

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXTUALIZATION

1.1 Framing the Context

Literacy for the purpose of this thesis refers to the teaching of reading and all of its facets. In this chapter, I will provide a detailed account of the early years of my principalship so that the reader may form an opinion about the degree of change I achieved and my impact on literacy-teaching practices within the school. I will also describe two pieces of legislation, the replacement of the confessional school system by linguistic school boards in Québec, and the Québec Educational Program (QEP) that thrust Québec schools into massive upheaval. Later in the chapter, I will present my first action research reflective cycle that is formulated from reflections that I wrote as I was striving to make sense of my work in my first year in the school, and the impact that the contextual changes had on me, as principal. It is these reflections that led me to consider action research in my second year and to slowly begin to use its methodology to assist me in my daily work. Through reflection and discussions with critical friends I learned to analyze my context to create an understanding of the school's learning environment and plan how to bring about deep changes to literacy-teaching practices. The evolution in my thinking is reflected when I begin to formulate my research question. My analysis of the early years concludes this chapter and leads into the review of literature that guides this study.

1.1.1 The Provincial Context

My story as the school's principal begins in the year 2000; two years after provincial legislation (Act to Amend the Education Act (c.96) Québec, 1997) changed the Québec

school system composed of confessional (religiously based) schools divided between Catholic and Protestant boards of education to a linguistic school system divided between English and French school boards. One year later, the province began a major reform, the Québec Education Program (QEP) (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000). The creation of linguistic school boards and the QEP were the two major political influences that directed the work of Québec principals when I was assigned to my new school. At the time, the loss of confessional schools was not well received in Québec's Catholic community. There was a long history that intertwined the power of church and state, and in Québec, the dominant church was Catholic.

Many Catholics felt betrayed by the province's move to abolish Catholic schools. Although the importance of religion was dramatically declining, as evidenced by dwindling church attendance, many Catholics nevertheless clung dearly to their schools and what they had come to represent within the community. Catholic, Protestant and Moral Education now constituted a required but small part of the curriculum, and many Catholic families continued to mourn the loss of their schools in which Catholicism had been such an integral component. On the other hand, Protestant families were very sceptical about the new alliances forged in the educational community. Even though all Québec schools were now non-denominational, many of the former Catholic schools retained their Catholic school names and continued to proudly display their religious artefacts. Non-Catholic families in the catchment's areas of redistributed school properties were uneasy and distrustful about sending their children to these schools.

The QEP entailed sweeping changes to Québec's educational structure with its cornerstone being a competency-based, constructivist approach that capitalizes on students'

learning in a social context. One of the most significant changes is the way that grade levels have been re-defined as two-year learning cycles with competencies defined for each subject and outcomes assessed at the end of each cycle. The elementary school program now consists of Kindergarten and three cycles of learning that mandated Québec educators to completely re-think how to deliver the basic elementary school program so that students may successfully meet the end of cycle competency outcomes. This has also had a major impact on assessment practices, not made any easier by the fact that the assessment guidelines were introduced well after the initial phase of implementation. As teachers looked to the principal for support, school principals became responsible for QEP professional development and for developing assessment practices that focused on rubrics and cycle competency outcomes.

Part of the new assessment practices included the formal introduction of authentic student assessment, in which students use samples of their work from their portfolios to share the state of their learning with their parents in student-led conferences. These conferences replace one traditional report card in each year of the two-year cycle, and are complemented by a summative report at the end of each of the three cycles. The end of cycle report contains judgments made by the cycle teaching team for every subject competency.

Along with the QEP also came public accountability for students' success. My jurisdiction within the school was to work in partnership with the Governing Board¹ and our joint responsibility was to develop and annually review both the educational project and the school's success plan. As principal, I was the team leader overseeing this work and

¹ Governing Boards are parity committees of parents and school staff with the principal as a non-voting member. The province determines the size of the membership for each school based on the school's student enrolment. The Governing Board's membership can also include members of the community and students as non-voting members. The role of Governing Boards is to oversee the main functions, organization and operation of the school. The Québec Education Act defines the mandate and duties of Governing Boards and thereby empowers this body at the school level. Governing Boards approximate what other jurisdictions refer to as School Councils or Parent Councils.

accountable for the findings in the school success report that must be publicly shared. Our success rates are closely monitored by our school board and become a part of the board's success plan that is reported to the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports (MELS).

This intense level of accountability places tremendous pressure on Québec educators including school principals, who are leading this change at the school level and are mandated to ensure successful implementation, to change their practices. But it is each teacher who directly implements changes, and to improve their practice, teachers must be able to experiment without fear (Guskey, 2000). With annual reviews of the school's success published for public commentary, teachers are unwilling to take risks and test new approaches in case the results fall below expectations. This hesitancy further taxes a principal who is mandated to make changes to improve student learning and to support the teachers in their work.

