CHAPTER SIX
MAKING SENSE OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 Staging the Final Reflection

My analysis of the research findings forms the basis of this chapter and also shapes my final reflection that concludes this action research study. Upon examination, the DRA and questionnaire results indicate that the nine literacy interventions contributed to improving the teaching of literacy and provide evidence that I had grown to become an effective literacy principal and as such, answer my lead research question "How can I improve my practice to enhance the teaching of literacy?" But there are also new critical questions that arise from the study. Why were the respondents' opinions different from mine? What other questions do my findings raise? I will begin to address these questions by commenting on why I think the differences in the rankings of the literacy interventions occurred and then examine the open ended questions that became apparent from the analysis.

In the second part of this chapter I will critically review my study's primary merits, its limitations, and its salient issues that warrant further consideration. In doing so I will explore the following questions: Did I accomplish what I set out to do? What were the greatest unforeseen challenges? What did I learn about my practice and how will my findings assist me? Are my findings relevant to other principals? What new knowledge will I contribute to living educational theory about the role of elementary principals in developing effective literacy-teaching practices?

The final reflection is an important element in drawing this study to its conclusion. Although my research focus was about improving my practice as a literacy principal, also

embodied in this study was my interest in the underlying question of what legacy I would leave the staff in terms of their literacy practices. Did my literacy development benefit teachers' literacy practices? Is there any evidence to support whether I had created with teachers a lasting professional literacy-based learning culture that would continue to grow teachers' practices after my departure? As a reflective practitioner, it is critical that I also address these final questions because I believe that some degree of my success in improving my practice can only be measured by my legacy and the sustainability of the improvements that took place.

6.2 Ranking the Interventions

From the outset, I realized that improving literacy on a school-wide scale was going to be a complex process and that no single literacy improvement formula existed. Because the school required growth in the many areas that I documented in Chapters One and Four, I determined that every possible avenue of literacy development would be actively pursued. As a novice, I did not know what strategies would prove to be successful so implementing a plethora of tactics to help guarantee improvement appeared to be a logical approach. Throughout the study, I did not question whether the literacy initiatives that I was promoting had any merit because the evidence from our bi-annual DRA results indicated consistent improvement. I interpreted this upward trend as an indicator that the literacy-teaching changes taking place were benefiting our students, although I did frequently question how through my practice, I could further improve students' literacy. What other things I could do to achieve better results. My steep learning curve to develop effective literacy-teaching strategies was further challenged by the ever-growing numbers of our ESL (English Second Language) and students with special education needs. To be effective, our literacy strategies

had expanded to include how to diversify literacy instruction for special education learners who presented a multitude of learning profiles.

However, despite the school's taxing environment, our literacy results continued to improve, as shown in Table 16. The gains were noticed by the school board's literacy team who suggested that my interventions were effective and wondered why other schools with less challenging populations were not as successful. We were implementing so many initiatives that we could not identify the specific effective ones, so the ranking of the nine literacy interventions (detailed in Chapter Five) became critical to provide some answers. But the rankings also raised new questions.

6.2.1 Analysis of the Differences in Intervention Rankings

I fully recognize that of all the respondents I am the least unbiased and I have striven to be as objective as possible in reviewing data. Table 19 shows how I ranked the interventions compared with both the teachers' and respondents' rankings.

Table 19:
Ranked Effectiveness of Literacy Interventions: Respondents' and Teachers' Versus My Rankings

Literacy Intervention	Ranking All Groups	Teachers' Ranking	My Ranking
Creating a time for literacy teachers to meet and jointly plan instruction	1	2	7
Supplying opportunities for literacy-based mentoring and coaching	2	1	7
Fostering a literacy-based school culture and promoting literacy research	3	4	3
Scheduling an uninterrupted literacy-teaching block for literacy instruction	4	3	9
Promoting professional development that centers on literacy instruction	5	6	3
Ensuring a literacy curriculum content framework with instructional methods and models	6	5	5
Implementing the use of a range of literacy assessment tools and appropriate assessment practices	7	7	1
Providing appropriate supports for at-risk literacy students	8	8	2
Acquiring appropriate literacy-teaching and learning materials, space and resources	9	9	6

I have ranked my leading effective interventions in descending order by the degree of importance and effort that I assigned to them: literacy assessment practices; supporting at-risk readers; and creating a literacy-based school culture tied with promoting professional development. I understand that my attaching a degree of importance and effort to these interventions does not necessarily equate to the degree of my effectiveness as perceived by the respondents. However, in the areas in which I worked the hardest to introduce changes, I did expect to see some recognition of my work illustrated by a higher ranking of my effectiveness by the respondents. From my list of the top three interventions, the only intervention in which my work is universally recognized as being highly effective is the school culture intervention which was ranked near the top third by all respondents. This is a

satisfying result as the literature states that a culture of learning must exist in the school before change can occur (Brill, 2008; Fullan, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1995, 2000). My findings detailed in Chapter Five confirm that I had successfully changed the culture by creating a literacy-based learning environment that was conducive to improving instruction and enhancing student learning. While the overall rankings of some of the interventions closely resemble mine, there were some larger discrepancies that surprised me. What sense can I make of the interventions where the rankings were quite different from my expectations? Here I am left to reflect deeply on my professional practice to ascertain why these differences occurred.

6.2.2 Creating Time for Teachers to Meet and Plan

Overall, the respondents deemed that my most effectively applied strategy was *creating time for teachers to meet and jointly plan instruction* followed very closely by providing teachers with *literacy-based mentoring and coaching*. From my perspective however, the implementation of these interventions had been gruelling due to the challenges arising from the teachers' grievance that left me feeling insecure and questioning my own effectiveness.

During this time, I desperately wanted to preserve the work we had accomplished in growing our professional learning community (PLC) that had been predicated on our ability to work collaboratively after school. But the teachers' grievance cited that their assigned workload was in violation of their contract as I had created three one-hour blocks for meetings after school for cycle teams and for in-house professional development. Therefore to mitigate malaise that could later prevent us from salvaging our efforts centered on the formation of a PLC, I purposely halted all work after school. This decision I believe was necessary because shared leadership can only grow in a context that has been re-shaped to

provide neutrality (Harris & Lambert, 2003) and the climate in the school during the grievance period was hardly neutral.

To my great dismay, the dispute took nearly two years to be resolved – a length of time that both extended and deepened the controversy, thereby seriously interfering with our emergent professional learning. When the original assigned workload was eventually upheld by the provincially appointed arbitrator, we resumed our after school cycle meetings and professional development sessions. Over time, we slowly evolved to reach the stage of evolution described by Mohr and Dichter (2001) as the "messy stage" (p.745) or as Lambert (2005) describes as the "transitional phase" (p.64) but the two-year delay prevented us from fully reaching our initial goals or what I had envisioned. I had hoped that teachers would not only participate in forming a community of practice but would also assume roles of ever increasing ownership and leadership that are indicators of the "high leadership capacity stage" (Lambert, 2005, p.65). I had also wanted teachers to take more of a lead role in mentoring and coaching because we had successfully grown some very competent literacy teachers as supported by T2's comment:

> As a staff, we should be teaching each other more. There is quite a lot of expertise within our own school and we need to mentor each other more.

