Leadership for Learning:
How Elementary Principal Leadership Practices Influence the Professional Learning of Teachers

by

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**ABSTRACT**

It is widely recognized that effective leadership ranks second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning (Jacobson, 2008; Simkin, Charner, & Suss, 2010). Taking the role of powerful change agents, principals work with staff to change schools from the ‘inside out’, thereby fostering the growth and development of the people who inhabit the organization (Owens, 2004). Furthermore, a principal who exercises such leadership acknowledges the conditions for improved student learning rest within the skills of the teachers in the school, and thus focuses on developing the capacity of the organization to support people in improving their own professional practice (Hallinger, 2010). Hence, an ‘inside out’ approach (Owens, 2004) to change embraces teacher professional learning as a key determinant in how schools approach and sustain successful educational reform.

Addressing the point that present research related to this phenomenon is often quantitative (Hattie, 2012), this study adopted a qualitative approach to narrow the gap in current literature related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. This study investigated the perceptions of principal leadership practices in support of teachers’ professional learning from the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors (who are supervising principals and superintendents responsible for instructional and administrative supervision of specific groups of schools and principals). Guided by a phenomenological perspective, I used three focus groups (one with elementary principals, one with elementary teachers, and one with supervisors) all of whom provided their experiences and perceptions of elementary principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning.
The following research questions explored the perceptions and experiences of elementary principal leadership practices in support of teachers’ professional learning from the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors:

1. What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning opportunities?
2. How do elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?
3. From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors is there a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?

The findings for each of the three research questions are summarized and discussed in relation to the extant literature. The results of this study suggest that a wide variety of principal leadership practices are perceived to influence teacher professional learning. While a few themes were similar across teacher, principal and supervisor participant groups, the majority of identified themes were diverse. The variability or divergence among themes is in alignment with literature referenced in this study and the conceptual framework upon which this study is based. Potential implications of this study include: an impact on principal leadership practices; principal hiring practices; the structure of teacher professional learning opportunities; and educational policy that constructs the parameters through which teacher professional learning is implemented.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that effective leadership ranks second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning (Jacobson, 2008; Simkin, Charner, & Suss, 2010). Taking the role of powerful change agents, principals work with staff to change schools from the ‘inside out’ thereby fostering the growth and development of the people who inhabit the organization (Owens, 2004). A principal who exercises such leadership acknowledges the conditions for improved student learning rest within the skills of the teachers in the school, and thus focuses on developing the capacity of the organization to support people in improving their own professional practice (Hallinger, 2010). Hence, an ‘inside out’ approach (Owens, 2004) to change embraces teacher professional learning as a key determinant in how schools approach and sustain successful educational reform. This chapter includes the rationale, purpose and my autobiographical signature, as well as definitions of the key terms, a general structure of the project, and a brief description of subsequent chapters.

Rationale

The importance of the role of principals in shaping organizational culture cannot be overlooked. Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) suggested leadership contributes to a range of organizational outcomes including motivation, commitment, and capacity for teachers to develop new approaches to education. School leaders are expected to exhibit this leadership quality to enhance teaching and learning in the school. Because present research related to this phenomenon is often quantitative (Hattie, 2012), this study adopted a qualitative approach to narrow the gap in current literature related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. This study captured the local voices and experiences of teachers,
principals, and supervisors (defined as supervising principals and superintendents responsible for instructional and administrative supervision of specific groups of schools and principals) to determine perceptions of what principals do effectively to influence teacher professional learning. A qualitative approach contributes to further inquiry, provides evidence to extend current research findings, and supports mobilization of knowledge to practice. Thus, potential implications of this study include: an impact on principal leadership practices; principal hiring practices; the structure of teacher professional learning opportunities; and educational policy that constructs the parameters through which teacher professional learning is implemented.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. The following research questions explored perceptions and experiences of elementary principal leadership practices in support of teachers’ professional learning from the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors:

1. What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning opportunities?
2. How do elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?
3. From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors is there a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?
Autobiographical Signature

My passion for pursuing the topic of influence of principal leadership practices on teacher professional learning is conditioned by my own experiences as a teacher, an elementary school principal, and a school supervisor.