The provincial context was a very important part of my story for two reasons. First, the provincial Education Act mandated my work as a Québec school principal and secondly, I used the QEP as the vehicle to drive changes within my school. Since the QEP is mandatory, teachers' criticisms and opposition to change are directed towards the Ministry and away from the principal, thereby reducing in-school conflict and fostering better staff relationships. This was a critical point because I believe it was imperative to have a positive working relationship with my teaching staff in order to successfully implement sustainable change. I envisioned this change arising from the creation of a sustainable professional learning community in our school and I could not form a learning community without strong teacher endorsement and involvement. Only a collaborative team effort would increase learning and provide opportunities for professional growth (Fullan, 1997) and it is this quest for

professional growth and development that form the underpinnings for professional learning communities (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002). Paradoxically then, although the QEP added to my work considerably, at the same time it made my role easier in leading changes within the school. During the time covered by this study, the QEP had been fully implemented in Québec elementary schools and is presently in the final implementation stage at the senior high school level.

1.1.2 The School Context

In the spring of 2000, G.E.C. School had a history common to many Québec schools: two years earlier it had been an English Catholic elementary school in a predominantly French Catholic school system. The school had a proud history in the Catholic community and prided itself on providing a solid education to inner city children. It had gone through many program changes in an attempt to deal with steadily declining student enrolment. For much of its existence, its population was too small to warrant a full-time principal and had been overseen by the neighbouring high school administration. With school board restructuring, its enrolment doubled with the introduction of English-speaking students from the former Protestant school system, creating the need for a full-time principal position and I was appointed as its second principal in two years.

At the time of my appointment, it was a smaller elementary school with 150 students and a dual track of English and French Immersion Programs. The two school communities (former Catholic and Protestant students, staff and parents) that were legislatively amalgamated into one building seemed to share little. Protestant parents were not happy about their children being forced to attend the school, while the Catholic parents dearly hung onto their Catholic traditions with crosses adorning every classroom and the main foyer.

Additionally, having been a small English school in a large, predominantly French Catholic school system meant that the school had been allocated few resources and what existed was very outdated. Teacher professional development had not been encouraged among the English Catholic educators, while their Protestant counterparts had a completely different history. They had benefited from much better resources and had been actively encouraged to participate in on-going professional development. The school's teaching staff was comprised of mostly Catholic teachers with a few teachers recently added from the Protestant system. With such great entrenched differences in place, I soon developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of the strife in Northern Ireland.

1.1.3 My Debut as the New School Principal

For many reasons (some personal, political and educational) I initially found my appointment in May 2000, as principal of St. Peter's School now known as George Etienne Cartier (G.E.C.) School² difficult to view as a positive move. I was told that the board needed me in this school because I had successfully demonstrated political savvy and would be able to make the necessary changes. Although in retrospect these comments were complimentary and attested to the board's faith in my leadership skills, at the time of my appointment they brought me little joy or comfort.

For me becoming the principal of G.E.C. School was the absolute last place I wanted to be as principal. I felt no joy when I finally got up the courage to visit the school one late afternoon in May and if anything my first visit confirmed all my feelings as to why I desperately didn't want to be there. The school's interior was unwelcoming with old and decrepit furniture in many of its rooms, including the staff room; the library was in the process of being dismantled and served as a junk room with broken furniture and books strewn everywhere; the halls sported a hodgepodge of lockers of different colors; few examples of students' work were displayed on the walls and what was

² Please note that both the former and present school's names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the staff.

displayed was falling down. The principal's office was stark and served as an overflow storage room for in-coming supplies like grad photos. Overall I had never visited a more unappealing school in my life... *(Excerpt from journal entry May 2000)*

Two years had gone by since the creation of linguistic schools yet nothing had visibly changed in the school. Many of the parents who were already reluctant about sending their children to our school were getting increasingly anxious about the kind of school their children were attending. Some parents had already engaged in conversations with me about what changes I was going to introduce and vocalized their concerns. I heard, "There is racism in this school and what are you going to do about it?" "This school has never had a 'Meet the Teacher Night' and we hope that you will be able to hold one this fall", "I cried when I was told that my children would have to attend this school. There are no books." These comments clearly indicated a high degree of dissatisfaction and a need for change and it was also abundantly clear that I was to be the change agent.

I struggled with determining the right approach to bring about change in a place that existed in a kind of time warp with only imposed pedagogical changes having taken place for a long time. As I chatted with school board personnel whenever they visited the school, confidential comments were shared with me such as: "The staff has had very little professional development and many of their practices are out of date", "This school has a very different way of doing business and doesn't understand the special education services our board delivers", "Not much has changed in this school in a very long time."

Upon reflection, I decided that I was going to give the school a vision based on the QEP and that we would, as a school community, restructure around it. I also decided that my leadership had to appear to be decisive, focused, and dramatic if I was going to have any hope of making changes. To set the context for change, I deliberately chose a staff activity

that I knew would catch their attention and signal change – I had teachers re-organize their classroom allocations to respect the QEP’s concept of cycle teaching teams. All classes in the same cycle had to be in proximity to one another and this meant that most teachers would move classrooms. This activity met with strong opposition as I was told, “We don’t want to move and you’ll have to understand that teachers make these decisions here.” In response, I arranged an *ad hoc* staff meeting and arrived with blank blueprints of the school. I delivered a visionary speech about how we were going to become a lead school in the QEP in time but for now we were going to start by restructuring our school to be more in line with the QEP’s philosophy. I left the blueprints to be filled in and asked staff for their plan to be faxed to me. About a week and a half later, I received their plan with a note stating that they still didn’t want to move classes. I sent them a note thanking them for their work and encouraged them to immediately start moving according to their plan. Purposely, I made no changes to their plan but I did assist teachers with their move by carrying boxes and learning materials.