In spite of our renewed efforts we never seemed to re-gain our former momentum or level of enthusiasm and we fell short of reaching higher levels of shared leadership in our literacy-based community of practice. Nevertheless, having common time to meet and plan, although ranked first by the average response of the three respondent groups, is supported by the teachers as my second most effective literacy intervention (refer to Table 19 that shows teachers' rankings). Even though teachers were not assigned specific after school activities

during the grievance, many still chose to use the scheduled time that remained in place to meet informally. I believe that this factor influenced their ranking.

6.2.3 Mentoring and Coaching

In spite of the problems raised by after school activities, teachers ranked mentoring and coaching as my most effective strategy (refer to Table 19 that shows teachers' rankings) which is again different from the overall ranking of the three respondent groups. This is echoed in these two teachers' reflections written anonymously at the end of our mentoring and coaching school year (year 4) that was facilitated by the research grant, when the teachers were invited by their PLC coaches to write a reflection about their work together:

> Phrases/Words that stick in my head now mainly as a result of our Professional Learning Community meetings:
>
> - Accountability
>
> - Results – really learning from them
>
> - Switch from "teaching" – to making sure students are learning
>
> ….I feel that we work well together and that this experience has really opened our eyes to the work we still want to do together….

And:

> I feel that I am a part of a cycle team that is working together in the interest of creating a meaningful learning environment for our…students. We meet as a team weekly and we meet with our teaching partners more frequently. This team approach is much more effective for programming and learning than working in isolation. Creative problem solving for different situations also occurs. I believe we are "well on the way" to creating a meaningful learning environment. *(Excerpts from teachers' reflection notes submitted to PLC coaches, May, 2004)*

As I give consideration to the teachers' rankings of these two interventions, I take them to mean that although the teachers did not like being assigned specific professional activities as part of their workload, voicing concerns that this reduced their professional autonomy,

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they did reap benefits from having weekly assigned time to plan instruction, share practices, and engage in mentoring and coaching. These professional activities buoyed their literacy practices as evidenced by T9's comment:

> Time set aside for planning and reviewing new practices in grade groupings, common, school-wide professional development, having an outstanding resource teacher to provide in-services – these initiatives allowed us to support each other in our learning and make sure that we incorporated the new practices into our daily planning and teaching.

Given more time, we would probably have broken through the next two developmental stages to ultimately reach the "mature-group stage" (p.746) in which a learning community is born (Mohr & Dichter, 2001). I make this claim because the teachers ranked my effectiveness in these two interventions very highly, and it is very encouraging that they strongly supported the concept of developing a community of literacy practice and recognized the professional gains to be reaped from such collaborative endeavours. However, the long pauses due to the grievance and our move to a new school site that are detailed in Chapter Four detracted us from fully developing our PLC.

The rancour and the delays surrounding the implementation of these two interventions led me to rank my effectiveness in these areas in the bottom third of my list because I believe that I failed the teachers. If I had been more effective, less demanding, and more receptive to the teachers' need to have more professional autonomy in deciding how to plan time to grow our PLC, there may not have been a grievance. Due to my inability to more effectively implement and scaffold these literacy interventions, I was unable to bring to fruition with the teachers our shared vision of becoming a successful literacy-based PLC and I am accountable for my professional shortcomings as the school principal. At the end of this study what resonates with me is that we did not achieve the level of collaborative professionalism we

could have achieved and that I initially envisioned. Perhaps I set the standard of judgment too high for our school team given that there were just so many competing interests for our time and focus in a learning climate that was oftentimes very difficult and riddled with tension.

6.2.4 Appropriate Assessment Practices

To achieve what Fullan (2006) defines as "precision teaching" (p.17-18), I invested the greatest amount of my time in addressing literacy assessment and evaluation practices to guide teaching and learning. I began by being very enthusiastic about introducing teachers to new literacy assessment strategies because I had been receiving on-going professional development in assessment and reporting practices for three years as a member of our school board's report card committee. The timing of the committee's final report coincided with the period of labour unrest in which I had put other literacy initiatives on hold, and so I began investing in the development of reflective assessment practices through anecdotal reporting and authentic assessment. I believed that this approach would allow us to continue developing literacy-teaching practices on more neutral ground as evaluation is an undisputed part of the teachers' workload. Our efforts in these areas became the underpinning of our provincial Lead School profile which is detailed in Chapter Four. But although this intervention was my prime focus in the school and our assessment efforts achieved some provincial recognition, it was ranked near the bottom by both teachers and administrators. The parents, however, ranked this intervention as their first choice suggesting a very divergent range of opinion existed around this topic. Why did this occur?

My decision to shift our focus to assessment practices was undoubtedly influenced by the grievance. Due to the resulting tension, there were few conversations about how to best explore literacy assessment or opportunities to seek staff input. This lack of shared leadership

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I believe accounts for why teachers did not rank this intervention very highly. It may also explain why some teachers felt, as demonstrated in their written comments, that we had started too many literacy interventions and that I had not allowed them sufficient time to acquire mastery of one before moving on to another.

Undoubtedly, the teachers were stretched in many areas by the constant increase in classroom challenges thereby limiting their available time to adopt new practices and therefore literacy assessment was viewed by many teachers as a burden, an add-on that was not an integral component of literacy development. Some of the teachers also felt that assessment took away from their teaching because of the amount of time it took to administer the DRA which is also expressed in their written comments. I had also struggled with how to reconcile teachers' assessment practices and integrate the DRA assessment tool with on-going in-class assessments. This reconciliation would have allowed for more precise literacy-teaching strategies to evolve from regular assessment practices and would have further enhanced daily learning (Noonan & Renihan, 2006).

When their feedback was requested, staff aired with senior administrators their concerns about using reading and writing assessment tools. As senior administration heard from a number of disgruntled teachers on the topic of literacy assessment, mostly during the grievance period, I am therefore not surprised that they viewed my effectiveness in introducing this intervention as less effective than other interventions. The parents on the other hand wanted more information about their children's literacy development. Parents therefore appreciated the information that teachers were now able to supply through the detailed anecdotal reporting about their children's progress that had been added to term

reports. I believe that this explains why parents' views about literacy assessment were markedly different from those of the teaching staff and senior administrators.

In light of all of this, I still maintain that changes in teachers' assessment practices that included detailed anecdotal reporting, the continued use of and reporting of students' DRA scores, did effectively promote overall changes to literacy-teaching practices. This notion is well captured in T6's comment:

> Marian has worked hard pushing us to write increasingly detailed report cards. This has resulted in us being forced to develop reflective practices. Over the past 3 years, I have observed both myself and my colleagues becoming more informed about individual students' literary strengths and weaknesses. We have become better at determining what the next step is for each individual. I believe our literacy-teaching practice has grown because of the increased awareness of the individual learners' needs.

In reviewing this teacher's comment, I am reminded of how much I wanted teachers to use data to become reflective practitioners and I believe that I achieved this to a degree. As a school community of learners, we did make gains and were recognized provincially as being on the cutting edge of assessment practices – being featured in two editions of the Government's regular pedagogical publication *Schoolscapes* (Katz, 2006; Krakow, 2004).

