that kind of feeling that it was one group of people working for the same thing. I think it kind of was English and Learning Support …but like we came together this year… it was never any thought that we weren't equal members of the team and I think you know as far as teaching's concerned any of us feel like we could be leading (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

Individual motivation contributed to building relationships and the team's growth. Bronwyn said *I'm a big team player. …I get a real buzz actually from working successfully in … teams or in pairs or whatever* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009)*.* The team teaching project provided this opportunity. Being part of a team contributed to ownership and motivation to achieve team goals. Wendy commented

> *I think it's being driven from within the team rather than from – I don't know whether it was top, but you know it was driven from outside the team before. Now the team's got a path of its own and it's team driven rather than it's somebody's idea that's being imposed…now I think the people in the team really want it to succeed … so it's like everything else, if you really want something then it's way more successful than if somebody tells you this is what you're going to do (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

Section summary

In 2009 the team included not only English and Learning Support teachers, but also Science and Social Studies. At least three departmental HODs also attended the meetings, plus an SMT representative, and the school's RTLB. Participants clearly found this inclusion of senior and middle management staff supportive of their work, and appreciated the expertise these leaders of learning could provide.

Yet they continued to express concerns about the role of leaders in their decision-making processes and their daily work.

Participants generally seemed more comfortable in their role as team teachers, and several had stepped up their involvement, to take on a variety of leadership roles. Those still actively participating in the team teaching partnerships reported deeper ownership of the project and believed they gained motivation from working together towards common goals.

However, there were difficulties for some. It was reported that a new team teacher found it challenging adjusting to working with a colleague in the classroom. Team teaching partnerships also required work and a building of trust to enable equal role sharing in classrooms. Some participants lacked confidence to share openly in their learning conversations and had not developed the level of trust that would enable them to challenge practice.

Structural and systemic aspects of the participants' work also interacted with the relational issues examined here, and are explored in the following section.

Contradictions related to structural and systemic factors count in the development of teachers' learning conversations

Complexities of time and workload

Time issues were discussed by all six participants, and involved many facets. It could be simply as Bronwyn put it, *there's time constraints … there's always a million things to do* (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008). But the pace of change was also a consideration. *Because I think we're going too fast and I think that basic theoretical and vision stuff hasn't been done…and we've tried to do it all too fast* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008).

Bronwyn also explained how limited planning time had impacted on the group's ability to develop a clear focus*.*

> *It was supposed to be (that) every other Tuesday morning would be when team teachers got together and met as a core and we have these learning conversations ... the time to actually focus on team teaching. However, that didn't happen. We had small groups that went off and did their own thing and it became quite disparate. So there hasn't actually ... been this time when we were allowed to develop … our team teaching skills as a group (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).*

In addition there was a sense that there was too much to learn and do, and that that learning took time, both for teachers to become engaged in the process, and for the learning to become embedded. Dean expressed frustration about this in meetings. *So (there's) general resistance to begin with and then you know people get quite excited with ideas and whatever and then it's time to go. It's really frustrating* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*.*

Jacqui noted how long it was taking for her to understand and embed the ideas she was learning into her practice. *I haven't really got my head around it completely, which is why I want to stay in that group because I'm still getting my head around making it work.* She also recognised the time it took for students to learn new approaches. *It probably takes a long time because that's how they are conditioned. I mean they've had years of that, of the teacher's the fountain of all knowledge and that's who you check with* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008). Both teachers and students needed time to understand and make new practices work.

Contradictions in participants' perceptions about time

The discussion of time also saw some contradictions. Wendy, who had previously worked in a primary school setting, did not believe more time needed to be allocated for team meetings.

> *I get a much greater feeling in a secondary school that they always want time allocated for everything. That it doesn't happen as a natural course and it maybe it's because it's a*

bigger institution and that if you don't set things up it doesn't

happen. I don't know. But there always seems to be this issue

of when are we going to do this or we haven't got time to do

this…What about the five, six or eight or sometimes more

spells that you have off during the week? You know it just

seems this need that you have to have a time allocation

otherwise we can't do these things (Wendy, interview 1,

October 2008).

And yet she acknowledged the difficulty she experienced arranging to

discuss students' learning needs with other core teachers, outside the

team teaching team. *The opportunity doesn't arise and I don't have the*

time with the child to actually do that…once again maybe that's where

they're (secondary teachers) coming from – time (Wendy, interview 1,

October 2008). This indicated a layer of complexity in this secondary

school for teachers wanting to discuss students' learning needs. Without

regular core teacher cross-curricular meetings this would involve finding

time for conversations with several teachers.

Teachers were also invited by SMT to request more time to undertake

planning for team teaching. However, this offer did not appear to be

taken up by any participants - despite their concerns over work

pressures. When this issue was raised, teachers expressed reluctance

because requesting relief would take them away from other classes.

At the same time, some participants strongly believed the time allocated by SMT for teachers to get together and plan was insufficient because it came with an expectation that the teachers also participate in wider school professional learning. Bronwyn felt that what was needed was *having time…a specific time to actually engage in those conversations and try not to push it into a time when other PD goals are being explored as well* (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008). Jacqui believed teachers' professional learning time should be managed wisely. *You know you've got to target it (PD) ... You've got to be respectful of people's time, so target it* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008)*.*

Clearly the issue of time was a complex one. However, during the second round of interviews, participants reported some progress because SMT had allocated dedicated professional learning time for team teaching. *The big improvement I think we've had in team teaching this year …is that we have regular PD every Tuesday morning for an hour…and we've had a lot of opportunities for those discussions* (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009)*.*

Dilemmas of workload

Clearly linked with time was the workload issue. Several participants believed this factor acted as a barrier to their engagement in learning conversations. There were also different aspects to this issue. One was the learning load placed on teachers by their involvement in both the professional development programme, and the new team teaching

initiative. Another was teachers feeling that what was being expected of their involvement was unrealistic.

Learning overload

In terms of the learning load, participants mentioned needing to learn about being a team teacher. As Jo explained it, *I think the demands on them have been fairly great because they had to do learning, but they also had to make it work at the same time so there weren't the opportunities to make mistakes* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008)*.* In a later interview she reflected *there were too many different things that they were trying to grapple with. They were grappling with a new approach of team teaching and they were grappling with e-asTTle and they never quite reconciled those two things* (Jo, interview 2, April 2009).

What predominated at the time of my data gathering was the learning around teachers' use of e-asTTle. Dean described that learning as *it's too much almost, quite daunting* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*.* Learning about e-asTTle was complicated by technical issues but as Jo explained

> *The problem is …I don't think anybody had any understanding of how much it (e-asTTle) would take. You know they truly thought it was just a matter of right we'll give this a go, we'll put it in there, we'll address the issues as they come up and within three weeks we'll have this all sorted. Not even close.*

> *… You know it was very, very difficult… it was just too hard*
>
> *(Jo, interview 2, April 2009).*

Workload created pressure

In addition, participants also expressed concerns about workload.

> *So the two team-teachers were the learning support teachers*
> *who were only supposed to be teaching the team teaching*
> *classes, but ended up getting an extra … class. So they were*
> *put under pressure because then they had more workload.*
> *…One of the learning support teachers ended up doing three*
> *of the team teaching classes, which was just too much (Dean,*
> *interview 1, October 2008).*

Workload concerns created further pressure when this person and
another colleague resigned.

> *You know you've had the original teachers, who were chosen*
> *because of the strengths they brought to it, and then some of*
> *those key people left and the people coming in haven't*
> *necessarily had the experience (Jo, interview 1, November*
> *2008).*

Newcomers experienced pressures too, which impacted on the way they
contributed to the group.

> *And I guess that's a little bit where I'm coming from too in*
> *saying I haven't rocked the boat in any way. I want to*

establish myself with credibility before I start to say what I

think more (Wendy, interview 1, October 2008).