When I began teaching eighteen years ago, I can’t recall the word ‘professional learning’ being used or being involved in anything resembling professional learning as defined by Ferrier-Kerr, Keown, and Hume (2008). Instead, as a teacher I participated in what was termed ‘professional development’ which was invariably presented by outside experts and which I found was rarely meaningful to the work that I was doing in my own classroom. As a novice educator, I engaged in professional development, which was often focused on top-down, system goals rarely articulated to teaching staff, with little sense that what I was doing supported my practice or improved student achievement. During my early days of teaching, the concept of focused, job-embedded professional learning based on shared leadership and a collaborative inquiry approach, common in many schools today, was non-existent in my professional world. At that time, organizational structures and school cultures were not established for building internal staff capacity to identify emerging issues, establish objectives, and implement school based solutions. Thus, I was rarely if not ever engaged in working collaboratively with my colleagues to improve instructional practices that would impact student learning.

I worked as a classroom teacher across each of the primary, junior and intermediate divisions; a student support teacher working with exceptional students; a special education coordinator at a system level; and then a vice-principal for two years. Subsequently, I was appointed as principal to an elementary school with decreasing achievement scores (as measured by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)). Looking for a way to improve our
students’ success, staff eagerly adopted a structured, job-embedded collaborative inquiry based approach to professional learning. I quickly observed from the practices at our school and discussions with principal colleagues as well as superintendents that adoption of this approach to teacher professional learning contributed to improved student achievement as demonstrated by pre and post assessment measures. However, principal leadership that focused on engaging and empowering teachers was integral for this professional learning to be effective. Such observations seem to support research that proposes that school improvement is more likely to be successful if principal leadership practices focus on the development of collaborative organizational school cultures to empower and engage teachers in change (Alkire, 1995) by building staff capacity, collaboratively sharing decision making and distributing leadership among staff. Thus, principals share with staff some of the power traditionally held by those in the administrative hierarchy (Owens, 2004). With this experience fresh in my mind, I continued to use this approach to professional learning as I transitioned to a new school in a different school board. Similar experiences were evident at this school as data demonstrated improved student achievement and teachers articulated value in the opportunity to engage with one another in professional discourse in service of changing instructional practices in order to improve student outcomes.

At the same time that I became principal in the new school board, I began my Master’s of Education at Queen’s University, as a personal commitment to my own professional learning. With little idea of the area of research focus, I took a variety of courses that encompassed the areas of qualitative research, curriculum development, special education, assessment and evaluation, leadership and policy, and organizational culture. With the opportunity in each course to explore a specific topic, I invariably gravitated each time toward the influence of
principal leadership and the development of organizational cultures that influenced teacher professional learning. As I began to consider a focus for my Master’s project and reflected on my past work, I clearly saw the theme that had emerged and began to acknowledge my passion for this topic.

After three years as an elementary school principal and looking for another challenge, I was appointed as a Supervising Principal of Special Education and Family of Schools Supervisor. My current role as supervisor of elementary and secondary schools involves many facets, not least of which is supporting administrators in developing leadership practices that promote effective teacher professional learning. Over the last two years, my observations of and conversations with principals, teachers and supervisors have illuminated principal leadership practices which seemingly influence teacher professional learning and contribute to improved student achievement. Similar to Jacobson (2008, p. 3), I started to be deeply convinced that, “effective leadership ranks second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning”. My observations of and conversations with principals, teachers, and supervisors have also shed light on principal leadership practices that have least influenced teacher professional learning. Thus, in my current role as Family of Schools Supervisor, I have a vested professional interest in solidifying my ‘hunches’ about specific elementary principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning and thus improved student achievement. A clearer understanding could potentially influence hiring practice, system professional learning for principals, expectations for principal leadership practices, and the structure of teacher professional learning opportunities.
Definitions of Terms

The key terms that are associated with my study are organizational culture, principal leadership, leaders for learning, professional development, professional learning, capacity building, and collaborative inquiry. Each term is defined below.