6.2.5 Instructional Materials and Resources

Another surprise occurred in the ranking of *acquiring appropriate instructional materials* intervention which I ranked near my top third of interventions. During the seven years covered by this study, close to $70,000 was invested in classroom reading materials and the same amount was also spent on library books from the school's annual operating budget of approximately $35,000 per year plus the addition of any surplus money from our annual daycare budget. There is plenty of tangible evidence throughout the school of the increase in learning materials as the school went from having virtually no reading materials and no

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library to having fairly well stocked English and French literacy book rooms and as many visitors expressed, "one of the nicest elementary libraries in the school board." Also our move to a larger school site allowed us to have rooms allocated exclusively for literacy materials. But unanimously all three groups of respondents ranked this intervention lowest. How can this be when so much time and money was invested in purchasing books, in setting up book rooms, and in creating a well stocked library? Even more puzzling is the fact that in their written comments, all three respondents' groups rank this intervention highly.

When I discussed this surprising outcome with critical friends, a thought emerged that there were so many resources in the school that many teachers had come to take them for granted. Over the seven years there were many staff changes with new teachers joining at different times and only seven original teachers remaining from years one and two, who knew how very poorly equipped the school had once been. Perhaps newer teachers did not give me credit for supplying these materials because they did not know the full extent of the efforts I had made to re-stock the school with quality instructional materials as I described in Chapter One. My findings indicate that I needed to improve my effectiveness in this area but I honestly do not know given the available resources, what else I could have done.

6.2.6 Support for Students with Special Education Needs

When I examined the intervention of providing *literacy supports for students with special education needs* another interesting variation occurs. Both parents and administrators rank this intervention in the middle of their rankings while teachers rank it second to last. Despite the many efforts made by school and board personnel to assist teachers, staff felt that there was never enough support for our student population with special education needs. As our numbers grew, the teachers, especially the less experienced ones, became increasingly

overwhelmed by the daily challenges of integration as the ratio of students with special

education needs increased in every classroom. This view is particularly well documented in

T6's comment:

> We are working with an increasing diversity of students. Many of these
> students have special learning needs, or behaviour and emotional challenges.
> The English stream classes at the upper grades are approaching 50% coded.
> This has resulted in many difficult teaching assignments. The mix of the class
> has affected the teachers' ability to provide a rich fast paced learning
> environment. Although many manage to involve students daily in a rich
> environment, there are many interruptions. Many students are pulled from
> class. Many students are regularly absent. Interruptions, absenteeism, discord
> in the school yard which is carried into the classroom, take away from the
> learning environment and learning opportunities hence compromise the
> literacy attainment of too many of the children.

Our student population with special education needs also took a lot of my time and

energy. Much of my time was spent working with outside service agencies, meeting with

families in crisis and working directly with students in need. The resource team and I made

considerable effort to provide services and support for struggling students, yet the teachers

did not see this as an effectively applied intervention. With the school's available resources

for students with special education needs, there were no interventions that could have more

effectively eased teaching loads. I believe that it was not a question of teachers gauging my

effectiveness in supporting learners with special education needs but one of rating resources

perceived to be inadequate given their daily realities. However, the parents and the

administrators did see the efforts that were made to address this challenge and hence I

venture to say that this is why they ranked it higher. In terms of my investment of time as a

principal I ranked this intervention second.

6.3 Summary

This review of the marked differences in some rankings confirms for me that there is some degree of subjectivity that entered into the rankings affecting how respondent groups responded. Stewart (2006) also raises this point when referring to the work of Evers and Lakomski (2000) that examines the extent of reliability of data derived from surveys, as people have distorted views of reality based on their subjectivity. This concept is further evident when I examine the written comments (shown in Appendix E.2) and their clusters (shown in Appendix G). Even though the data set is too small to be statistically meaningful, interesting trends appear. The three respondent groups' written comments generally support the ranking of the nine interventions in Table 10 but there are some notable differences. It is interesting that administrators' comments gave high importance to the curriculum intervention while the other two groups ranked it in the middle. Teachers' comments ranked professional development very highly while the other two groups ranked this intervention in the middle. I interpret these outcomes as containing some elements of personal perspective that are directly linked to the work, expertise and viewpoints of each of the respondent groups.

Therefore as a researcher, I had to be very careful in interpreting data to capture a true understanding of the responses. To foster trustworthiness I analyzed all questionnaire data as rigorously as possible, as discussed in Chapter Five. Moreover, to safeguard against subjectivity from skewing the results of the questionnaire, the questions were derived from an outside independent source and I had chosen to send my questionnaire to and analyze the rankings from three distinct respondent groups to mitigate any possible distortion. I believe

that I have effectively addressed the concerns raised by Evers and Lakomski (2000) about the reliability of data derived from a questionnaire.

6.4 The Choice of Action Research

With the multitude of critical issues requiring prompt attention to improve student learning, it became evident in the first year of my study that I would need to develop reflective practice, as only informed practice would effect the needed changes in the school. The only research methodology that allowed me to conduct this work was action research and now that my study is over, I carefully examine the benefits this method afforded my practice. In my final reflection, my initial reasons for selecting this method still resonate with me.

Action research enabled me: to conduct ontological research that embodied reflective practice (praxis); to enhance my accountability with input from critical colleagues; to document the evolution of my experiences into my epistemology; and to set rigorous standards of judgment that encapsulated my values. Action research permitted me to examine my work as an elementary principal in context and to improve my practice to enhance literacy. At the core of my research my intent was to fully expose the role of the principal while improving my practice, which I have described in Chapter Four. What I accomplished in this study was to take school leadership (theoretically documented in Chapter Two) and to expose its ontological applications in the field by documenting my daily work as literacy principal in my own voice through the use of vignettes taken from my journals. To my voice, others' have also been added so that my account has been cross-referenced in an attempt to ensure validity.

My study had two main foci: the prime focus was to improve my practice as a literacy principal, leading to the secondary one, to improve students' literacy. As my study

progressed it was often difficult to separate the foci as the two are complexly intertwined and were viewed collectively when I was planning how to implement informed action (praxis). I also had to recognize the co-dependence of principal and teacher roles as school educators, which led me to also focus on improving teachers' literacy practices, because I could not improve students' literacy alone. In coming to terms with these intricately interwoven components of my practice I came to more deeply comprehend the complexity of my practice as a school principal. This knowledge led me to truly become a lead learner in a community of learners and this awareness now fuelled my interest in professional learning communities. My views are best explained by Lomax (1990) in McNiff et al (2001),

> …action research is a way of defining and implementing relevant professional development. It is able to harness forms of collaboration and participation that are part of our professional rhetoric but are rarely effective in practice… (it) …starts small with a single committed person focusing on his/her practice. It gains momentum through the involvement of others as collaborators. It spreads as individuals reflect on the nature of their participation, and the principle of shared ownership of practice is established. It can result in the formation of a self-critical community: extended professionals in the best sense of the term. (p11)

Would I have come to such realizations about my practice by any other research model? I do not believe so because it was the very tenets of action research that fully opened and exposed my practice for such critical scrutiny that enabled me to reach this depth of knowledge to examine application models of school leadership.