The feeling of overload extended widely within the team teaching group. Jo commented *they've had some add-on-itis, thinking oh this is extra over and above what we really want to be doing* (Jo, interview 1, November 2008). But it was also reported in the wider teaching cohort and suggested inequity in professional learning expectations on staff. Jacqui explained, *I think probably quite a few of us are in a number of different groups…but not everyone is involved in groups and I'm not quite sure how they've avoided that* (Jacqui, interview 1, November 2008)*.*

Workload as an issue of resistance

Concerns were expressed that workload was also an issue blocking teachers' commitment to the project. Dean commented, *that workload thing seems to come up all the time and it's really negative and it just stops the progress in its tracks* (Dean, interview 1, October 2008)*.* He explained efforts to counter it. *I had conversations … trying to get … a positive attitude to it rather than reinforcing the sort of negative views of workload that they wanted to take.* He saw it as a resistance issue that could be a positive thing but had potential to block progress.

> *So there's a continual sort of but, but, but. You know the sort*
> *of resistance, the nay saying and it depends on the balance of*
> *that nay saying. That resistance in a group can be quite*

critical to how the conversation goes. It can be a good thing

because it can really get a conversation going but if there are

too many it can sap the energy out of the group (Dean,

interview 1, October 2008).

By the second year of the project, workload was another issue that

participants believed had been somewhat resolved for their group.

Well I think … one of the big issues was last year there was

too much going on for everybody. You know they took on way

too many things and this year they've said okay the people

involved in the team teaching that's all the professional

development they have to do (Bronwyn, interview 2, March

2009).

Some participants commented that sharing planning, and resource

development, was reducing their load. However, Glenda reported that

one of the team teachers was *finding the expectation, the amount of*

meeting time and discussion that we're having for our Y9 classes is a big

commitment (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009)*.* This suggested the

learning load might reduce over time, but that it was likely that new

project members would experience challenges, adapting to new

structures and practices.

New structures required new learning

A concern raised in relation to the project's structure was teachers' preparedness for working in teams. Team teaching was a new intervention for the school and some participants had not worked with colleagues in this way before. It challenged teacher beliefs and created pressures for group members. Jo explained

> *A group of team teachers and the school put in place a structure that's different to anything they've ever done before, to support a particular group of students that came into the school …and… for the teachers to deal with the wider range of ability that was in there. It's pretty cool really but it's been misinterpreted by many that came in from their own framework and said well the extra teacher's in there to support those kids and that's not what the intention was (Jo, interview 1, November 2008).*

Jo spoke about the challenge the new structure had presented for some teachers.

> *They started the year having a range of kids and they were trying to work out well what do we do with this? How do we manage this? We've got two teachers, we've got a structure we put in place but actually we don't know how to make that work for us …we've got to try – and that's your risk-taking. Give it a go. See what you can do. And gosh it's taking a lot of*

effort and this is just one of my classes (Jo, interview 1,

November 2008).

Some were confident in the team teaching role and relished the opportunity to share their expertise with others. Bronwyn commented *actually, I'm adamant … that I'm not seen as the person who sits on the table with the slower learners.* She recognised the expertise that the specialist teachers brought to the role. *We do have… a really good understanding already of where the* (target) *students are at … what their needs are and what we can do to support them* (Bronwyn, interview 1, October 2008).

However, others were less confident. Wendy who also had previous experience in team-teaching identified concerns with teacher practice. She was not convinced that teaching approaches within the team teaching project were as effective as they could be, but had not raised this issue with others.

> *They do a lot of teacher/pupil discussion but they don't do a*
>
> *huge amount of group discussion where half a dozen kids*
>
> *discuss something and report back. There's a lot of teacher*
>
> *ask, pupils give answers and it's still teacher directed talk*
>
> *actually…I think there needs to be a change in the structure of*
>
> *the whole lesson to be able to make the best of the team*
>
> *teaching (Wendy, interview 2, April 2009).*

So while for some the focus was on adapting to new structures and learning new practices, others who had knowledge, needed to develop confidence or feel a level of safety that allowed them to share their expertise, and challenge, and support others. Participants needed different levels of support depending on their role and responsibility.

New classroom practices take hold over time

Differentiating learning was a primary intention of team teaching. Glenda described a change in approach that she recognised in her own teaching.

> *I think at times I've talked to the top two thirds of the class and it's made me a lot more aware of how do the lower end of the scale hear what I'm saying or don't hear it. And the way that we give instructions and reinforce instructions and … it's certainly more differentiated in terms of thinking about how kids are going to respond to what we're teaching (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).*

Bronwyn recognised changes in the way things were done in 2009 and how these built on the experiences of the previous year.

> *For example the reading programme … we've extended it and we've sort of made it more focused. … In English we're using having two teachers in the classroom giving us time for one to supervise the class, one to conference with the students on a regular basis about their reading and how they're reading,*

> *what they're reading, why they're reading (Bronwyn, interview*
>
> *2, March 2009).*

She referred to *refining the materials we did last year* and explained how the model was set up this year, to enable teachers to transfer the learning they were doing in the team teaching classes (about differentiating programmes to meet the range of learning needs) into their other classes. Those involved in team teaching were becoming more strategic, planning to extend the projects' influence.

New teaching structures supported by management systems

The team teaching model in 2009 experienced a number of changes reflecting the learning from experiences in 2008. Dean outlined some of these in an interview early in 2009.

> *It's been set up in terms of the school management. It's all*
>
> *been negotiated and laid out very clearly right from the*
>
> *beginning exactly how much time there would be, how much*
>
> *planning time, how much the appraisal and professional*
>
> *learning programme for the year would be attached to it and*
>
> *where they would fit during the year. So that was significant…*

> *We set it up so that on a Tuesday in the professional learning*
>
> *time those teachers did not have to take part in whole group*
>
> *stuff. So they meet … they have an agenda…and then they*
>
> *plan their strategies and they talk about what they're going to*

be focusing on for the week.   So they meet on a Tuesday for an hour and do all that kind of work

But then on a Wednesday we timetabled the teachers really carefully so that they were all free on a Wednesday, spell five, and … (they) can meet and plan and do things specifically for the class (or) they can meet separately (Dean, interview 2, March 2009).

Participants clearly appreciated the allocation of time and the sharper focus of the team project in 2009. Bronwyn commenting on SMT support said, *they've all backed it and I think they're more realistic, learning the lessons from last year that the people needed time and space to make it a success really* (Bronwyn, interview 2, March 2009). Glenda described the team's tighter focus on the target groups*.*

> *It's quite a new thing for us to think about a group of students and having a common approach…not necessarily doing the same thing at the same time … but we've all got the common goal for this group of students and it's quite a supportive way of planning and thinking about how you approach tasks and stuff with those kids (Glenda, interview 1, April 2009).*

Emerging from this description of participants' comments in relation to structural and systemic factors is a sense that over time some issues that were apparent in the first year were resolved and new issues were coming to the fore. It appeared that SMT had listened to some team teacher concerns and had provided some of the systemic supports participant's believed they needed to work more effectively. However, when the focus came off immediate and practical concerns, other potentially more complex issues arose to take their place. These included the time needed to build positive working relationships between teachers, to bring new teachers on board with the project and to embed practices for both students and teachers. Leaders and managers also needed time to adapt to new structures and to provide the necessary supports that enabled teachers to learn new practices to replace the old.

In terms of the weaving metaphor it is evident the new fabric, woven from threads not yet strongly formed, is fragile. At first, in seeking to overcome old and established norms of practice and belief, the threads unravel easily. However, as participants develop and refine new skills some threads appear to gain strength and the weave becomes firmer. A stronger and more vibrant fabric begins to emerge.

Concluding Comment

This chapter identifies contradictions in participants' beliefs, relationships and the structures and systems that they work within when developing learning conversations. These contradictions add complexity to this development. As I begin to weave together the threads of my learning from research literature and my own findings it is apparent that how participants manage the conflict and challenges posed by these contradictions is what counts in the development of their learning conversations.