Organizational Culture

The working definition that I used for this research views culture as the body of solutions to external and internal problems that has worked consistently for a group and that is therefore taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think about, and feel in relation to those problems (Owens, 2004; Schein, 1985). Using this definition, my study suggests that school improvement and school reform efforts are more likely to be successful if principal leadership practices focus on the development of collaborative organizational school cultures that empower and engage teachers in change (Alkire, 1995). Thus, the organizational culture of a school is strengthened when principals demonstrate a belief in and commitment to the use of organizational self-renewal strategies that change the power relationships in the school and engage staff in systemic, collaborative problem solving.

Principal Leadership

Within the above context, principal leadership is best defined as “working with and through people to achieve organizational goals” (Owens, 2004, p. 78). Using this approach, effective school principals guide the change process in schools by using structures that “shape conditions that build school capacity for change and foster effective teaching and learning” (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 656) by actively engaging and involving teachers in the development, implementation, and sustainability of change. Thus, principal leadership may be seen as a process of influence that shapes the behavior of individuals and groups toward the
attainment of goals. While principal leadership may be viewed as a catalyst for change, it is the particular location of each school in its journey of school improvement that creates the need for and shapes the behavior of school leadership. Principal leadership, therefore, not only impacts school improvement, but also shapes and is shaped by the context in which it is exercised (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Examples of some of the most common approaches to principal leadership include: shared leadership; transformational leadership; and instructional leadership.

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) defines effective principal leadership as “the exercise of influence on organizational members and other stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (The Institute of Education Leadership, 2008, p. 7). Such influence is indicated as reciprocal, not unidirectional and exercised via relationships among individuals, groups, and current settings. Using this definition, principal leadership may be considered successful or effective to the degree that it makes significant, positive, and ethically defensible contributions in achieving the vision and goals of the organization (The Institute of Education Leadership, 2008).

**Leadership for Learning**

Leadership for learning may be defined as “the persistent focus on improving the conditions for learning and creating coherence in values and actions across classrooms day in and day out in the school” (Hallinger, 2010, p. 137). This approach to principal leadership is a blend of two earlier conceptualizations; instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Leadership for learning recognizes the “critical role that leadership plays in creating and sustaining a school-wide focus on learning” (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 657) and highlights learning for students, teachers, and other staff members.
Professional Development

Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2008) defined professional development as “deficit focused, assumes teachers need information from outside experts, and ignores key principles of adult learning by seeing teachers as passive receptors and not as sources of knowledge in their own right” (p. 124). Thus, for the purpose of this study, ‘professional development’ is operationalized as direct instruction sessions, selected by others, and presented by ‘outside’ experts.

Professional Learning

The term ‘professional learning’ as opposed to ‘professional development’ is intentionally used in this study. Professional learning is premised on schools as learning organizations. Thus, professional learning implies an “internal process through which individuals create professional knowledge” (Ferrier-Kerr et al., 2008, p. 124) through collaborative work that focuses on teaching and learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Hence, professional learning is ‘on the job’ learning in which student achievement is improved as problems of professional practice (i.e., curriculum implementation) are solved within the school and classroom context.

Professional learning as an organizational self-renewal strategy is an integral component of an inside out approach to school reform. Professional learning as an organizational self-renewal strategy provides an internal capacity to identify emerging issues and develop and implement school based solution. As Owens (2004) stated, school reform based on organizational self-renewal strategies “seeks to change schools from the inside out” (p. 385) by fostering the growth and development of the people who inhabit the organization. Thus, there is an acknowledgement that the conditions for improved student learning rest within the skills of
the teachers in the school leading to the approach of developing the capacity of the organization to support people in improving their professional practice.

**Professional Growth**

For the purposes of this study, professional growth has been operationalized as a combination of the following five criteria: 1) acquisition of new knowledge and skills; 2) application and transfer of the new knowledge and skills when and where appropriate; 3) improvement in student achievement; 4) enhancement of reflective practice; and 5) contribution to the learning community (Peine, 2009). Keeping these five characteristics in mind, it could be expected that the degree to which these characteristics are evidenced varies between individuals and is based on the professional growth experience.