6.4.1 Benefit of Reflective Practice

For me as a practitioner researcher, the greatest value added from applying an action research model was undoubtedly my ability to develop reflective practice. As I now review my data collection, it is abundantly clear that the years where the biggest gains were made were the years in which I invested the most time in reflection. My studies assisted me in systematically regulating reflective practice and this shaped and most importantly guided my practice in a way that I do not believe would have been possible through any other research method.

Our school, with its great need of fundamental changes to improve learning, had challenged and tested my leadership capabilities to the greatest extent possible. My practice developed with each of the three reflective action cycles of this study that contained an intervention plan: the first reflective cycle (about a year and a half into the study – year 2001-2002) had focused on literacy with a view to learn more about effective literacy practices and to find an effective literacy delivery model that included a research trip to view Edmonton schools' balanced literacy program; the second reflective cycle (about year four of the study – year 2003-2004) had focused on exploring a literacy-based professional learning community in search of a model to support teachers and their principal as learners and researchers in finding ways to support our challenging student population and included a grant to work with teachers to investigate this model (PLC); the third reflective cycle (about year six of the study – year 2005-2006) had focused on literacy assessment practices and literacy goal setting in student-led conferencing to find a model in which students would become more active participants in their learning and assessment and included a research trip to view Hawaiian schools' authentic assessment practices.

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These think-act-reflect cycles provided me with a clearer vision of my role in improving student's literacy and enabled me to better identify the right things to do and to proceed more effectively with the teaching staff to reach identified goals. Teachers noted in informal conversations that I had a vision to improve student success and I found that reflection not only generated informed practice but also gave credibility to my work, and allowed me to share in instructional methodologies at the teacher level.

6.4.2 How Assessment Helped to Shape Reflective Practice

One of the significant contributing factors that increased my literacy knowledge was my increased awareness of how assessment affects teaching practices. As shown in the rankings, assessment was a more important focus for me than for the staff. Perhaps this is not so surprising because as expressed by Noonan et al, (2006) assessment is a powerful support for principals,

> ….the existence of an enabling and visible system policy on assessment
> (preferably expressed as an integral element of the system's vision) is a
> fundamental source of support for principals. Well conceived and logically
> framed, it can provide valuable parameters for the actions of in-school
> leaders;…it can provide a rational basis for principal interventions regarding
> assessment practices in classrooms;…it can reinforce expectations for
> classroom professionals regarding assessment; and it can provide irrefutable
> proof that the work of principals in relation to assessment is informed and
> transparent, rather than capricious and arbitrary (p. 15).

My practice benefited from improving my knowledge of assessment practices. It helped to validate my work and to support the stance that I had adopted during the grievance period.

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Moreover it provided me with another lens to examine literacy-teaching practices as I began

reflecting on and examining the developmental stages of how students acquire literacy skills.

I began to question what teaching strategies would move students from one stage to the next.

I raised probing questions with teachers such as "What sense did you make of the scores

where students scored very well on decoding but whose comprehension scores are weak?"

"How will your class DRA data assist you in establishing your guided reading groups?"

"What do you think you can do to further assist struggling readers in your class whose

literacy scores have not significantly moved in a year?"

As teachers began to address these questions they delved into reflective practice and the

deeper I probed into our school's literacy assessment, the more I became an advocate for

teachers to adopt reflective practice. For some teachers this challenge was viewed as positive

as expressed in the following excerpt from a written note I received from a teacher who was

leaving the school to work on a Master's degree fulltime:

> ….G.E.C. is a vibrant, progressive school because you challenge us professionally to step out of our comfort zone and try new things (guided reading, student-led conferences). It has been great working at G.E.C. these last 3 ½ years….

New teachers benefited as well as illustrated in an end of the year written note:

> Thank you for your support and strength, .giving me room to grow, and being there when things became difficult….for challenging me professionally (reports, assessment, IEP's, goal setting, student-leds….) and providing a strong pedagogical and academic foundation for me as a new teacher….

There is no denying that the teachers worked very hard in this area and were often taken

out of their comfort zones during periods of assessment and reporting, further adding to their

already heavy workloads. This is captured succinctly in one teacher's reflection:

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We are so tired. It is a busy time….. *(Excerpt from teachers' reflection notes submitted to PLC coaches, May, 2004)*

But to improve schools some of these measures are necessary as best summarized by Harris & Lambert (2003), "Building leadership capacity asks those within schools to step out of the 'comfort zone' and do things differently" (p. 130). Once the grievance was resolved, I engaged in many professional conversations about our student literacy assessment practices with the staff, cycle teams and individual teachers, but unfortunately there was not a collective spirit of collaborative learning centered on assessment. Several teachers did however, grow significantly in their literacy assessment practices and became assessment leaders on staff and within our school board as well as recognized provincially for their contributions at provincial conferences.

6.5 Leadership

As I discussed in Chapter Two, school leadership has many facets and, over the course of my study, my leadership underwent change as I used various approaches to meet the school's many demands and challenges. Each leadership frame that I adopted offered me new insights, extended my practice and added to my overall development as a literacy principal.

6.5.1 Situational Leadership

In the final review of my leadership, the work of Bolman and Deal (1991) in *Reframing Organizations Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* still resonates with me. At the outset of my principalship, I had set out to construct a leadership style that had elements of their four leadership frames (structural, human resource, political and symbolic) and deployed elements from each to fit different situations. I had assumed in my dialectic fashion a multi-frame leadership approach (Bolman & Deal, 1991, 2002) as no single leadership model would effectively address all the work that lay ahead of me. In doing so, I had adopted a form of

situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1975) but as my study developed and I began to define my own contextual leadership requirements, the four leadership frames no longer seemed to suit all of my needs. I began to search for other frames to add as I came to more fully comprehend the complexities of my role, confirming for me that my initial beliefs about school leadership requiring multiple frames were correct.

Chapter Four revealed that there is no one leadership frame to create an effective literacy school. To borrow from Hulley and Dier (2009), the reality is that if principals strive to be effective school leaders, they do whatever it takes to create an effective school. I add, from my experiences that in doing so, effective principals adopt situational leadership. I have provided evidence that effective literacy leadership requires flexibility, creativity, instructional knowledge, perseverance, vision, moral, and ethical conduct. For school leaders to stay the course, leadership is always context bound (Foster, 1989) and therefore no single leadership model – instructional, transformational, democratic, or other will suffice in the field. I have shown how principals carry out their complex instructional leadership role and how school leadership needs to extend beyond the four frames set out by Bolman and Deal (1991).

6.5.2 Instructional Leadership within Shared Leadership

In providing information about my work as a principal to affect student learning, my study also addresses some of the questions raised by Marzano, Walters and McNaulty (2005) about how principals contribute to student achievement. Although research demonstrates that shared leadership is effective in school improvement (Fullan, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) and the many facets of school leadership with its competing demands necessitate that it be shared, nevertheless there is an instructional leadership role that only the principal is given. "In spite

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of the problems that may arise from giving so much responsibility to one person, principals continue to be the key to school improvement" (Lambert, 2005, p.65).