Chapter 4

Discussion of the findings:
Teachers' learning conversations - a complex and fragile weave

This chapter weaves together the various threads of my thesis. It combines what is known already about teachers' learning conversations (the existing fabric) and the findings from my case study, which suggest their contradictory nature (the two sides of the cloth). It highlights consensus and disagreements in findings from both sources. It also presents my own learning from this study, and explores some implications.

Earlier chapters used a weaving metaphor to help explain the complexity that is evident as teachers' learning conversations develop. Aspects of this metaphor are explored further. Also findings have led me to examine other literature as I seek to understand previously unconsidered dimensions of learning conversations. A particular focus is the contradictions inherent in the ideal and the reality of teachers' professional conversations and I consider the work of Argyris on espoused theory and theory in use (1995).The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research and recommendations for educators in developing knowledge and understanding in this field.

Weaving the cloth

This section discusses key research findings, synthesising what was
learned from current research literature and the case study. Overarching
the discussion is the framework of beliefs, relationships and structures,
and the understanding that each of these threads represents
contradictory beliefs and practices, which creates two sides to the fabric
of teachers' learning conversations. In some aspects, findings from
project participants mirror findings from the literature. Yet, while there is
some consensus equally there are areas where researchers'
interpretations conflict and also where participants' findings contradict
the research. These areas of difference are also discussed.

The contradictory nature of beliefs

Fundamental to the concept of professional learning communities as
described in the research literature is the notion that teachers continually
assess their practice. Also central is that this *inquiry into practice* focuses
on raising student achievement. It requires teachers to develop shared
understandings and challenge each other (Annan, et al., 2003; Earl &
Timperley, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2008; Timperley, 2007).

Although referred to in the literature by a range of terminology, a *learning
conversation* is the primary tool by which such inquiry occurs. It is
through learning conversations those teachers' goals and actions are

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determined, understood, acted on and realised (Annan, et al., 2003; Dufour, 2004; Little, et al., 2003; Louis, et al., 1996).

Establishing a shared vision

The first area of consensus from the literature is that such an inquiry process is built around a shared vision with the goal of improving teachers' performance so that standards of achievement for all students can be raised. It is further agreed that the focus of such efforts should be on those students currently most disadvantaged (Dufour, 2004; Hattie, 1999; Timperley, 2007).

The case study school acknowledged these elements. From the beginning the team teaching vision aimed to provide a more inclusive learning programme for underachieving students and the team teaching model was set up to achieve that. Teachers were supported in developing their practice through a range of structures and the provision of internal professional learning opportunities, guided in some cases by external facilitators. The school's management team had clearly articulated goals in its strategic plan and staff members were involved in a range of projects working towards their implementation. However, although inclusion was one of the school's strategic goals, management also had additional foci.

Participants in the case study believed having a vision and a clear purpose was central to their functioning effectively. Yet, during the early

stages of data gathering, they agreed that their project lacked a shared vision: the consensus was that this impacted negatively on its direction and progress. Initially, there were some teachers who challenged the focus on inclusiveness: they were reported to favour a return to the status quo which involved separate programmes for students with learning difficulties.

Management and team teachers did not seem always to be heading in the same direction. Lack of consultation created tension between senior management and the team teaching team. This was particularly evident in the development of the team's vision and also when the issue of the e-asTTle trial arose. In this instance, the management team's priorities for development clashed with the team teachers' vision for how inclusion could be achieved.

Some participants expressed concern that management had "hi-jacked" the team teaching project when it allowed this trial. They reported it as a different form of data gathering than team teachers had been using, which required considerable learning, and some resented its intrusion on their programme. Yet those in management positions believed the trial was fundamental to the school's vision (because it focused on using evidence to inform practice).

Both within the team and between the team and management there were difficulties reaching consensus over vision. It was important to

participants that there was congruence between the vision of the
school's leadership team and the direction of its various staff projects.
Leadership within the team was another key factor, which impacted on
vision. When the team lost key personnel it had to bring newcomers on
board and find new leaders. New members and leadership brought
different experiences and understandings, which had to be taken into
account. So, for a while this also challenged the team's focus and it had
to rebuild its vision.

Establishing a shared vision that was understood and valued by all was a
difficult process.

Technical versus idealistic focus

Research literature prioritises different interventions to improve
outcomes for disadvantaged students. Some researchers emphasise
process-focused approaches where student achievement can be
measured (Black, et al., 2003; Little & Curry, 2008; Timperley, 2007)
while others concentrate on the transformational potential of professional
learning communities (Kincheloe, 2003; Levine & Marcus, 2007; Sparks,
2005). An example of this difference is the preference for set formal
protocols (Timperley & Parr, 2004a) versus more open-ended
conversation (Johnston, 1997). Also in the secondary context, there are
those who advocate subject specialisation (Dufour, 2004) while others
recommend more integrated approaches to learning (Wylie, et al., 2004).
These differences represent a more technical approach to learning

conversations on the one hand and a more idealistic perspective on the other.

Raising achievement versus potential to transform

New Zealand MOE policy is focused on improving results, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The revised NZ Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008) strongly promotes teacher inquiry into practice and the MOE invests in the use of assessment tools such as asTTle so that progress can be monitored for individuals and class, year level, and even national cohorts. Teacher professional learning, (as found in MOE contracts such as Assessment to Learn, and literacy and numeracy projects) supports teachers to develop skills for assessing and monitoring students' learning and measuring progress in terms of achievement against national benchmarks. Evidence-based learning conversations are a key tool in this process (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Yet, other educators and researchers advocate a broader view of educational achievement (Achinstein, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Kincheloe, 2003). They are more outcomes focused, rather than being captured by the stress on measured achievements. In addition, they focus less on standardised tests to measure performance and more on building relationships within the wider school community. Their concern is to better understand the learning needs and aspirations of their local communities and to find ways of working in partnership with them. The objective is to improve opportunities for all. Advocates of this

position insist they are not driven by a vision of "better scores", but by advancing educational experiences for students and supporting communities to achieve their own goals (Achinstein, 2002; Levine & Marcus, 2007).

Such educators promote an idealistic vision that some claim is emancipatory and has the potential to transform outcomes for disadvantaged learners (Kincheloe, 2003; Sparks, 2005). For many New Zealand teachers, this may be a more inspirational approach than the more technical position supported by the MOE and practised by many teacher professional developers in our schools.

Protocols versus open conversation

There is a marked difference between those who work to develop shared understandings of philosophy and practice and advocates of evidence-based (data driven) discussions. While researchers agree that learning conversations must encourage teachers to challenge each others' beliefs and practices, some advocate more open-ended conversations with a potential for disagreement and even conflict (Achinstein, 2002; Johnston, 1997). There is an openly political agenda in some research (Achinstein, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Kincheloe, 2008). Others favour managing any tension with clear protocols and facilitation (Little & Curry, 2008; Timperley & Parr, 2004a).

Secondary context – subject specialisation versus integration

Another aspect of this technical versus idealistic divide is particularly related to the secondary school context. As schools become more diverse, there is a call to adopt different teaching and learning approaches. Like the case study school, many teachers and schools acknowledge that more integrated and team approaches to learning better meet the needs of diverse and disadvantaged students. There is pressure to work collectively for solving problems. Some resist these changes but a growing number advocate them.

What counts as evidence?

A further area of contention in the literature is argument over what counts as "evidence"; countries use different forms of evidence to measure success. In New Zealand the MOE's emphasis is on student achievement data from standardised tests this is demonstrated by its investment in the development and use of assessment tools which provide the favoured data for evidence based learning conversations (Education Review Office, 2007; Timperley & Parr, 2004a). In the United States, none of the reported studies of learning conversations, provide evidence of student achievement to measure progress in interventions. They tend to report qualitative data in the form of teacher perceptions of impact.

The nature of evidence was an issue in the case study school. Using evidence to inform teacher practice was a strategic goal of school

management, and a focus of teacher professional learning. External facilitators supported the school in this development. Initially their focus was on building portfolios of student work and reflection but that shifted mid 2008 to the e-asTTle trial. This became a source of conflict and management was seen as imposing the trial on the group. The lack of opportunity for both groups to communicate their views and concerns prevented common understandings developing. Initially this was a barrier to progress within the project.