**Capacity Building**

Capacity building is defined as the intentional focus on the growth and development of the individuals within the organization. Capacity building offers educators a “voice and visibility in the process of reconstructing their professional knowledge base” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, n.p.). Capacity building provides a vehicle to engage staff in systemic, problem solving aimed at developing capacity for internal solutions to improving student achievement. Capacity building builds in collaborative problem-solving and professional learning opportunities “so that complex practices envisioned by ambitious learning goals have a chance to be studied, tried out, analyzed, retried and refined until they are well-understood and incorporated in the repertoire of those who teach in school” (Delaney, 2002, p. 106). Thus, professional learning through capacity building provides a venue at the school and classroom level for decision-making about instructional practices.
Collaborative Teacher Inquiry

A job embedded, collaborative inquiry approach to professional learning is premised on McLaughlin’s (2009) organizational approach and mutual adaptation as an implementation strategy. This approach acknowledges that if we want teachers to succeed at new kinds of teaching we must acknowledge that the process of change requires time and opportunities for teachers to reconstruct their practice through study and experimentation (Delaney, 2002). Thus, learning opportunities must be built in so that teachers construct their own reforms that are valued and appropriate within a local context. Successful implementation of change therefore is individualized, child-centered, and based on a mutually adaptive process between the user and the setting (McLaughlin, 2009).

More specifically, collaborative inquiry can be defined as opportunities for teaching staff to meet frequently and work collaboratively to determine student instructional need using school based data; develop a plan to improve student achievement for students in their class and work collaboratively to improve instructional practices that would most significantly impact student achievement. Such a process establishes internal staff capacity to identify emerging issues, establish objectives, and implement school-based solutions. Within Ontario, the term collaborative teacher inquiry may be used in reference to professional learning communities, networks, and action research and consists of seven characteristics including: student learning that guides inquiry; teacher inquiry as a shared process; teacher actions informed by reflection; progressive growth in understanding from cycles of inquiry (iterative); analysis drives deep learning, inquiry shapes practice and practice shapes inquiry; and theory and practice connect dynamically (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2010).
In practice, collaborative inquiry is professional learning that consists of teachers and administration within a school who come together during the school day to work collectively on specific instructional strategies in literacy or mathematics that support improved student achievement. Strategies chosen link directly to the goals of individual school improvement plans and are based on student needs. Principals attend and facilitate these professional learning sessions. Each professional learning group collects pre-intervention student data, implements a chosen strategy within classrooms and then collects post-intervention data to determine student growth. This cycle may occur over a period of weeks to months during which teachers may meet frequently in their collaborative inquiry groups. A significant component of collaborative inquiry is the time built in for teachers to discuss student work, reflect on teacher practice, and work together within the professional learning sessions. Such a process is especially powerful because it is adaptive and driven by practice.

**Overview of the Study**

This project is organized into five chapters. Thus far, Chapter One introduced my research interest, the purpose and rationale of my research, and provided an autobiographical signature and the key definitions of terms used throughout the study. Chapter Two contains a review of literature that addresses the importance of principal leadership in supporting teachers in improving student achievement by improving their own practice. This chapter provides a foundation of prior research and literature related to effective principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning that sets the context for this study. Chapter Three outlines how I carried out the research. Here I describe my rationale for using a phenomenological perspective, the methodology, and data analysis. Matters of trustworthiness are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter Four presents the findings as well as the results derived from the findings of
the focus group interviews. Chapter Five provides an opportunity for discussion, implications, and conclusions. In this chapter, I present and examine the thematic analysis that connects the findings of this study to relevant literature that framed this study. This chapter concludes with implications and conclusions.

Summary

This chapter provides the purpose for this study which is to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. It presupposes that principal leadership and teacher professional learning are key determinants in how schools approach and sustain successful educational reform. “School leadership achieves this impact by shaping conditions that build school capacity for change and foster effective teaching and learning” (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 656). This project is an effort to explore this topic in a qualitative manner by capturing the local voices and experiences of teachers, principals, and supervisors to determine perceptions of what principals do effectively to influence teacher professional learning. In Chapter Two, I review the relevant literature related to how effective principal leadership influences teacher professional learning.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has had much to say about the important role of teacher practices on improved student achievement (Hattie, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2010). More recently literature has begun to address the importance of principal leadership in supporting teachers in improving student achievement (Hallinger, 2010; Jacobson, 2008; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004; Owens, 2004; Simkin et al., 2010). In this chapter, I review the research related to the role of the principal in the development of effective organizational cultures. Organizational culture provides the lens through which organizational self-renewal strategies are discussed. Next, I discuss professional learning as a key determinant in impacting school reform and student achievement and the implementation of collaborative inquiry within Ontario schools. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of pre-established conceptualizations of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning including the shift towards recognizing principals as ‘learning leaders’ whose key role is to construct the learning of teachers in the school to have an impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2012).