From my study I learned that principals must use their role to actively pursue shared leadership, to oversee its continued development, and to sustain its academic focus in order to improve student learning. Every team requires a group leader to ensure the team is on task and this is the role of the principal in the schoolhouse (Sergiovanni, 2000). Creating a PLC builds a social formation that frames the school team's efforts through the provision of a nurturing environment to keep the team focused on developing and sharing best practices. In this social formation, it is the role of the principal to ensure the promotion of effective practices leading to enhanced student learning and school improvement. The principal adopts the role of encourager, re-enforcer and vision guider.

Chapter Four showed that the notion of focusing our school improvement efforts on literacy came from the teaching staff and in doing so they set the vision. But in meeting the daily demands of the school, I found that it was easy to lose sight of the overarching vision that we had set and one that I was refining as principal. The heavy demands made of me on a daily basis in a large inner city school often took my vision on many side trips that slowed our literacy improvement. I often told staff that my work on a daily basis was always unknown and the only given was that each day I would have one child, one family, and one staff member in crisis. I never knew who it would be nor the degree of the crisis but it was a given that it would always unfold and it did, and usually at the most inopportune time in the day. In between these events I would use the remaining time to foster and to support the implementation of literacy interventions. In our inner school environment, the constant for me was the vision of what we were working towards and I had to work hard to keep it in the

forefront. Principals need to steadfastly keep the vision in sight for I have learned from my study that the principal is also the vision keeper. The vision can easily get lost in the pressing urgencies of daily demands and so keeping the vision becomes a critical role in school change and this role belongs to the principal.

My fundamental beliefs about sharing leadership to build leadership capacity; developing sustainable improvement initiatives (Fullan, 2005a, 2005b; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Senge, 1990); building a collaborative practice; promoting effective professional practices to enhance student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, et al., 2002; Fullan, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Williams, 2006) were all tested in my study. Living out these theories in the field proved at times to be daunting as my practical application of the theoretical framing of my action plans was not a clean, direct, or a timed process. I found my work to be extremely messy and complicated by the realities of the workplace and progress came at a much slower rate than I had originally anticipated. The staff was ever changing so each year brought new team members who required an induction and the partnerships formed one year were gone the next. The human dynamics of our teachers, our students and our families all intertwined to form the literacy interventions that grew in our school and uniquely assumed shape within our environment confirming for me that change has to fit within the school's context and learning culture and to be shared amongst all the stakeholders if it is to flourish.

6.5.3 Sharing Leadership

However, sharing in methodological instruction is not sharing leadership. As I now carefully re-examine the concept of shared leadership, I have come to recognize its complexity as I learned to make the distinction that sharing leadership is a very different concept from consultation or collaboration. Shared leadership is the ability to take joint ownership to

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identify future directions and jointly make decisions to achieve pre-determined goals. But in our literacy development, most teachers on staff were beginners in literacy-teaching practices and although I had worked hard to learn as much as I could about literacy, I too was an emerging practitioner. The teachers and I were not proficient in literacy-teaching practices and consequently, not in a position to share literacy leadership. Collectively we had to work with others more skilled until we were sufficiently informed to become more involved in leading a literacy-based PLC and sharing this leadership.

As my practice evolved and I began to see an increased need for sharing leadership, I began to work more closely with those who had both the literacy training and experience to guide us more effectively, namely our resource teachers. They were all trained *Reading Recovery* (Bourque, et al., 2006) specialists who worked closely with our board's literacy consultants and with me to support our literacy students with special education needs. In doing so, I had formed an ad hoc literacy team for our school that evolved into a leadership team as we met frequently to brainstorm strategies and engage in professional dialogues about literacy development and PLCs. During our exchanges, I listened and gave input but our decisions were collectively taken – this resulted in the literacy team having full autonomy to conduct staff sessions as they determined.

I believe that it was through these conversations that I shared school leadership with the literacy team that extended beyond distributed leadership within a hierarchical structure as Woods (2004) describes with the principal directing the whole process. I did not direct the decisions made by the literacy leadership team but actively participated in joint decision-making. I saw its members as being equal participants in sharing knowledge, experience and decision-making to the fullest degree. I now recognize that my notion of shared leadership

did not truly evolve with all members of the staff and I make the distinction that I chose instead to work closely with all of the school's leading literacy experts on staff. My intent was not to distribute leadership but to share leadership as I have defined it. My leadership evolved from working alone in the school to working very closely with a team of literacy trained teachers. Over time this leadership team included other educators who became critical friends who worked with staff to improve the teaching of literacy.

6.5.3.1 Teachers' Perception of My Shared Leadership

As I review the teachers' written comments in the questionnaire it is clear that they viewed literacy changes as being positive and that my leadership role played an important part in the school's literacy evolution. It is evident that the teachers approached mentoring and coaching with deep appreciation and it was professionally very enriching for them. There are numerous references made in their responses that attest to the strong support of our lead resource teacher in leading many of these after school sessions. What the staff was not always aware of was the extent to which the resource teacher and I had conversations about how to grow literacy leadership amongst the staff. It is not surprising therefore that in their comments there is no mention of my sharing leadership with them as I had shared literacy leadership with the literacy resource teachers and literacy specialists at the board but not with teachers directly.

In time I believe that as a staff that we would have evolved into a community of practice that fully shared literacy leadership as we became more proficient and required less support. I say this because while the staff did not fully embrace a literacy-based learning community in the manner that I had initially envisioned, collectively we did engage in professional conversations and did seek solutions to enhance the teaching of literacy in the school. The

students' DRA results that showed continued improvement further suggest that our teachers were becoming more effective in their literacy-teaching and were receptive to incorporating changes into their teaching derived from our early PLC discussions that focussed on effective literacy practices.

6.5.4 Grey Zone Leadership

In carrying out the board's directive to assign specific activities to teachers' presence time, I and the other principals entered into a grey zone as I have defined it in Chapter Two. By the nature of my position, I could not ethically say that I was only following board directives and not necessarily in full agreement, so as principal I took the brunt of the attack. Adding complexity, the teachers interpreted my sphere of influence as being far greater than the hierarchical structure allowed. The tensions on staff heightened because the points raised in the grievance ran counter to our previously and mutually agreed upon goals and operational procedures, and furthermore were in direct conflict with my moral beliefs and what I believed was best educationally for our students (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Given the constraints of my principal's power, I could not perform miracles (Clay, 2001) to resolve the dissension expeditiously.

Operating in the grey zone caused me to encounter my greatest moral dilemmas as the school's principal. During this period I encountered extreme isolation in my position – more than I had ever before experienced. When settlement came, the fire was hard to re-kindle as our collaborative "mindset" (Senge, 1990) had been tainted. I privately identified the lingering resistance on the part of the teachers as betrayal after all that I had invested in supporting teachers at all levels. Therefore it was also very hard for me to re-gather the threads of our emergent professional learning community and to move forward

collaboratively with staff. To proceed with this initiative, I had to reach deeply into my moral

convictions and draw from my inner bank of entrenched values to rise above my emotional

stance which was directing me to distance myself. The strength that I needed to move

forward with the teachers stemmed from my values and beliefs that the inherent nature of my

leadership role dictated that I lead and rise above our differences.

The tensions between my emotional intelligence and my ethical intelligence presented

my biggest hurdles in this study and no epiphanies emerged from any amount of reflection.