In summary, as new forms of professional learning in the form of learning communities and learning conversations gain hold, several areas of challenge are evident. Despite being acknowledged as a priority, there can be difficulty in establishing a shared vision. Also there is tension between those who advocate more technical, process-focused approaches and those who promote more open, idealistic alternatives. Additionally, there are differences between countries in how evidence is used to inform teacher practice. Experiences in the case study school suggest that regardless of a national focus on *assessment to learn,* it takes some time and considerable input to shift teacher practice.

Contradictory aspects of relationships

Challenge versus safety and trust

Research literature agrees that a crucial professional learning focus is that participants develop common understandings and share the best

approaches for realising the schools' vision. Sharing knowledge about students and challenging any assumptions and practices, which are barriers to improved student performance is part of that process. As established, a key element is examining data about classroom practice and student results, so that decisions are based on evidence and effectiveness of interventions can be measured (Annan, et al., 2003; Earl & Timperley, 2008; Education Review Office, 2007).

This includes participants engaging in critical self-reflection but also involves them in conversations with colleagues where each other's beliefs and teaching practices are examined and challenged. It is widely accepted that such conversations might lead to conflict. Developing trusting relationships is important. Many researchers recommend that this process be taken slowly so that the development of trust is not put at jeopardy. There are several researchers who are clearly anxious about the lack of safety in some of teachers' collaborative work (Byrk & Schneider, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Hynds, 2000, 2007).

Participants also agreed that trust is important. They spoke about the importance of relationships, of sharing and listening and mutual respect. Some believed there had been reciprocal learning in their partnership meetings and most acknowledged personal learning. There was also a sense that over time, participants believed shared understandings were developing. Later in the interview process, they reported working together constructively towards common goals.

This issue of trust was reinforced in an early discussion with the facilitator, when she reported team teachers' unwillingness to "*give things a go*" (Jo, interview 1, November 2008). It suggested they had not yet reached the level of trust they needed in order to enter willingly into the trial of new practices, either with the facilitator or with their colleagues. Yet later, capacity for experimentation seemed to have developed within the team. In the second year of the project, participants noted more openness to new practices, more sharing of ideas and resources and a willingness to seek and listen to the advice of both in-school and outside experts. Some participants reported asking trusted colleagues to observe them trying new practices and welcoming feedback.

Another aspect was management's trust of team teachers. In 2008, when SMT instituted the trial of e-asTTle with limited consultation this was resented by the team. They felt they were over burdened with new learning, but also that they were being led in a direction that was different from the one planned. It implied a lack of trust that the team could effectively manage its own direction. In 2009 management seemed to have learned from that experience. Participants spoke of team teachers attending an e-asTTle workshop and bringing back what they learned. The emphasis was on team teachers selecting what was useful and sharing their knowledge. In having more autonomy to make decisions about their work the team teachers seemed to develop more enthusiasm

and commitment to it. The issue of autonomy is explored further in a later section.

Trust versus collusion

Many argue that teacher collaborative work is founded on trusting relationships between participants and it is commonsense that individuals are unlikely to engage openly in dialogue, when threatened or exposed to ridicule, and criticism. However, some research finds that the desire to maintain a trusted partnership leads to collusion where partners work to protect each other rather than addressing areas of disagreement or concern (Hynds, 2000). Teacher safety becomes more valuable than direct challenge aimed at achieving best outcomes for students. Also, teachers may perceive danger in challenging the status quo, whether from students, colleagues, or the wider community, and they close ranks to support each other.

Consensus versus diversity of voice

Another contradiction in the literature is between reaching consensus and maintaining diversity of voice. Many argue that challenging assumptions and discussing differences so that participants share understandings is central to learning conversations. Some proponents of this view recommend establishing clear protocols for managing conflict in this phase of learning conversations (Little & Curry, 2008; Robinson & Lai, 2006). However, others advocate open conversations and believe it is vital that a diverse range of voices is heard. They recommend

differences are kept in the open and rather than being resolved are celebrated (Achinstein, 2002; Johnston, 1997). They hold that although diversity and difference might make some uncomfortable, such conflict is conducive to change.

A caution to this view stressing diversity of voice is found in some New Zealand research which reports that some teachers and parents from ethnic minority groups are reluctant to challenge and voice concerns with peers or within the school community (Hynds, 2007). Whether this is due to unwillingness by some minority groups to confront issues in this way or their sense of it being unsafe to challenge in such contexts, the conclusion seems that in open dialogue situations, the reality can be that discussion remains one-sided and voices, which might represent alternative viewpoints are silent. In order for diversity of voice to be a reality, community members need to create an environment where all feel free to participate openly. This may require alternative structures and different relationships to be established within the school and its wider community.

Challenge without conflict

Participants' attitude towards conflict differed from what some literature recommended. While participants admitted to some tensions and differences of belief and practice within the team, they did not agree that overt challenging of their colleagues was the most effective way of dealing with those differences. In fact, participants went to considerable

lengths to avoid challenge and conflict: rather, they worked towards changing practices by modelling more effective methods and supporting others to try them.

This process was time consuming, yet participants reported growth. Over the months I observed the group, participants either acknowledged changes in their own practice and beliefs, or reported changes in others. Teachers who had been unwilling to give up some exclusive practices (believing that students at different levels needed different programmes) reported differentiating to manage the range of levels within the classroom. Rather than being alienated by criticism and entrenched in old approaches, they were now advocating new practices.

Participants also believed that challenge was not conducive to effective working relationships. They believed strongly that their learning conversations needed to promote easy and positive relationships with colleagues and that challenge would promote negativity. The importance of maintaining strong working relationships was emphasised.

Some participants believed that this reluctance to challenge was due to defensiveness. These participants recognised this trait personally but also reported observing it in their colleagues. Participants believed that their acceptance of more challenging and critical feedback depended on their relationship with a colleague. If that relationship was one of trust, they were more likely to respond without being defensive.

To summarise this section, researchers of learning conversations advocate critical self-reflection and challenging others' beliefs and practice while acknowledging the importance of safe and trusting relationships. Some emphasise the importance of shared understandings while others argue diversity of voice is fundamental in an effective learning conversation. Participants accepted the need for challenge but admitted defensiveness and studies report the potential for collusion to maintain safety (Hynds, 2000). Overall the participants valued challenge without conflict. The fabric of teachers' learning conversations is indeed contradictory.

The contradictory nature of Structures

A further complexity is the interconnectedness of the threads in teachers' learning conversations. Some elements already discussed are re-examined in this section from the perspective of structural dimensions.

Research literature agrees that inquiry into practice in professional learning communities requires solid structures for effective learning conversations to occur. For example, sufficient time to meet and activities, which encourage participants to work interdependently are both necessary for their success (Louis, et al., 1996). Participants widely reported systemic improvements, especially those related to time and meeting allocations as enabling the team to function more effectively.

When management recognised the project as team teachers' primary professional learning focus, this addressed many participant frustrations, and contributed to their perception of team progress. However, other structural issues were less easily resolved.

Change versus stability

A factor that participants recognised as negatively impeding their work was the lack of continuity in team membership. Whilst changing personnel is an inevitable part of any project, the amount of change in this case seemed to significantly block progress to the extent that the team effectively re-emerged, as a new team. Replacement leaders were sought or stepped into gaps, philosophies were revisited, and practices began to develop as the new team grew into its role. Monitoring staff commitments and the impact of changes is an important management responsibility. Some researchers propose systems for ensuring this occurs (Gajda & Koliba, 2008).