My debut certainly did not go unnoticed but neither did it receive thunderous applause from the teachers with requests for an encore. Our parents watched from the sidelines. One parent whose older daughter had been a student in my previous school commented, “I wasn’t going to send my daughter to this school but when I heard that you were going to be the principal, I changed my mind. I knew you would turn this school around and make it work. I can see that you have already started.” I, however, did not feel as confident about long term success.

1.2 The Change Process

My long term goal was to change teaching practices but the staff was definitely not ready for that level of change in the spring and fall of 2000. I made a conscious decision when first

appointed that I was going to do everything possible to bring about cosmetic changes, as these are less threatening, to create a climate in which change was accepted, if not embraced. So in my first year I embarked on making several external changes to our school environment, but even these changes created great emotional rancour. I later came to realize that I was in fact changing our school's culture as Deal and Patterson (1999) describe, the "school's own unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything ...and how teachers feel about their work and their students" (p.2). I was establishing both deep and fundamental changes in our school's values and beliefs about how we do business (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996). Changing a school's culture is exceptionally difficult as schools are historically conservative institutions designed to foster and protect students' futures usually in a fashion comparable to that received by their parents before them (Hulley & Dier, 2009).

1.2.1 The School Culture

The culture of a school – the distinct profile that shapes the direction and activities undertaken in carrying out the day to day operations that are mandated – is very important. I was very sensitive to the need for me to be as delicate as I could be when changes were occurring in highly sensitive areas. Many of the changes were profound and clearly marked the end of this school's Catholic history. I knew, from my experiences as a child growing up in Québec and having attended English Catholic schools, of the great symbolic significance of religious artefacts. From previous experience, having been involved in school closures as an elected Ontario school trustee, I had learned that a school has incredibly strong ties to its surrounding community. When a school was closed, or there were massive changes to a school's identity, I had been made very aware of the need of the local community to have a

memorial place to acknowledge its educational past. I therefore knew that some artefacts had to remain so that our school's history would be honoured for the members of our community.

The two most sensitive changes made during my first year were changing the name of our school to a less Catholic name and taking down the crosses. The re-naming of our school was by far the most acrimonious event. Although this initiative was the undertaking of some of our parents (mostly former Protestant parents), the teachers held me personally responsible and they refused to share with me their thoughts or voice their anger. The re-naming process spanned several months during which time the staff used union meetings that I could not attend, to vent and to plot their strategies to oppose the name change. On one particular occasion following a session where their input was requested by our board, the teachers and I had a very heated discussion about all the stakeholders and their respective roles in re-naming a school. I informed teachers that their input was sought but that they were not the decision-makers and since the majority of our parents wanted a name change, I cautioned them about the risks involved in challenging parents by openly opposing this change.

...after two months of ugliness, our school board officially changed our school name in December. The staff told me that it was my board and I had to keep restating that it is our board. The staff refused to do anything about participating with the students in a re-naming ceremony. Most of them did not want to even talk about ...why we changed our name. So I went to visit all the classes on my own and shared with our students our new name and answered their questions about why we changed our name. For five months, we didn't talk any more about it. (*Excerpt from journal entry May 2001*)

In early May 2001, I began discussing a re-naming ceremony that would be held in mid-June. Initially teachers refused to engage but as I got students involved in selecting our new school colors and in competitions to design new school crests, teachers very slowly began participating with their students and by the time the re-naming ceremony came around everyone was involved. Staff invited former colleagues, administrators and the parish priest

who attended and also blessed our newly re-named school. We were now officially George Etienne Cartier School, a name carefully chosen to reflect many key elements of our school's culture and heritage.

The removal of the crosses was also a highly sensitive matter and I was seen as challenging the very core of our school's history and culture. I soon discovered that... "Tampering with symbols of importance is like playing with fire...symbols play a more prominent role than many initially suspect" (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Some members of staff had confided to me that they found the crosses offensive in a non-denominational school and a few teachers had already quietly taken them down. This and parental comments along the same lines prompted me to inform staff very early in the 2000-2001 school year that the crosses would need to come down and that I would find appropriate homes for them. Some teachers openly declared that they refused to take down the crosses and I replied that was fine and that I would have our maintenance staff remove them later. When the local parish priest visited, he told me that he had heard that I was ripping down the crosses. In response, I invited him to ask his parishioners if any of them would like a cross and he could forward me their names and phone numbers, which he did. During the March break, I had our maintenance staff remove the remaining ones and as they slowly trickled into my office, I became the keeper of the crosses.

I arranged for the crosses to be given to community members who expressed an interest in having one. By the end of the year we had more interested parties than crosses but I prioritized the list with staff members at the top. A small brass plaque engraved with our old school name, year and the name of the recipient was attached to each cross and I personally polished the crosses with my head teacher's assistance while the other staff took notice of

this activity. The crosses were presented to their new owners during our re-naming ceremony but I kept one cross and a picture of our original Catholic namesake.