The literature on school leadership does not prepare principals for such episodes and from

my experience, I found that it is during these tumultuous times that principals have no

recourse other than to seek guidance from moral leadership to identify the critical and ethical

components that are necessary to form a supportive environment to achieve desired goals

(Foster, 1989). Based on this experience I espouse that moral leadership is imperative when

there is conflict.

6.5.4.1 Benefit of Building Trust

Over time, trusting relationships were formed that enabled us to overcome the many

challenges we faced, especially those arising from the periods of labour unrest. To encourage

and assist teachers, I frequently supplemented their professional development funds for

additional training opportunities and paid for learning materials previewed at conferences.

Such support was appreciated by the staff and viewed as one of my positive principal's traits

as the staff learned that as long as they could pedagogically defend their choices and indicate

a willingness to share newly gained knowledge with others, I would always find a way to

fund their requests. Knowing this, senior teachers often encouraged new teachers to seek my

support for training to develop necessary skills. Through this corroboration, I endeavoured to

soften my rough edges, to build trust and to gain teachers' support which proved to be an effective strategy.

Although it had been strained by the grievance, our established culture of trust withstood the stress and this enabled me to work with teachers on other initiatives. I believe that it was my recognition of this fact that ultimately motivated me to move beyond my sense of betrayal and to proceed with staff in re-starting our work to form a literacy-based community of practice. The fact that we did eventually return to our collaborative efforts after school albeit with a slower momentum and reduced enthusiasm confirms for me that I had successfully built trust with my teaching colleagues. Trust, an important component of my practice, had been thoroughly tested.

6.5.5 The Need for Professional Values and Ethical Practice

In times of conflict, I learned that I had to be attentive to the 'mindscape' of the school (Sergiovanni, 2003) and not just its landscape as there were competing elements that required delicate balancing. I had to find a way to put student learning and school improvement first while respecting the needs of the teachers. As principal, I wanted to do the 'right' thing but was unable to satisfy everyone and so my professional values became very important in the re-shaping of our learning community during this period of unrest especially as a practitioner-researcher working with teaching colleagues (L. M. Smith, 1990). As a practitioner-researcher I worked from my own values to pursue educational goals that I believed would benefit our students but not undermine the teachers' convictions and further strain our working relationship. As the school's principal it was imperative that I drew on moral and ethical leadership to safeguard against incorporating any decisions that could be detrimental to either the students or teachers.

I was committed to making a difference on a school level so that all students and teachers would benefit and was cognizant that my direction needed to be morally driven and have a moral purpose. My approach is supported by Fullan's (2003b) work on moral leadership and adds "….that all other capacities (e.g. knowledge of the change process, building learning communities) should be in the service of moral purpose" (p.30). My action research study was about living my educational values while improving my educational practice (Lomax, et al., 1996) and the hegemonic aspect of my role implied improving both my practice and the literacy-teaching practices of my teaching colleagues. Thus the stance I took during this time of conflict to re-direct my work to focus on assessment practices had an underlying moral purpose to benefit students and teachers.

6.5.5.1 Moral Dilemmas

In my study I learned that issues arise that can derail the study or slow its process but to stay the course is critical and to do so requires moral leadership. My biggest unforeseen obstacle was, without question, the grievance and its effect on our team work. There is no one clear answer as to why our school was one of the three schools named in a grievance, as other principals had also followed board directives. It is possible that our outcome was influenced by the fact that the three schools had executive members of the association on staff. In hindsight, I may have been too zealous in carrying out board directives and not attentive enough to what my teachers were expressing. Whatever the contributing factors were, for the purpose of this study, the important thing is that it happened and it altered my study.

My third action research cycle became fragmented and took a circuitous route which had not been my original intent and there are layers to examine as to why this happened. Briefly, the introduction of the third action cycle did not result from the natural progression and

extension of where I and the staff had evolved and was a somewhat forced fit in light of the circumstances; the existing tensions during this period clouded our cooperative working relationship and limited our ability to fully explore and jointly develop deeper understanding in these areas; and the lingering need to resolve and complete unfinished business was more difficult in the aftermath of the grievance.

Focusing on my school leadership, I learned that there were some elements that I could not control and that when confronting difficult issues, I needed to demonstrate professional commitment, patience, understanding, and conduct my practice ethically but these goals were at times elusive and hard to achieve (Campbell, 1999). In certain circumstances, I had to seek more objective ethical approaches than those derived from my reflections alone. But first as Campbell (1999) cautions, I had to accept that I was faced with an ethical dilemma that would require objective solutions. During these times, I sought the counsel of critical friends to provide me with sound objective guidance.

I also learned that I had to model the attributes that I both expected and required from my teachers. My approach is reinforced by Hester's (2003) and Starratt's (1991) views that ethical leaders, through modeling and mentoring, build effective relationships that create a community of enhanced learning within an ethical multidimensional framework that fosters creativity, flexibility, and reflective practice.

My initial beliefs about my instructional leadership role were altered over the course of my study for I learned that I needed first to learn about literacy in order to lead changes to literacy-teaching practices. It was not effective enough that I simply implement provincial educational policies (Fullan, 2001) and at the same time also shape teachers' professional development (Leithwood, et al., 1992). I did this in my first year in the school but I quickly

realized that I also needed to guide classroom instruction and to do so meant that I needed to create a learning climate in the school (Guskey, 2000) and actively engage in it (Fullan, 2001). In order for me to establish a literacy-based learning community to affect changes in the classroom, I had to become a literacy principal (Booth & Rowsell, 2007) to effectively motivate and support teachers. My literacy development both enhanced my leadership role and brought improvements to my practice which together supported the necessary conditions to improve literacy delivery. My leadership practices were critical in this evolution of change at the school level (Louis, et al., 1996; Newman & Wehlage, 1995; W. Smith & Andrews, 1989).

6.5.6 Literacy Leadership

I learned that the elementary schoolhouse has myriad on-going demands that necessitate the full attention of its teachers and principal, and that changing instructional practices and promoting student success are complex issues that must be very carefully nurtured in a fertile environment in a culture of learning. I have come to fully comprehend that the early work that I did when first appointed (that I off-handedly refer to as "my housecleaning years") was in fact extremely important. The tasks I undertook in the early stages that are documented in Chapters One and Four built a literacy-based learning culture in the school (Sergiovanni, 1984, 1995, 2000) and if I had not done so, none of the literacy advancements would have been possible.

Reflective practice provided me with instructional awareness and this learning enabled me to engage in professionally rich dialogues with my teaching colleagues about how to assist them in improving their practices. The development of effective literacy-teaching practices in the school is well documented in Chapter Four. The analysis of my findings

shows that my work was effective in both changing teaching practices and improving student learning. My instructional leadership was shown to contribute to student success. But in order for me to lead literacy initiatives and then later to be able to share this instructional leadership with staff, I first had to be instructed in literacy-teaching practices. By doing so, I became the lead learner who modeled for teachers the importance of learning more about literacy. Chapter Five's analysis illustrates that my knowledge had evolved to synthesizing literacy information and then applying very effective literacy interventions which is supported by respondents' comments. My learning framed for teachers the importance of investing time in improving their own teaching practices and adopting new strategies.