Collaboration versus autonomy

A further tension identified in the literature is that the movement towards more collective action challenges many teachers' preference for autonomy within their classrooms. The traditional practice of working in isolation is still favoured by many (Little, 1990). Facilitators of teacher professional development continue to report teacher resistance to new practices, especially those involving collaboration (Grossman, et al., 2001). At the same time, many schools and teachers call for more

autonomy in developing effective programmes. Some research reports teachers being proactive by demanding the ability to be flexible in their teaching approaches and developing a curriculum that is more relevant to students' interests and aspirations (Grossman, et al., 2001; Levine & Marcus, 2007).

Also important is the key role that leaders play in establishing both the vision and in providing the structures and motivation required to ensure success. However, some researchers emphasise that teachers need more control over how their time is organised, more flexibility to develop appropriate programmes and more autonomy in seeking solutions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Wood, 2007). Without this they argue that collaborative work will not move beyond superficial change nor deliver transformational outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Leadership versus ownership

The internal leadership of the project was important to participants. They wanted to have ownership of the project and to be self-directing rather than having their work decided for them. This became clear when the initial leader of the project resigned and there was a period of confusion during which the team lacked direction and focus. It was not until others stepped in to fill gaps that the team regained momentum. In fact the notion of distributed rather than hierarchical leadership became important to them. Team members grew to prefer sharing leadership

responsibility and having a variety of roles with all members contributing to the team.

A further aspect of autonomy is that if teachers are to be held accountable for their students' results, they need to have more authority to intervene, seek information, and develop partnerships with parents and within the community (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Wood, 2007). In order to make real change in student achievement for disadvantaged learners, teachers need to have the authority to make decisions. Too rigid adherence to the status quo and tight restriction by management policies and conventional practices will limit the prospects of success.

Participants demonstrated this by expecting to create their own goals for the particular work they were doing. Their focus was on developing inclusive practices, which was also a school-wide goal, but not the primary focus of teacher professional development initiatives the school was emphasising at that time. Participants' views on leadership proved contradictory because they believed that SMT had a role in establishing the school vision but also they should be supportive of team goals. Their comments also suggested that the team wanted to have some autonomy in making its own decisions and forging its own direction, without undue pressure from management.

These sections have reviewed findings from current research and case study participants, which highlight the complexities of learning

conversations. Not only are there disagreements, but also many aspects of the knowledge about learning conversations are contradictory. It is difficult to unravel the multiple strands that comprise teachers' learning conversations to clearly identify what is most important and what their implications are.

My learning

What counts as a learning conversation?

As I reflect on my own learning from this study I come back to the overarching question of this research study and ponder some issues. *What counts as a learning conversation? Were participants engaged in learning conversations? Why are learning conversations so complex and contradictory?* In seeking to understand these dilemmas and the contradictions inherent in the development of teachers' learning conversations I revisit my definition of learning conversations (p. 18-19) and return to research literature.

The definition of learning conversations in Chapter 1 focused on four main elements.

- Inquiry into practice.
- Understanding others' perspectives and challenging the assumptions of underlying beliefs and values to create shared understandings and build new insights.

- Improving teacher practice and student achievement to promote more equitable outcomes for all learners
- Having the potential to reform schools and the way learning happens.

These are high ideals and involve teachers in new and challenging work. When I began this research in the case study school, I believed many structures and systems were in place to enable learning conversations. Teachers participated in a range of professional learning opportunities that encouraged reading, conversation and reflection on a range of educational issues of importance to their school community. The school's management team had identified goals and had put in place systems and structures to encourage that work. The school was supported by a small team of external facilitators who were working in a range of ways and at various levels to build knowledge and develop expertise. In early interviews, participants reported successes that gave me confidence that a professional learning community was developing within the school.

However, as I look back now and reflect on the team teaching project I question whether the work of the group at that time represented a true learning community. Some essential elements were in place and participant findings reported in Chapter 3 suggest at times there was potential and perhaps some progress towards a 'real' learning community. Yet equally there were many barriers in the way of achieving that ideal.

One of the crucial factors that count in a learning conversation is what Timperley refers to as "cognitive dissonance" (Timperley & Wiseman, 2003). This involves teachers' beliefs and assumptions being tested and challenged by experiences and data to the extent that they seek alternative practices and revise existing schema. Timperley recommends an outside facilitator to support the data analysis process and to provide information about new approaches (Timperley, 2001). Whilst I observed participants engaging in the process of data analysis supported by a facilitator, there were many factors which prevented these practices becoming embedded. Technical issues, teacher resentment and a lack of time, were some of the barriers at that time.

Another important element of participants' feedback was their lack of tolerance for conflict. Research findings support teachers' desire for safety (Byrk & Schneider, 2003), and common sense suggests on-going tension may mitigate against effective action, especially in a close working relationship like a team teaching partnership. However many researchers argue challenge without conflict is not conducive to change (Achinstein, 2002; Johnston, 1997). If teachers are really working at surfacing underlying values and beliefs concerning long-term educational underachievement, - and the consensus is that this is necessary for development - it is unlikely that conflict can be avoided. The nature of the challenge in a learning conversation counts.

Investigating underachievement at secondary level in New Zealand schools raises issues of race, gender and class. Teachers' beliefs and values on such topics are seldom discussed and yet they impact considerably on individual's perceptions and interactions with members of 'other' groups whether they are students, colleagues, parents or other members of the school community. New Zealand research in Maori contexts highlights the impact of educators' deficit thinking on student achievement (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Hynds, 2007). Investigating and reforming schooling practices, structures and systems counts, if learning conversations are to lead to improved outcomes for all students.

My reporting of findings suggests some reservations about what I refer to as 'technical' approaches to professional learning. I acknowledge there may be some benefit to such approaches as teachers learn new skills in analysing data and challenging practice, however my concern is that such approaches offer a 'safe' alternative and in practice divert teachers from the kinds of changes needed to ensure improved outcomes for all.

The case study experience demonstrated the huge learning curve involved in coming to grips with assessment tools and practices. If teachers' effort is placed in learning to use assessment tools, analyse data and monitor progress, where do they find the time and energy to investigate some of the more challenging issues that cause the problems they identify? Those issues of race, gender and class, which lead to deficit thinking, are sidelined and traditional practices persist. I agree with

researchers who advocate that, teachers' work is essentially political and they should be supported to be involved in reform work (Achinstein, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Hynds, 2007; Kincheloe, 2008; Sparks, 2005). Yet such an approach demands a significant shift in understanding of the nature of teachers' work.

My metaphor of the woven fabric of teachers learning conversations emphasises both sides of the cloth. The two siddedness of the fabric represents the contradictions that are inherent in teachers' learning conversations. One side represents their ideal as described in current research literature, and expressed in the voices of educational leaders and in the hopes and dreams of participants in this study. The other side represents the reality of such conversations in practice. These contradictions certainly count in the development of teachers' learning conversations and account for their complexity. I returned to the research literature for more insights into this aspect.

I revisited the ideas of Argyris whose thinking had informed much of the research I had read. Argyris reports two theories of action; espoused theory, which represents an individual's beliefs, attitudes and values; and theory in use, which comprises what he or she puts into action. His earlier research found that often there is considerable discrepancy between a person's espoused and enacted theories and yet individuals are seldom aware of these differences. In fact they use a range of

techniques to avoid noticing them and in order to minimise potential embarrassment or threat (Argyris, 1995).

According to Argyris (1995) work to support individuals or organisations to put their espoused theories into practice is complicated by several factors. Firstly individuals' sense of self-efficacy is tightly bound to their practice (theory in use). Asking them to change is likely to produce defensiveness. Often practices are tied to individuals' belief they are doing the right thing and so they are unlikely to recognise counter-productive consequences of their actions. Also what they do is ingrained, "taken for granted" and done automatically. Change requires being faced with evidence of the discrepancies between belief and action and learning a new set of skills and values to enact.

Argyris and his colleague Schon (Robinson & Lai, 2006; Scribner, et al., 1999) argue that "double-loop learning" is needed. This learning requires valid data as evidence, information about alternative practices, and participants to critically reflect on actions or to be monitored in the implementation of new practices. A significant difference in double-loop learning is that participants are aware of how they reached their decisions. The process of deciding and acting is "slowed down" and open to inquiry and testing by others. Issues that in the past would be avoided are scrutinised (Argyris, 1995). Argyris also recommends that such work initially requires skilled facilitation and practice over an

extended period, but that support is withdrawn, once members are confident with their new skills.