We established a memorabilia wall to honour our proud history and we framed a cross in a shadow box on the wall along with a re-hung picture of St. Peter with a small brass plaque with his name so that students would know who was in this picture. With the help of teachers, past teachers, and parents we framed some school photos from the past to give a flavour of the school's history. Interestingly, it was really very difficult to get pictures. It seemed that no one took any and there were not many events to remember. (*Excerpt from journal entry June 2001*)

Our memorabilia wall was unveiled at our re-naming ceremony and many teachers were visibly pleased to see cherished artefacts given a place of honour in the school.

When we moved to a different building a year and a half later, our artefacts came with us and now proudly hang outside the office area in what was, ironically, a former Protestant school. Our new school building has a unique blending of history with old high school honour rolls and a large bronze plaque commemorating former high school students who died serving in the First World War, including the name of John McCrae's friend whose death inspired the writing of *In Flanders Fields*. To this formerly Protestant school's memorabilia we added our Catholic artefacts. Our two distinct school communities of Catholic and Protestant parents came together to share our walls and their history. We later added more recent pictures and artefacts that symbolized what our school has become. These acts were critical to successfully integrating our shared values and beliefs (Deal & Peterson, 1999) and brought me peace with our community. Today, the school has an excellent relationship with the local Catholic parish priest and he attends important celebrations such as graduation.

I tried to lay the groundwork for all of our students' ethnic and religious backgrounds to be treated with respect, tolerance and dignity. In doing so, we found a way for our Muslim children to pray during their lunch hour and we hold smudging ceremonies for our First Nation students. As our school community takes pride in being a diverse multicultural school that includes a significant First Nation student population, I also placed aboriginal art on our hall walls and in my office. Most of our First Nation students arrive from small and remote communities on reserves in the far northern regions of Québec. To support our aboriginal students, I arranged for Elders to visit regularly and for our students to have access to counselling services in their native language. I sought other means as well to assist these students' integration into our large inner city school.

With 14% of our students being Aboriginal, our social worker and I worked to identify these students and to create a friendship club. Our students named the club as the Powerful First Nations Friendship Club. Our goal was to raise self-esteem. Our social worker trained peer mediators and one of our parents sewed aboriginal medicine wheel armbands for our student mediators to wear on the playground...I also spent time seeking funding to get more support for our Aboriginal students and their families. (*Excerpt from journal entry June 2001*)

In my first year, I also introduced other cultural activities that have now become annual events. One example is our multicultural potluck supper that features various ethnic musicians who entertain during the evening. I continuously searched for ways to celebrate our cultural diversity and as Deal and Patterson (1999) state, "Particularly when the school community consists of diverse cultures, something special must be done to lay the groundwork for a common mission and to build an inclusive, cohesive community" (p.134).

Given parents' concerns about racism in our school, when we moved to our new site, the Governing Board created an educational project³ that focused on respect as a core instructional program. To enhance instruction, we brought in a number of trained professionals over the years to work with our students, teachers and parents, and to model and discuss appropriate strategies and behaviour. All of these efforts are integral elements that reduce racism and contributed to the success of our educational project. We tracked our behaviour reports electronically and although we did not eradicate racism, we greatly reduced the number of behaviour reports and especially those with racial undertones.

The school backs onto a housing project and because we tried to be good neighbours, we offered our local community free use of our gym one evening a week and one Saturday a year for their Christmas party. We also worked with the city to create a shared park on our grounds that features a soccer field, and a winter skating rink. Additionally, we offered support services to parents by working with our Québec local community liaison social service agency provider (CLSC), and I was able to arrange for the CLSC to deliver parenting courses in the school. The turnout was not high but we reached out to as many families in need of this service as possible. These initiatives all played an important role in our school's cultural transformation (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Traditionally, parents had not been very involved in our school and we now had two sets of parents from distinctive communities (Catholic and Protestant) who had their own ideas about how a school should function and about their roles in the school. One of my goals was to involve parents as our partners in student learning. My main initiative began with our first

³ Bounded by the Québec Education Act, each Governing Board must develop with its school principal, a school project to enhance student learning. The educational project is subject to annual review and shared through an annual report that is circulated to all parents and community members.

“Meet the Teacher Night”. Parents were personally invited when I saw them in the school and I advertised it in the school’s newsletters. That night, we had standing room only and staff was thrilled with the turnout of about a hundred and fifty parents. Each year, our parent turnout has been very good.

... parents are more involved in our school. We are trying to build a sense of school community. I firmly believe that parents need to be involved... I often walk around with new parents popping into classes to see how children learn in our school. Teachers are beginning to get used to me popping in and out. I want our school to be open and welcoming. *(Except from journal entry November 2001)*

I sought opportunities to make our school a more inviting place for parents and tried to involve parents who might not normally be involved. To that end for example, I asked parents who could not afford to pay school fees to work off their fees by volunteering. Some of these activities experienced more success than others but the important thing was that teachers began to view parents as partners in helping students learn and supporting the work they did in the classroom (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

1.2.2 The Learning Environment

I believe that change should not be viewed as something negative, so to create a positive atmosphere, I redecorated the staff room with new furniture and upgraded the staff washroom. During the first summer parents also helped me to re-open the library. We culled and threw out old books and started with a small but updated collection of books on bright and freshly painted shelves. In addition, new classroom furniture and other materials were purchased to replace discarded old stock and parents were encouraged to use their fund-raising to buy new audio-visual equipment. Once our physical environment looked more inviting and cheery, I then moved to focus on learning materials.