As I now answer the critical question, "Did I accomplish what I set out to do in this study?" My simple answer is yes and there is evidence to substantiate this claim in a trustworthy manner as evidenced in Chapter Five. The results of the questionnaire and especially the written comments support my claim that my leadership role had been pivotal in improving literacy-teaching in the school. Our school community could have made greater gains but given the circumstances and especially considering the distance of the journey we had successfully travelled since my early days in the school, the results are very satisfying. In my role, I did improve students' literacy by enhancing literacy-teaching practices.

6.6 The Study

My action research study was shaped to a great degree by its context and by its contributors – the administrators, the teachers, the parents, and the students and, as such, its results are really the sum of the work of the collective whole. Enough cannot be said about how the many variables contained within this study impacted on my practice – some positively and

some negatively. As this study concludes, I can say with certainty, that the overall experience I gained and the changes made to my practice were extremely positive.

6.6.1 Limitations of the Study

While action research is set in the field with its reflection cycles directing changes, the activities within one's practice nevertheless unfold in the natural setting of its everyday context. Through reflection I had formulated a detailed action plan using the concept of professional learning communities (PLC) to frame our literacy improvement endeavours. It was a plan in which I had invested considerable time and effort. Teachers had been consulted and through their initiative we had received a grant to further explore this concept – initially one that was enthusiastically supported by staff. But due to a decision to file a grievance, my well thought out plan had to be abandoned as I suddenly found myself unable to work with teachers as I had previously done. Our efforts to grow a PLC in our school were suspended and because a ruling on the grievance had broad ramifications, its resolution took nearly two years. During this period, I found myself powerless and forced to re-route my activities to improve literacy and my study in mid-stream.

In the interim, I had to very carefully examine what direction I could take in regards to my study as my practice did not halt and nor did my research. I needed to seek an alternative course of action and assessment was a logical extension to the work we had been doing. In evaluation and reporting, the lines of responsibility are contractually very clearly drawn, which made it easier to move in this direction. However, faced with a restricted professional learning environment I was unable to foster a more collaborative approach to developing assessment practices for learning. The tragedy of our literacy assessment journey was that much of it transpired under duress and thereby our creative enthusiasm and progress was

limited. In retrospect, I should have been more sensitive to how to advance assessment practices in a less overwhelming fashion and made greater efforts to be more supportive of the staff who continuously juggled the many demands made of them daily as inner city teachers.

In a different context, I would not have introduced improvements to assessment practices in the manner that I did. I would have chosen to investigate this literacy intervention only when it arose as an area to be addressed from conversations within our literacy professional learning community. However, given my realities and our 'organizational barriers' (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. xix) I did not feel that I had many other options to pursue with staff other than to continue working on improving literacy through changing assessment practices.

This period of labour unrest led to what I consider to be a significant limitation in my study as it was an uncontrolled variable that my real world research setting could not filter out. The inherent nature of action research did not permit me to get other subjects for my study or run other tests. The greatest strength of action research – being able to study one's practice in the natural setting of everyday context had proven in my study to be its greatest limitation. Undoubtedly, this action had a direct impact on my research findings and my study's outcome.

Did the benefit to our students outweigh the toll that assessment took on the staff and thereby justify the means? I find this question hard to answer because the questionnaire told me how the teachers really felt about assessment and my demands on them. I can say that in the context it seemed the right thing to do and the resulting reflective teaching practices that ensued from probing more deeply into assessment for learning did change how teachers taught literacy especially for students with special education needs.

6.6.1.1 Power Differential

Throughout the study I was keenly aware of the tensions arising from the dual nature of my work as researcher and practitioner; and adding further tension was the authority assigned to my role in the school. I had to downplay my authority (Clay, 2001; Zeni, 2001) in order to encourage teachers to take more active leadership roles in the creation of a PLC. There were many times that I wanted to direct this activity or to move it forward at a faster rate but to foster teacher leadership, I refrained from intervening. I found this tension to be another limitation in the study as it restricted my full participation in key aspects of my research. This became extremely problematic during the grievance period as I was cast as the outsider. As principal I could not ask the teachers to continue their after school discussions and to work on further developing our PLC; whereas had I been a teacher researcher I might have been able to strategize a different tactic and likely one that would have been viewed favourably by staff. I would have been able to play a more central role in this critical aspect of the study.

6.7 Contributions of the Study

There is so little known about how principals actually go about doing their work in schools that I have chosen to lay open my practice to everyone to see. In essence, how does a principal go about informing her practice? My contribution to living educational theory is my documented professional practice that details my literacy development and professional growth as a school leader. It extends beyond an ethnographic or autobiographical account of my role because I was testing a living educational theory as I sought to illustrate how the role of the principal actually affects the teaching of literacy. The driving force behind my action research study was not simply to improve my practice but to truly understand it – to understand why and how I do what I choose to do as a principal.

I know that I started off knowing nothing about effective literacy-teaching practices and my study was predicated on the premise that if I could learn about literacy practices, then I could activate changes to teaching practices that would improve student literacy. From my reflective practice, the nine literacy interventions emerged and they were found to be effective in improving teachers' literacy-teaching skills and students' results. The interventions are not new interventions and are in fact common practices that all effective literacy teachers adopt. The questionnaire results indicate that I was an effective literacy principal and that the interventions adopted in the school resulted in changes that improved how teachers taught literacy. These changes impacted positively on student literacy achievement as evidenced in our DRA results.

The sum of these changes resulted in the formation of an effective school that is substantiated in a note at year end (2004) from a supervising senior administrator who makes reference to my school running like "a well-oiled machine" which is a statement about how well our school operated. The results of my study documented in Chapter Five support the findings of Chrisman (2005) who from examining school improvement in 430 Californian schools claims that, "….improved student achievement seems to be the product of how well a school operates and depends on the quality of leadership and the effectiveness of instructional programs and practices" (p. 17). My study therefore meets Chrisman's (2005) criteria for how schools improve student achievement and serves as a living example of how a principal can affect literacy improvement. The findings from my study also support those from Coburn's (2005) study that demonstrate student learning is enhanced when principals become more effective pedagogical leaders by engaging in informed practice. But my

research extends beyond Coburn's by illustrating what steps a principal can take to inform her own practice

These insights serve to encourage other school administrators to adopt reflective practice to strengthen both teacher and student learning through the "think-act-reflect" cycles of action research thereby offering significant contributions to the field. I accept that I am publicly accountable for my work, that it will be critiqued by my educator colleagues, and that my research needs to meet high standards of judgments. Without these rigorous standards of social judgment, my research is subjective and offers little to education.

6.7.1 Contributions to Practice

The final question to answer is, "Are my findings generalizable and how my study can help other principals?" This study can be used to guide other principals' work through its illustration of how and what strategies can be deployed to improve literacy results. I believe that colleagues in the field choosing to conduct similar work will relate to my work on improving my practice. The data analysis shown in Chapter Five ranked the literacy interventions and my effectiveness as a literacy principal. In conducting this analysis, an assessment tool was created that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of principals who are implementing strategies to improve literacy-teaching and learning. The work principals do to apply literacy interventions can now be measured and ranked in their order of effective application. This study's findings can be used by other principals to examine more intricately their practice and the strategies they are employing to improve student literacy. My living theory about the nine literacy interventions does not provide a rule for how other principals should conduct their literacy practices but my work does provide a framework for others to

use to construct what is relevant in their particular situations and then measure their own success.