Knowledge of these theories of practice offers some explanation for individuals' unwillingness to engage openly in conversations about practice and their reluctance to embrace change. It also suggests why there is such discrepancy between the ideal (what individuals say about their beliefs) and their practice (what they do). Working to change practice through learning conversations involves many challenges. Inequities will persist unless teachers are able to: meet over time, explore issues in depth and acknowledge gaps, be provided with opportunities to learn new practices and supported with their implementation, and are encouraged to reflect on this new learning. Many students will continue to underachieve and disadvantaged groups are unlikely to realise their potential.

Implications of the beliefs, relationships and structures framework

Findings common to both the literature and the participants in my research study are the features of developing a shared vision, building of trusting relationships and the provision of structures, which allow quality talk where there is time and space for in-depth discussion and interaction. However, it is clear that in practice the establishment of these elements requires persistence and patience. The reality is that learning

conversation development requires a considerable investment of time
and energy.

Beliefs: Sharing the vision

Inquiry into practice and *evidence-based practice* are part of the Ministry
of Education's vision for New Zealand education. Yet my experience is
that this is a model not yet embraced by many in New Zealand
secondary schools. Even in the case study school, which has a
reputation for being proactive in leading change and articulates goals
aimed at transforming outcomes for underachieving students, teachers
were reluctant to accept evidence–based practice and were cautious in
adopting recommended new teaching practices. They resisted changes
imposed on them.

I believe in a complex institution like a large secondary school
establishing a shared vision requires open lines of communication and
sustained effort at building and maintaining common understandings and
relationships at multiple levels. It requires more than stating a vision –
the school community has to work together over time to develop shared
understandings of what their vision means in the context of their school
culture and time to experiment with and hone interventions that support
that vision effectively. Management teams have to be willing to model
and engage in learning conversations in their dealings with each other,
with their staff and in their interactions with the wider school community.

Teacher teams too have to demonstrate ownership of their roles and be empowered to establish the pace and direction of their efforts with a degree of autonomy. However, research suggests that this is not a question of teachers working on their own to effect change. The concept of "*collective efficacy"* where teachers work together, believing they have the power to make a difference, leads to improvements in student achievement (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Hynds, 2007).

Relationships: Unravelling the old and weaving the new

The case study shows that many old habits need to be put aside before new practices can take hold. Some teachers find it difficult to move on from the status quo when they are uncertain about whether the replacement will fill the void. It takes time, evidence that old approaches are not working, patient modelling of new strategies, and opportunities to reflect on interventions, to convince teachers that there are other more effective ways of managing student learning. Even then, new practices might not be sustained nor meet student learning needs. New models require on-going reflection and adaptation.

The expectation that teachers work collaboratively and participate in conversations and meetings with a focus on improving learning outcomes calls on them to make radical changes. The traditional way of weaving the fabric of learning will not work in this new environment. Just as participants in the case study had to learn new methods involving the breaking down of conventional practices and development of new ones,

teachers adopting learning conversations will need to acquire many new skills. The temptation to revert to old habits is strong.

Structures: Evolving over time

The case study suggests confidence in new approaches grows as participants become clearer about their roles and as new knowledge is understood and experience develops. That confidence can generate motivation for a more collaborative culture. Over time, participants seemed to work more productively together.

The realisation that professional learning communities and learning conversations evolve over time may seem obvious but there is uncertainty in knowing *how* they will develop. Experiences during the on-site research phase ranged from struggling to a growing confidence. Participants also began looking at the future of their project and had plans for developments beyond the existing framework that would see it having a wider influence both within their school and as a model for other schools. This reinforces my conviction that professional learning is a dynamic process. In a healthy community, as teachers develop expertise, their expectations for what might be achieved will change and grow.

Personnel changes also mean that learning communities are forever evolving as new members develop and build their skills in collaborative work with a new set of colleagues, new personalities and group

dynamics. The pace of development is unpredictable and the community's strength may ebb and flow. The learning process will move at a different pace depending on the individual and their needs. A team's vision may have to be evaluated, clarified and reshaped as the group changes and knowledge and expertise grow.

Another aspect of the evolving nature of professional communities is evident when despite some problems being resolved new issues emerge for the group. The case study group was more positive in its second year however their concerns seemed more complex in nature. For example once the school management had addressed many time and workload issues, which had frustrated the team, members became pre-occupied by relationships and measuring the impact of their work. The point may be obvious but it is likely that as one set of problems is resolved there will be new challenges ahead. The test is whether a teaching team is constantly refining its practices by taking its working relationships to a higher level.

This learning has implications for further research, educational policy and practitioner practice. My recommendations follow.

Implications for research, policy, and practice,

Recommendations for researchers

I suggest three areas require more research focus or funding.

- In New Zealand, secondary schooling, particularly in the junior years is under -researched. More needs to be known about the systems of learning that are most suitable in the middle years, especially for underachieving or disadvantaged groups and as students transition from primary to secondary.

- Secondly, with the growth of professional learning communities as the focus of teacher professional development, the nature of teachers' work in this new context needs to be explored fully. A particularly important aspect of this is how to promote teacher voice in research literature. Teachers are significantly impacted by that work and yet their voice is missing from much of the existing research.

- Finally this research study has identified contradictions inherent in the development of teachers' learning conversations and professional development work. Researchers are only beginning to explore these issues and more work needs to be done to ensure their implications are better understood.

Secondary schooling in the New Zealand context

There are few independent, in-depth studies of secondary schooling in the New Zealand context. Much available research is from reviews and reports done by the Ministry of Education or projects that are supported or funded by it. Although other agencies like the New Zealand Council of Educational Research also conduct and publish research on the New Zealand secondary school context, and some larger MOE funded projects like Kotahitanga are being independently evaluated, evidence from this kind of research, and also findings from individual research like that of Masters and Ph.D students, often take time to trickle down and may never move beyond the walls of academic libraries.

The middle years of schooling require greater attention in New Zealand educational research. Researching for this thesis found more evidence about learning conversations at the primary school level. It is generally accepted that senior levels of schooling are widely investigated due to the ready availability of examination data at this level. While some research was uncovered on the transition from primary to secondary, there was little that explored junior secondary schooling and the impact of teaching and learning on students at this level.

This is a huge gap in the literature. Given that New Zealand secondary schools face more diversity and pressure for change, it is an area that deserves more investigation. Literature reports the transition to secondary school is a positive experience for many students (Wylie, et

al., 2004). However, those most affected by the transition are students from Maori and Pacific Island ethnic groups. Current schooling practices, which impact on learning outcomes for Maori and Pasifika students, should be targeted for research and explored in more depth.

Teachers' work and teacher led research

Recent developments in teacher professional development and their impact on schools, teachers and students need to be critically examined. The nature of teachers' work is changing. It is based on different beliefs, requires new types of relationships, and the breakdown of traditional structures and systems. Learning new approaches creates workload issues and pressures for teachers. Their impact on teaching and learning is worthy of deeper investigation.

An increasing number of schools (like the case study school) are trialling new approaches so as to better meet student needs. It is important that such interventions are monitored and evaluated so their impact is known. Research into such developments also needs to be done over time. This case study showed that change is complex and development evolves slowly. Projects should be evaluated from their inception until they are fully embedded so that features of different stages of development are explored and better understood. The impact of new practices on student outcomes also needs to be known; so studies that investigate classroom practices and include student voice are also important.

New forms of professional learning are seeing more focus on teacher-led action research. The encouragement of an *inquiry into practice* philosophy may see teachers researching and presenting the findings of their practice more readily. It is important that teacher voice in research literature is promoted. Studies like this thesis report teacher experiences but these are filtered through the biases and assumptions of the researcher. I am aware that in this research I have done the reading, inquiry and reflection that ideally teachers should have the opportunity to do, if they are to better understand the processes and systems that impact on their work.