Several book publishers (all previously checked to ensure that only quality and Ministry approved materials were presented) were invited to visit and meet with teachers. We used materials on loan and later made collective decisions about what to buy. I tried not to interfere with any decision made by the staff as long as their choices served our school well and there was consensus. Our school board assisted us in re-stocking our school with new materials by allocating additional funds (approximately \$10,000 in the first year). A more sensitive topic arose when I announced that with all of our new materials and books, teachers were no longer going to need to rely so heavily on student workbooks for instruction and that this was the last year for workbooks. I wanted teachers to become more actively engaged in classroom instruction and learn to be more critical of the work they gave to students. Instruction needed to be designed to meet the QEP guidelines and the needs of our diverse student population, so that students would be given appropriate work for their instructional levels.

With the infusion of new materials, the classrooms did become more interesting places as teachers began to introduce students to these resources and to incorporate them into their teaching. However, there was still fairly traditional teaching taking place in most classes and to make learning more exciting, I wanted teachers to take their students on field trips that would be connected to various themes being taught. Previously, our school did not go on any field trips because teachers felt that many students were too poor to go; but I encouraged teachers to take their class on at least one cultural field trip and suggested local cultural activities that could be easily arranged. I ensured that students requiring financial assistance were supported by school fundraising so that no child was left out. Our field trips continued and teachers learned that learning can take place outside of the classroom, especially for our

kinaesthetic learners. The next step in promoting changes in teaching methods was to encourage professional development for the teachers.

1.2.3 Professional Development

As a staff, we started to work on school success initiatives...I strongly encouraged teachers to attend professional development workshops. I hope that as more teachers get professional development and have opportunities to meet with other teachers from outside of our school that they will begin to see the world a little differently and open up to more fundamental teaching changes. *(Excerpt from journal entry June 2001)*

In order to create a more vigorous learning environment (Dufour & Eaker, 1998), teachers were encouraged to grow professionally by attending all professional development sessions that our school board offered. I registered as many teachers as I could and for many of them it was a novelty but they took comfort in knowing that other colleagues from our school were also going so that they could travel and attend together. More importantly, attending professional development sessions in groups enabled the staff to develop a more common approach to teaching. For teaching practices to change, teachers must have opportunities to work together on planning and developing what is taught in their classrooms (Fullan, 1995; Senge, et al., 2000). This was further extended at the school level when they engaged in professional conversations about the workshops they had attended, and how they might implement some of these practices.

There were several other initiatives to scaffold teachers with varying degrees of success. To further support a sense of professionalism (Booth & Rowsell, 2002), I began to invest in current professional texts to begin an in-school teacher lending library. Professional articles on topics of interest were downloaded from the Web and circulated to teachers to supplement their professional reading. We now had two literacy book rooms – one for English and one for French materials with each room containing an area for professional teacher materials and

books. Major gains were achieved in the first two years when our teachers opted to spend one night after school each week to work on professional development. Teachers set the agenda by selecting topics and we used in-house expertise to enhance their knowledge and sought outside help when we needed it.

1.2.4 Student Evaluation

Our report card format was in desperate need of updating and once again I used the QEP as the driving force. I believed that if we could use a QEP report style, then at least teachers would be examining QEP competencies as they assessed students' progress. I was interested in assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2001) but at this time I was focusing to a greater degree on the teachers' learning more about the QEP. Therefore in the fall of 2000, I set up an *ad hoc* committee of teachers, parents and me to review samples of QEP reports that were being used in other Québec schools. After a few meetings, a draft was circulated to staff for their input, and our new reports were ready for our first term report. As teachers used the new reports, they realized that they could not adequately assess all the QEP competencies as they were not teaching or evaluating certain skills. Up to this point our teachers had been very confident that they were teaching all that was required in the QEP and that our new reports would be easily integrated into our school's evaluation process. This revelation led to many productive pedagogical discussions about what we needed to do about implementation.

We also ran into a snag: although our school had on-line computers in every class, we could not easily find a way of doing our reports electronically. So we did handwritten reports for the first year but I vowed to find a way to do electronic reports in the future, and two years later we graduated to being the first elementary school piloting our board's electronic reports. This initiative required teachers to have several training sessions after school with

our board's personnel. Teachers met this challenge with a sense of pride and accomplishment and there were smiles when their trainer presented them with an award and chocolates for outstanding work in quickly mastering a complex system.