The experiences I have shared, suggest that every principal has the potential to become an effective literacy principal as long as there is commitment to learn about literacy practices and to do whatever is required to change teaching practices to enhance student learning. While each school is unique, the fundamental issues are constant as all elementary school principals encounter many of the same challenges that I faced.

On a deeper level, and for those interested in school leadership, my study exposes the realities of the schoolhouse in action and offers some solutions and possibly what to avoid. To paraphrase Whitehead (2004), my study has evaluated new initiatives and developed a conceptual model that can be used as a resource within the broader community of practice (p.2). This point was verified when I was asked to be a presenter at an international *Solution Tree Conference* (Toronto, February, 2009) to share my leadership journey. My two sessions were largely attended by school administrators – many of whom individually and enthusiastically thanked me at the end of each session stating that my work resonated with them because so many of my 'issues' were also their 'issues' and they could relate to the solutions that I chose to use. Finally, my analysis of leadership styles and my attempts at sharing leadership should help principals to reflect on their own practice and develop procedures appropriate to their contexts.

6.7.2 Considerations for Future Research

From the findings some questions arise that relate to the patterns found in the questionnaire's responses. As shown in the previous chapter, administrators and teachers consistently ranked my effectiveness in comparable ways. If this study were to be duplicated as closely as

possible in other schools would the same pattern appear in the rankings? Would senior administrators demonstrate similar responses to those of the teaching staff but tend to rank the effectiveness of the principals' work consistently higher than teachers? Do parents always view these interventions quite differently from the professionals working in the field? If principals want to improve literacy then are these interventions the areas to pursue and should they be applied in their descending order of effectiveness as ranked in this study or not? The answers to these questions can only be achieved through additional and comparable studies that would study trends to determine if there is support for the findings that are evident in my research study. These patterns may be of interest and could be used to guide or shape future studies.

One last question comes to mind and not one directly arising from the study, but one that interests me as a researcher. Namely, as my study took place in an inner city elementary school, I question if teachers would view literacy interventions (my nine interventions) similarly in a non-inner city school? I raise this question because so much of my practice was tremendously influenced by its context and several of the teachers' written comments in the questionnaire confirm that working in such a fluid and unpredictable environment affected their teaching practice. This aspect of the study and its relevance to practitioners may also be of interest to researchers working in this field.

6.8 Final Thoughts

My reflective practice was informed by the think-act-reflect cycles (Schon, 1983) and strengthened by input from critical friends. In this manner, action research enabled me to comprehend the phenomenon of school leadership to improve my practice, to explore my hegemonic role in changing teaching practices, and to test effective literacy interventions.

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Ethically it was essential that my praxis be informed so that my actions would promote successful literacy interventions to improve students' literacy.

Even though our school exuded the impression that it ran smoothly, from my perspective I did not always sense that such a smooth operation was underway in the building. Although I was organized and followed a vision to build literacy capacity and sought input from critical friends to refine my literacy vision for the school – my daily activity level was often racing and at times chaotic as I strove to meet the onslaught of the needs of students, their parents and those of the staff. Our school's road to school improvement was far from smooth and in fact I would suggest that my effectiveness stemmed from my inherent ability to quickly assess the situation, change direction as needed and provide appropriate interventions in a timely fashion. My actual work performed in implementing effective instructional programs and practices did not transpire as calmly or in as orderly a fashion as is illustrated in the many vignettes shared in this thesis. I came to fully comprehend that directing effective school change is a messy and at times a convoluted process.

I cannot take all of the credit for engineering the school's literacy success. There were many contributing elements to the school's change that were not directly related to my leadership and some of these elements became catalysts that helped shape the change process. I capitalized on these causal factors and used them as agents of change when I could – the prime one being the implementation of the new Québec Education Program (QEP). As we became a bigger school our finances grew proportionately, providing us with new quality learning materials that encouraged teachers to try new approaches. There was also the rapid growth in student population bringing several new teachers to join our school's teaching team that allowed me to hand pick teachers who had traits that were needed to complement

those of my existing staff. I deliberately selected experienced, confident, hard working and skilled literacy teachers. Where possible, teacher input and participation in these elements of the change process were strongly encouraged, and this engagement softened the winds of change a little.

As the staff grew more professionally confident, I grew more confident as their principal and over time there was less urgency on my part to make so many wide sweeping changes at such a furious rate. Fundamental changes had enabled the staff to move from updating teaching practices to be more current with those of other educators, to examining more closely what was needed for our school with its challenging student clientele. As teachers slowly developed into a professional community of practice, I moved from change agent to educational leader with a deeper sense of pedagogy now driving our professional learning community that encouraged teachers to become risk-takers to do whatever it takes to improve student learning.

The strong steps that I first took when arriving at the school did change the school's culture. Without first changing the learning climate within the school, there would have been no fertile ground to plant the seeds of second-order change (Fullan, 2005b). Over time, teachers truly evolved in their professional practices and the school became a different school because of our literacy efforts. I now find it hard to think back to the school's situation nine years ago. As one teacher who had also been a former student teacher in our school expressed in a year-end note:

> I have seen such change at this school since my student teaching….so many of them due to your positive influence and adventurous influence…. *(Excerpt for teacher's note – June, 2006).*

If I had to do it all over again, there are not too many things that I would do differently other than the handling of the grievance period as my study's findings show that positive changes occurred. My practice has been enriched by my study as I grew professionally and became a literacy principal.

I continue to grow in my senior administrator position at the school board now overseeing literacy programs along with student assessment and reporting in all of our schools. I have to thank my former teachers for training me so well in literacy and for teaching me how to improve my leadership skills. The greatest flaw that my former teachers will probably identify is that I made high and at times unrealistic demands of them and did not give them enough encouragement and recognition for the fine work they did. They would be right, and in my practice, I still need to learn to smile more and to learn more about sharing leadership.

The legacy I left the school I hope was instilling professional pride in the teaching staff to always be the best teachers they can be, not to fear new ideas and changes to teaching practices and most importantly to continue growing professionally. I recently had the pleasure of attending a Leading School Network Conference (April 2009) as a member of the provincial committee that oversees this work. One of the Lead Schools was George Etienne Cartier and I was very pleased to see that, a year and a half later since my departure from the school, the teachers' presentation was about assessment practices – their creation of writing exemplars coupled with curriculum mapping that assessed expected writing outcomes over the three elementary cycles of learning as outlined by the QEP. Their work was an extension of the research we had conducted on authentic student assessment. I was so pleased to see that the teachers and their new principal were continuing this work. When I later showed

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their work to a visiting Ministry level language arts consultant, she was very impressed and requested a copy to share provincially. I came away feeling so proud of my former teachers and now confident that I had left behind a successful community of practice centered on literacy. So in the end, my legacy to the school and its teachers was successful and my mission was accomplished.

Action research must be carried out in the real world, with real people, not in a laboratory, and the real world is a messy place and real people are unpredictable. But the rewards of an action research study are potentially greater, and the rewards of this study, both to myself on a professional level, as well as to a staff of teacher-professionals and – most important – to continuing cohorts of students have been proved in the preceding pages.