Knowledge gained from such research needs to be spread widely so that best practice is shared. In New Zealand this will require funding for teachers to undertake research, some recognition and allowance for the time this takes and forums for both the publication and presentation of findings to be created, if the hope is to become a reality.

Exploring the contradictions

Finally this study has identified contradictions in beliefs and practices relating to teacher professional learning conversations. These need to be more fully understood if practitioners are to implement such conversations effectively and support their development.

One area of contradiction and complexity this study identifies is the issue of trust. An important aspect of building trust is growing teachers' sense

of agency and autonomy. Autonomy is a marker of trust that teachers and schools are able to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions for the benefit of all students and particularly those most disadvantaged. They need increased autonomy including: more control over how their time is organised, more flexibility to develop appropriate programmes, and more authority to intervene and develop partnerships with parents and the wider community in order to be responsive to local and individual needs.

Recent developments in teacher professional learning have demanded teachers learn new skills and practices to better manage the increasingly diverse range of students they face in the modern classroom. One way of increasing knowledge and expertise is in opening lines of communication with family and the wider community so that knowledge about students is shared. If teachers are to be involved in solving entrenched problems, they need to have the flexibility and authority to make decisions and take action. They should not be constrained by limiting policies, hierarchical approaches or traditional practices.

Research into learning conversations is showing that if goals are shared and common understandings are established there can be more open communication. Assumptions can be challenged and differences worked through. It seems appropriate to move beyond merely professional conversations amongst colleagues to involve dialogue with all parties: students, family and the wider community.

Recommendations for educators: Teachers, school leaders and facilitators

Recommendations for educators are considered as a whole because research into professional learning suggests coherence between levels of a project supports effective development (Timperley, et al., 2007). Discussion here focuses on developing beliefs and relationships. Although structural aspects of development are embedded in these recommendations they are mostly considered at policy level.

Beliefs: Vision and trust

Establishing a shared vision is fundamental to the development of a professional learning community, however, this research has shown that it involves more than a school developing strategic goals. All members of a school community need to participate in developing the goals but also considerable effort is required to ensure shared understanding of that vision and agreement on practices that support the vision. Coherence is needed between the school's vision and management, teacher and facilitator practice, requiring consultation and open lines of communication at all levels. As membership changes and knowledge and expertise grow, visions should be evaluated, clarified and reshaped.

Research literature cautions that shared understandings do not stifle diversity of voice. However, it also acknowledges there is considerable

challenge in ensuring that all voices are heard. School leaders and communities must investigate processes and forge partnerships that encourage open dialogue with all. A key element in facilitating such partnership is the development of trust. However, this research has shown that trust can be contradictory. Participants in learning conversations, facilitators and leaders need to be aware of its potential and pitfalls.

Relationships: Leadership and ownership

The nature of leadership is also known to impact significantly on learning conversation development. New forms of professional community and learning are requiring new patterns of relationships. Research participants preferred a more distributed style of leadership and yet expected management to provide leadership in some areas. There is clearly a need for practitioners at each level to maintain open lines of communication where they consult with each other, share concerns, acknowledge frustrations, and take appropriate action. School leaders in particular should monitor staff commitments so that workload is fairly distributed and they can be aware of and responsive to issues.

Recommendations for policymakers: Ministry of Education

Coherence around goals and practice is also important. As with other participants in professional learning partnerships, Ministry policy and action should reflect decisions made from wide and open consultation.

There should be a level of trust that schools and communities have the knowledge and expertise to make decisions and be responsive to local needs.

In making policy Ministry needs to be mindful that there are multiple pathways towards achieving goals and strict adherence to one approach will not achieve desired outcomes for all.

A key element of Ministry support is acknowledgement of the time and resources needed to effect change. Teacher professional learning requires persistence and patience and considerable investment of time and energy. Professional development support should be flexible enough to meet the demands and needs of different school communities. Facilitators require in-depth training in new approaches, tools and techniques if they are to effectively support schools in this work. This may involve them developing skills in data analysis, change management, and conflict resolution. They also need to be familiar with alternative practices so they can provide information about and support the development of new approaches.

Challenges: a complex and fragile weave

The development of learning conversations and the building of learning communities is a complex process. What is apparent as I come to the end of this research process is the contradictory nature of learning

conversations and the complexities of implementing them effectively. The weaving metaphor encompasses the contradictions and complexities created as the multiple threads of teachers' learning conversations are woven together.

When participants describe the fundamental importance of having a shared vision and yet in the early interviews admit their lack of clear vision and focus; when they talk about the importance of open dialogue and yet identify a lack of consultation and an unwillingness to confront issues within the project; or when they value building trusting relationships with colleagues and believe that quality talk is important in learning conversations and yet acknowledge their defensiveness and caution about critical feedback; these contradictions represent the gap between the ideal of professional learning conversations (the right side of the cloth) and the practical reality (the other side).

Also, as the case study demonstrates, over time a new weave may emerge. As learning conversations developed what was initially a very fragile weave with weak and knotted threads and an uneven pattern, prone to unravelling began to develop in strength. Team members became more confident in their roles and began to take more ownership. They demanded more autonomy, and sought support when it was needed. They saw potential for further growth and change.

The fabric of teachers' learning conversations will never be a perfect cloth; issues of vision, leadership, relationships and structural elements will continually challenge members of learning communities. However, neither is that fabric a static pattern of even colour, texture and pattern. If the community is a healthy one its learning conversations will continue to develop in vibrancy, depth and complexity as the community itself evolves.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview schedule.

Clarify interview protocols
- Recording
- Confidentiality
- Able to review transcript

Can you tell me about yourself as a teacher at ……… College?
What is your teaching background and your role at this school?

What is your role in relation to the particular teams and meetings I am observing?

Thinking particularly about the focus of this research – learning conversations:
- What does the term 'learning conversation' mean to you?
- What opportunities do you have to engage in learning conversations with colleagues in your work?
- What do you believe makes for an effective learning conversation between teachers?
- Can you describe an example of such a conversation from your experience?
- What are the enablers and barriers to learning conversations between teachers?
- Can you give one or two examples to explain what you mean?

Thinking particularly about the conversations you have with teachers in the team teaching group:
- What meetings do you have with the teachers in this team? (Prompts: How often? When did they start? Are the meetings I've attended the only meetings you have?)
- What is the purpose of these meetings? (The grand aim?)
- Can you describe a typical meeting: what happens during the meeting, what are typical outcomes, how do people interact?
- Do these meetings represent what you believe are effective learning conversations? Yes/No
- In what ways do/don't they?

- Do you have other conversations with the teachers of this class or others about the learning needs of students in this class? (Perhaps less formal meetings or discussions)
- Can you describe a typical conversation of this type? (Prompts: What makes it different? In what ways is it the same as the team meetings?)
- Do these represent what you believe are effective learning conversations?   Yes/No
- In what ways do/don't they?

- What are the learning needs of students in your target class? How do you know that?
- Evidence of student achievement in asTTle tests has been presented in these meetings. What about other measures of student performance in class? If so what forms of evidence are presented?

- How important is it to you that this data is shared? What is the purpose of that?
- Is teacher practice part of your conversations? Why/why not? How does or would that help?

Thinking about the purpose and usefulness of the learning conversations overall:

- What are the positive outcomes of working with colleagues in this way?
- What are some of the challenges in working with others in this way?

- What impact do you think the meetings or the less formal learning conversations are having?
- In what ways are these meetings challenging your practice?
- In what ways are these meetings challenging other people's practice?
- What examples or evidence do you have to support these claims?

- What impact do you think the meetings or less formal learning conversations are having on the learning outcomes of students?
- What examples or evidence do you have to support that view?
- What impact are they having, or might they have, in the way teaching and learning happen at your school?