As the staff grew more knowledgeable about the QEP and about evaluation practices, teachers were able to provide more detailed anecdotal reporting coupled with competency evaluation. Our special education students all receive detailed supplemental reports commenting directly on the goals set out in their Individual Education Plans (I.E.P.s). We also moved to using authentic student assessment, and every student has a student portfolio that follows him or her through elementary school. In year three (September 2002), I initiated student-led conferencing. During staff meetings we discussed how to do student-led conferences and I supplied teachers with as much relevant reading material on this topic as I could. Teachers discussed with other teachers who had been involved in these conferences, how to assist students in getting ready and how to organize both the portfolios and the conference. With this level of professional assistance we launched into school-wide student-led conferencing which proved to be exceptionally well received by our parents with over 90% of them attending these reporting interviews.

We did considerable work in developing our QEP assessment practices and I believed that we were ready to share our experiences with others as a lead school, but some teachers argued against this initiative. They felt that we had little to offer to the English schools' network of lead schools that were selected by their boards for their exemplary work in implementing QEP practices. To garner support for this idea, I brought two teachers with me to a lead and pilot school meeting, and they later informed staff that we were truly in step with other lead schools, and that we could feel proud of our work. Following this exchange,

staff supported this move and we officially became a Québec lead school in spring, 2003, sharing with other Québec schools our student evaluation and assessment practices. Several of my teachers and I have since presented at various workshops for Québec educators outlining our assessment experiences. Our presentations are well attended and many schools have expressed interest in our work by asking many questions and requesting information packages. My teacher presenters have been written up in a provincial educators' publication *Schoolscapes* (Katz, 2006; Krakow, 2004), produced by the Ministry and circulated throughout Québec schools, instilling professional pride in the teachers about our school's culture of learning.

1.2.5 Other Educational Changes

Other changes also happened during the year. I created a teacher resource position. We increased the school's awareness of special needs' students: how to better identify them and how to better serve them.... Our special needs' population doubled – not because our clientele doubled but because the teachers got better in identifying them and were encouraged to do so... Teachers began to learn how to do I.E.P.s.

I created a physical education specialist position in our school. As a result, our students participated in more sport events and competed against other schools.

I timetabled the school differently. Teachers had equal workloads, as they must have contractually, but I had them teaching a little outside of their class in a neighbouring class. I hoped that this would open up the teaching atmosphere more and encourage them to talk and work with one another.

When it came time to ordering school materials... I refused to give each teacher \$200 as per tradition. I gave each of them \$50 to order very basic personal supplies... but gave each team consisting of approx. 3 teachers per cycle team ...\$800... This was my attempt to get them to work together and to share materials.

The school got a new school nurse and social worker...Our nurse was instrumental in increasing our social service hours from one day a month to one day a week...our school size has more than doubled in two years, so an increase in services was warranted but no one before now had sought these increases. (*Excerpt from journal entry summer 2001*)

Our school did not have any criteria for entrance requirements to our French Immersion Program and so I spent time in another series of meetings. I strove to create a sound pedagogical position to help us make good decisions about students' placements. I did this because previously, too many students were failing in the Immersion program and in many cases; students were being withdrawn from Immersion classes in the middle of a school year. We established written norms for entrance criteria and the basic requirements for staying in the program. We held information meetings to inform parents about these new standards that now had to be maintained to guarantee an Immersion placement. Concurrently, we also set up screening procedures to determine the level of French oral, reading, and writing skills for all new Immersion students to ensure that their skills are within the range of our other Immersion students. We also established a new policy, to better balance our two programs, that a student's at-risk behaviour profile could not by itself prevent a student from access to our Immersion program. Stability in our Immersion program improved as we had fewer students leaving the program.

1.3 Tensions

When I recounted the highlights of my work to visiting Ministry personnel, they informed me that I had managed incredible change in my first year and that many schools had not yet addressed these sensitive issues. They also noted that the staff was friendly and overall I appeared to have a good working relationship with them. This was confirmed by my supervisory senior administrator who wrote following a school visit: "Thanks for my day on Thursday with such an upbeat meeting. What impressed me was the keenness of your staff and their industriousness! This is to a great extent, the result of your ongoing support and

encouragement.” These comments gave me the much-needed encouragement to continue my transformation efforts.

...I largely devoted my time and energy to... create a sense amongst the staff and the community of being a new school with a new future – my prime goal was to rebuild... to help forge a new identity for the school. There were times of dissent and acrimony as changes occurred. (*Excerpt from journal entry November 2001*)

Teachers came to accept that we were forging a new future but they didn't always agree with the changes. Some teachers made their dissatisfaction well known but no teacher resigned or requested a transfer. I took that to mean that I had had a successful first year, given the breath and scope of changes that I had undertaken. Fullan (2006) validates my belief when he cites Mintrop, “Job satisfaction affects turnover and absenteeism, and rather than compelling workers to extend effort and instilling the will to high performance, pressures are sometime avoided *with exit...*” (Mintrop, 2004). Since we didn't experience ‘exits’, I concluded that I had passed my first year as principal, but it had been a very difficult year.