Principal Leadership and the Development of Organizational Culture

Change is a long and complex process when viewed through the lens of educational reform. Within the field of education in Ontario, initiating, managing, and sustaining change aimed at closing the gap and improving student achievement has been at best difficult. This has in part been due to educational reform efforts grounded on ‘top-down’ management approaches and bureaucratic leadership practices. While leadership on its own does not determine the success of school reforms, Alkire (1995) suggested that school improvement and reform efforts are more likely to be successful if principal leadership practices focus on the development of
collaborative organizational school cultures to empower and engage teachers in change. Thus, when principals share with staff some of the power traditionally held by those in the administrative hierarchy, principal leadership becomes viewed as “working with and through people to achieve organizational goals” (Owens, 2004, p. 78). Using this approach, effective school principals guide the change process in schools by using structures such as capacity building to empower and actively engage and involve teachers in the development, implementation, and sustainability of change. The evolution of leadership practice from bureaucratic, hierarchical toward collaborative organizational structures points to a development of a contemporary and effective means of influencing organizational culture and producing meaningful school change.

**Leadership under the Historical Approach to Educational Reform**

Seashore (2009) proposed that the importance of principal leadership in shaping organizational culture and its impact on change within schools has historically been neglected, thus resulting in key school reforms being met with limited success. To appreciate this phenomenon it is imperative to understand the historical impact of Taylor’s (1911) principles of scientific management and Weber’s (1947) theory of bureaucracy on school leadership practices and school reform initiatives.

Historically, the application of Taylor’s principles of scientific management has resulted in school organizations applying a ‘top-down’, hierarchical, labor management approach. Within this approach is a distinct division of responsibility between workers and management, with management being responsible for goal setting, planning, and supervising and workers for performing the required tasks. This labor management approach shaped the assumptions and beliefs of managers and thus the thinking around concepts such as collaboration and teamwork.
The principles of scientific management had a significant impact on schools who adopted the above values and practices of businesses. Hence, Owens (2004) postulated that those in leadership positions within schools have used Taylor’s principles to justify resistance to collegiality and collaborative approaches to problem solving, goal setting, and planning and other ‘bottom-up’ approaches to school reform.

Also firmly embedded within schools is Weber’s bureaucratic theory of organization. Bureaucratic organizations are grounded on a division of labor based on specialization, competence, rules, procedures, impersonal relationships and a firm hierarchy of authority and close supervision. Theory X, useful in understanding the hierarchical nature of relationships within the bureaucratic model, emphasizes such an administrative approach based on the belief and assumptions that employees dislike and avoid work and therefore must be supervised closely. Weber proffered that well run bureaucracies are more efficient, rational, fairer, impartial, and more predictable than non-bureaucratic organizations. While bureaucracy can certainly be effective in environments that are stable and homogeneous, the educational system, which is complex, filled with uncertainty and grounded in democracy and collaborative and inclusionary practices has proven to be anything but. Thus, ‘top-down’ strategies that are devoid of the impact of principal leadership in shaping organizational culture have significantly limited the success of past school reform initiatives and the implementation of successful change. As Seashore (2009) stated, until “we find the levers for change that already exist within schools and districts as organizations, school improvement will continue to be a haphazard affair” (p.136). Clearly, a bureaucratic structure no longer meets the unpredictable, dynamic, shifting and changing needs of school organizations with continued application resulting in ineffective school reform. The
next section will review a more current approach to school reform that strives to change schools from the ‘inside-out’ (Owens, 2004).