- What supports or enables learning conversations?
- What do you suggest might improve these conversations? Produce better outcomes?

- In what ways does your SMT contribute to enabling and fostering learning conversations?
- What else could SMT be doing to support such conversations? How would these suggestions help?

Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to your experience of learning conversations?

Thank and explain process now
- Transcribe
- Return to you for clarification, confirmation
- Write up a narrative of interview

Discuss reflection process:
- Template
- Journal
- May lead to further questioning

Appendix 2: Observation tool

(N.B. Meetings will be digitally recorded. These notes serve as a back-up to the recording and indicator of key themes during conversations as reference for further analysis)
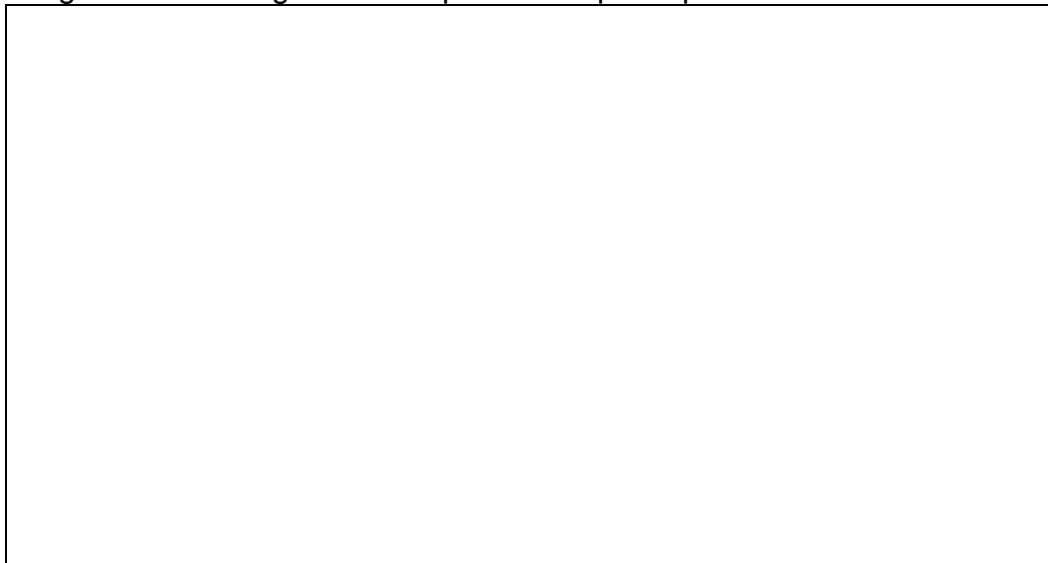
Date:

Present:

Absent:

Purpose of meeting:

Agenda:

Diagram of meeting room and position of participants

Matters discussed:

Evidence/documentation tabled:

Key outcomes of meeting: Decisions made.

Next meeting

<div style="border:1px solid black">

VUW letterhead to be included

Sample Information Letter for Participating Teachers

</div>

Title of the Research Project: Investigating 'learning conversations' where teachers work together across curriculum areas to improve learning outcomes for students of a junior core class.

Researcher: Jeannette Grundy

Kia Ora (name)

I am a Masters of Education (M Ed) student at Victoria University of Wellington where I also work as a lecturer in the School of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education and as a facilitator of in-service development in secondary literacy. This letter gives some information about the research I am undertaking for my M Ed thesis and in which I am inviting you to participate. The research is being supervised by Dr Anne Hynds, Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington.

Your school has been recommended to me as one where teachers across the curriculum are successfully engaging in learning conversations around improving student learning outcomes. For the purposes of this research, learning conversations are understood as those discussions in either formal or informal settings where teachers consider evidence to determine; the learning needs of students and appropriate next steps with a view to improving learning outcomes for students. I would like to invite one group of core class teachers at your school to participate in this study. The focus of the study will be on exploring and describing teachers' beliefs and experiences of their interactions to improve learning for students and their perceptions of the impact of those conversations on their teaching practice and on student learning outcomes.

Background to the research

The purpose of this case study is to investigate teachers' learning conversations as teachers from different curriculum areas in a New Zealand secondary school work together to improve learning outcomes for students of a junior core class. The aim is to better understand what constitutes a learning conversation and to identify practices that support or present barriers to teachers' engagement in such discussions.

What would your involvement mean?
If you agree to take part in this research it would involve you in:
- Being interviewed individually about your own beliefs and experiences of the conversations you engage in with colleagues to improve students' learning outcomes
- Being observed in meetings with colleagues of your junior core class where the learning needs of students are discussed.
- Recording your reflections on these meetings in a format we decide
- Providing documentation you present at or produce as a result of these meetings.

Interviews and core class meeting will be digitally recorded. It is expected that there will be an initial interview of about forty-five minutes and follow-up meetings with you where the meaning of transcriptions and reports are checked and clarified. The individual interviews and follow-up meetings will take place at a time and venue most convenient for you and core class meetings will be as scheduled by your team.

Benefits of the research

I hope this study will enable me to identify 'what counts' within teachers' learning practices and will result in findings that inform understandings around learning conversations as a means of improving teacher practice and learning outcomes for students. I have identified a gap in the research around learning conversations, particularly in a New Zealand, secondary school, cross-curricular context.

Confidentiality

The information provided by you and any third parties will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the final report so that you and your school cannot be identified. All written material collected during this project will be kept in a locked file with access restricted to the researcher. Tape recordings will be wiped at the completion of the research, unless you would like them returned to you. All the data gathered through the interviews, meetings and documentation would be destroyed within one year of completing the project.

If you change your mind and no longer want to take part in this research you may withdraw from the project at any time up until the end of the data collection process.

Publication of findings

The final report will be a thesis for my M Ed; articles relating to the research will be submitted to education journals and findings may be presented at conferences. I will produce a summary of findings, which will be made available to all teacher participants and the school's Principal at the end of the study.

This research has been assessed and approved by the <u>Victoria University College of Education Ethics Committee,</u> however the University requires that ethics approval must be obtained for work that involves people. I invite you to participate in this study, which you can accept by completing the attached consent form. I am happy to answer any queries you may have either now or at any stage of the research project. My contact details and those for my supervisor are listed on the next page.

Thank you for your participation in this research.

Jeannette Grundy, Researcher

Dr Anne Hynds, Supervisor

Appendix 4: Sample consent form

VUW letterhead to be included
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of project:
Investigating 'learning conversations' where teachers work together across curriculum areas to improve learning outcomes for students of a junior core class.

I agree to take part in the above research. I have had the project explained to me and I have had a chance to answer any questions. I understand that agreeing to this means that I will be willing to do the following: (please tick boxes)

❑ I agree to take part in this research and to be interviewed by the researcher

❑ I agree to being observed in on-site meetings with colleagues from (name class) where the learning needs of students in the class are discussed

❑ I agree to the interviews and meetings being audio-taped

❑ I agree to record my reflections on these meetings in a format that will be decided by me

❑ I agree to provide the researcher with copies of the documents I present or produce as a result of the core teacher meetings

❑ I understand that I don't have to take part in this research and that I may withdraw from this project without having to give a reason, up to and including the final point of data collection

❑ I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and her supervisor and that I will not be identified in the research or any reports on the project or to any party

❑ I understand that I will have an opportunity to check the accuracy of any transcripts of the interviews and meetings and to comment on the research findings

❑ I understand that the tapes and data gathered during the research process will be destroyed within a year of the completion of the project

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Circle your response:
Would you like your interview tape returned to you?   YES   NO
Would you like to receive a summary of the report findings?   YES   NO

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, …………………………………………………………….. will be the transcriber for the data collected from the research project *What counts as a learning conversation when teachers from different curriculum areas meet to improve learning outcomes for students of a core class in a New Zealand secondary school.*

No names or identification of institutions will be provided to me. Furthermore, all the information that is provided will be deemed confidential and I will ensure that it is not released to any third party.

Signature of the transcriber ……………………………………………

Date ………………………………………….