I would be remiss if I did not discuss the many tensions that have arisen in my work as principal. For me, there are two types of tensions that exist - internal and external. The greatest tension is external and arises from the Ministry's demand for public accountability while at the same time demanding colossal changes to teaching practices through the QEP. From a teacher's perspective, there is less risk involved in maintaining less successful teaching practices than introducing new strategies that could yield lower student results than the status quo. There is a delicate balance that must remain because no matter what, teachers do need to be accountable and teaching practices do need to change if we are to see improved results. For large scale change to occur, a new ‘mindset’ must evolve, (Senge, 1990) and we

must pursue what is necessary to build a 'learning organization' (Fullan, 1995) that develops a 'professional learning community' (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Certainly my initial work in laying a necessary cultural foundation on which to build a better climate for learning was highly contentious leading to internal tensions. There were many times that I felt quite isolated in my work as teachers chose to shut me out, resulting in a covert tension that lasted for most of my first year. I had adopted a kind of 'tough love' approach and after setting that in motion, I had to wait and see if desired responses would in fact occur. With this tension however, came the greatest number of changes in the school and the learning climate did truly change but it was, without question, my most difficult year with few enjoyable professional moments. However, without real conflict, successful changes cannot take place (Fullan, 1995). Historically, work disruptions arising from provincial contract negotiations have derailed our professional growth plan on several occasions. The pattern is that we have harmony in the workplace for a year or two before the next work disruption overtakes us for an extended length of time until a settlement is reached. This cycle affected my working relationship with teachers and added significantly to the complexity of my role. The tension arises from the need to follow through on initiatives and the need to wait it out until there is a willingness on the part of teachers to forge ahead according to plan. This start-stop cyclic approach to school improvement prevented smooth transitions from one stage to the next developmental stage in our professional growth plan.

Our student enrolment growth allowed me to hire many new teachers (comprising approximately two thirds of our staff), selected for their skills to best fill the school's needs. This was a mixed blessing as they not only brought enthusiasm and fresh ideas to the school but they also brought a need for on-the-job training and mentoring. A young staff also

translated into many maternity leaves, creating a cycle of staff turn-around that played havoc with stability, because teaching teams created one year are often gone the next, or even in mid-year.

Other tensions are covert and exist to fuel on-going internal pedagogical debates which are good but also time consuming. An example is the continuing tension between our English and Immersion teachers about how we fit and work together as the two programs⁴ are often in competition with one another over students, resources and my time. There are other tensions between our regular, special education, and ESL staff, with conflicting interests that demand a constant re-vamping of services to accommodate our students, including the 15% who are transient. All of these tensions must be managed for meaningful changes to develop, for as Fullan (1995) writes, “Productive change is full of paradoxes, and components that are often seen as not going together...these tensions must be reconciled into powerful new forces for growth and development” (p. 4). Therein lies my challenge and best summarizes my professional tensions as principal.

1.4 First Action Research Reflection Cycle

In retrospect, even I cannot fathom the amount of changes that took place in the early years of my appointment. Every facet of the school had been bombarded with change. I instinctively knew that the leadership style I had initially chosen left my leadership vulnerable and subject to criticism. At the time, I felt that if I did not immediately begin with a rapid succession of professional changes that touched all staff then the school climate would encourage staff to continue to resist change. My approach involved high risks and the

⁴ G.E.C. School is a dual track school that offers two distinct programs of study; one is a 50/50 French Immersion Program in which the students spend half of their day studying in French and the other half in English (subjects are selected to be taught in one of the two languages) and the other program of study is a Regular English Program in which all subjects are taught in English except for French as a second language (FSL).

possibility that the changes I made might not necessarily be integrated into the inner workings of the school. Furthermore, I realized that I might not be able to engage staff to work with me as a team and that they would always view me as the enemy to be endured. I was fully aware that I was viewed as relentlessly pushing staff very hard in many directions.

I did push hard but in my awareness of doing so, I also tried to soften change by being supportive of teachers in other areas as often as I could. I listened to them, wrote copious thank you notes, supplied occasional treats at lunch and after school, provided all teaching materials they requested, arranged for extra funding for professional development from the school's budget for more teachers to attend conferences and workshops, channelled all parental complaints to my office, and quickly responded to discipline concerns arising in the classrooms by removing students as needed. Although many of my actions did bring me some basic level of acceptance from the staff, trust had to be earned and that took a much longer period of time to build. Teachers still viewed me as being a tough taskmaster and I knew that I desperately needed their good will to effectively change teaching practices, and that I would have to work hard to achieve this.

I also knew that with the initial wave of change I needed to be resilient. I felt confident that I had developed that trait by working as an elected school trustee for nine years on a large urban school board but I was not prepared for how truly hard the early transformation years proved to be. Figuratively, there were days when there was blood on the floor resulting from some of our exchanges. My leadership style took its toll and I did not emerge unscathed from these contentious encounters. I would often go home at night feeling exhausted, discouraged and frustrated. My front with the staff, however, was less emotional as my mantra became, "As principal, I am not paid to be loved but to run a school." Privately,

through all of this, I did continue to worry about the impact of what all this change meant for our teachers. I worried too about the sustainability of the changes that had taken place and I worried that without changes to teaching practices, student learning in our school would not improve. How to overcome this inherent obstacle of getting teachers on side remained my greatest challenge.

I wanted to ensure that our actions would improve teaching practices and effectively move students towards our selected targets. Our teaching practices needed to be grounded in research and sound pedagogy, and adopted by all the staff to provide continuity and student success. In preparation for the next stage of our school improvement initiatives, I began researching ways to facilitate professional change and how to scaffold teachers undergoing change. Up to this point, the teachers had been given a crash course on the QEP and now it was time to concentrate our efforts on one aspect of the curriculum to produce deeper changes to teaching practices (Fullan, 2006). To achieve this level of change, I needed help to identify a focus for the next wave of change, and how to implement it as I still struggled with making sense of my work. Since it is such a fundamental skill and one that was supported by teachers, literacy became the focus. In this endeavour I not only concentrated on my learning about literacy best practices but also on how to improve students' literacy by improving teachers' literacy practices.

It was at this point that I began to review action research and adopted it as a means to improve my leadership and guide my actions to be more effective. I thank Fran Halliday, one of the Ministry's Professional School Improvement team members, who, through her work in our school, became my mentor and introduced me to action research in the fall of 2001. She encouraged me to take an introductory course in action research that she was teaching in our

region for Bishop's University and I agreed to take this course as I needed to learn how to implement this level of reform at the school level. The need for principals to have opportunities to learn and to have professional development to assist them with school reform efforts is well stated by Elizabeth McCay (2001),

To help other educators achieve their learning goals and to lead school reforms, principals need opportunities to learn, reflect, and change..... Recent efforts in school reform have focused more attention on the professional development of teachers than on the learning needs of school leaders, especially principals, who direct the process of change. Before principals can take on the challenges of school reform, however, they must become active learners (Erlandson, 1994), willing to change their own thinking and practice as they lead others in implementing reforms. (p. 75)

As part of my course work, I began to reflect on my practice and to formulate an action research question that would guide me in my next stage of reform implementation:

...as an action researcher, I have been examining the need to sensitize teachers to the need for change. This research has led me to explore the following questions:

What is the problem?

What evidence do I have that this is the problem?

Which problems do I have control over?

Which of the remaining problems have the greatest impact on our students' performance?

These broadly based questions have led to more specific questions as:

How do I get teachers to recognize the need to change teaching practices to enhance students' literacy learning?

How do I nurture collaborative planning while maintaining the momentum of change so inertia doesn't set in or the tendency to retreat to old practices?

How do I manage perceived necessary changes that must be principal guided or otherwise they won't occur?

How do I address literacy changes in French and English programs that traditionally have not been all that complementary or in sync?

How do I create an English and French literacy team approach to better serve students and their learning? (*Excerpt from Action research paper, Bishop's University April, 2002*)

1.4.1 The Research Question

How do I as a principal influence the culture of learning in the school in a way that helps to enhance the education of students and the professional development of staff? (*Excerpt from Action research paper, Bishop's University April, 2002*)

1.4.2 Sub-Research Questions

How do I as a principal influence the teaching of literacy skills in my school in a way that helps to improve the literacy levels of our students and develops teachers professionally to be more proficient in their teaching of literacy skills?

How do I sensitize teachers to the need for change in their classroom practices? (*Excerpt from Action Research Paper, Bishop's University April, 2002*)

Through this course and my work at the school with Fran, action research became a means by which I began to document my work and to reflect on my practice. As I grew as an action researcher, I sought the counsel of critical friends, most of who were also engaged in action research, to help me to better understand my role in the school and how I could make a positive difference and contribute to both teacher and student learning. The difficult questions that I began to ask in my journaling and the challenge in trying to find a successful means to answer them prompted me to closely examine professional learning communities, leading me to the work of Eaker, Dufour and Dufour (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, et al., 2002). I

started to reflect on whether the creation of a professional learning community within our school could provide a learning culture in which teachers would begin to examine their literacy-teaching practices in a less threatening fashion. It was at this time that I realized that I had successfully become an action researcher.

1.5 Summary

In setting the context for this thesis, I have tried to provide a sense of the degree of fundamental changes that our school underwent in the early years of my principalship. I have outlined the provincial context that framed my work in the school and described in detail the context within our school, and the many challenges I faced in merging two distinct schools into one school community. Our school story is not unique but I have documented the process for others and it is hoped that by exposing my journey, other school leaders may be more successful in theirs.

I have discussed some of the tensions (Protestant-Catholic, French-English) that existed in the school and some of the measures taken to reduce them. I have also shared my earliest action research questions that arose out of my work in the school as I was making sense of my role in this initial change process. These emergent action research questions evolved in my study after further cycles of think-act-reflect. This evolution re-shaped my lead research question to be: How do I improve my practice as a principal to improve the teaching of literacy? Over the next five chapters, this evolution will be shared with the reader in context. I still wonder about the tensions⁵ that continued to exist in the school and question to what degree these tensions impeded change. I still worry about the sustainability of the many changes that have occurred and question how effective my initial leadership strategies were

⁵ See Appendix A for an overview of school tensions.

in forging a foundation for establishing a professional learning community that later came to be centered on literacy.

In order to assist the reader in forming an opinion about my work in the school that is based on leading change in a time of reform, it is necessary to review the literature on both change and leadership as this sets the theoretical context for my research and as such impacts on my action research in the school. The elements of school leadership and change are examined in Chapter Two.