**Leadership under the Current Approach to Educational Reform**

A more current approach to school reform acknowledges that “the essential impediment to change” and sustainable school reform “lies in the culture of the school” (Seashore, 2009, p. 136). This approach no longer advocates for or utilizes ‘top-down’ leadership but rather embraces ‘bottom-up’ leadership with an emphasis on increased staff participation and communication and a de-emphasis on status-power relationships. This human resources approach, which arose in part due to unprecedented societal changes and acknowledgement of the complexity and uncertainty of modern society, acknowledges that all organizations are “populated by human beings with their very human and personal beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, hopes and fears and such inner states of these people, collectively go a long way to make the organization what it actually is” (Owens, 2004, p. 97). Thus, any changes in human relationships can powerfully affect the performance of the organization. Such a ‘people approach’ encourages organizational change within school cultures through collegiality, collaboration and teamwork.

Utilizing a ‘bottom-up’, people approach, principals take on the role of powerful change agents who work with and through people to achieve the organizations goals through empowerment of others. This, ‘bottom-up’ approach provides principals with the opportunity and means to collaboratively share decision making and distribute leadership among staff. Thus leadership is viewed as an organization-wide phenomenon “in which flatter organizational structures and leadership” are “distributed over more people and roles” (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008, p. 530). Theory Y, useful in understanding the nature of relationships within a ‘bottom-up’, human resources model, emphasizes such an administrative approach, based on the belief
and assumption that people exercise initiative and self-direction and seek responsibility when they are committed to the organization in which they work (Owens, 2004). Such commitment occurs when principals intentionally build organizational cultures that focus on practices such as shared decision making, shared leadership, capacity building, and authentic, collaborative relationships that impact collective teacher practice, improve student learning, and sustain school reform. If “the single most critical factor in improving the performance of an organization is to change its culture” (Owens, 2004, p. 166) than this strategic exercise of strong, shared, adaptive principal leadership is a precursor for initiating, managing, and sustaining change aimed at closing the gap and improving student achievement.

**Organizational Self-Renewal Strategies**

Within a ‘bottom-up’ approach, the organizational culture of a school is strengthened when principals demonstrate a belief in and commitment to the use of organizational self-renewal strategies that change the power relationships in the school and engage staff in systemic, collaborative problem solving. Organizational self-renewal provides a mechanism for internal capacity for problem solving at the school level that includes a capacity to identify emerging issues, establish objectives and develop and implement school-based solutions. Within schools utilizing these strategies, staff are more responsive to change, energized, motivated, and share decision making and leadership responsibility at various times. Reform based on organizational self-renewal strategies changes schools from the ‘inside out’ thereby allowing the school as an organization to renew itself. A principal who adheres to this practice exercises leadership that acknowledges the conditions for improved student learning rest within the skills of the teachers in the school, and thus focuses on developing the capacity of the organization to support people in improving their own professional practice (Hallinger, 2010).
**Capacity building.** Capacity building, the growth and development of the individuals within the organization, is one vehicle to organizational development and self-renewal. Capacity building focuses on implementing change or reform within the organizational culture of the school by building organizational resilience (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Capacity building relies on ‘bottom up’ principal leadership practices that engage and empower staff in systemic, collaborative problem-solving aimed at developing capacity for internal solutions that impact teaching and learning and improve student achievement. The role of principal leadership in building teacher capacity is identified by Hattie (2012) as one condition that has a significant positive effect on student learning and achievement. Capacity building develops people from within the organization leading not only to self-growth, but organizational self-renewal and sustainability of change.

**Professional Learning**

The ‘bottom up’ approach to school reform embraces teacher professional learning as a key determinant in how schools approach and sustain successful implementation of educational reforms (Ferrier-Kerr et al., 2008). This approach acknowledges the complexity of modern society and pre-supposes a people approach to organizational change focused on collegiality, collaboration and teamwork; enhancing teacher ownership and engagement and impacting individual and collective teacher practice at the classroom level. Professional growth is considered a desired outcome of professional learning. For the purposes of this study, professional growth has been operationalized as a combination of the following five criteria: 1) acquisition of new knowledge and skills; 2) application and transfer of the new knowledge and skills when and where appropriate; 3) improvement in student achievement; 4) enhancement of reflective practice; and 5) contribution to the learning community (Peine, 2009). Keeping these
five characteristics in mind, it could be expected that the degree to which these characteristics are evidenced varies between individuals and is based on the professional growth experience.

Hattie (2012) identified key features of teacher professional learning that impact student achievement including: (1) coaching over an extended period of time; (2) the use of data teams; (3) a focus on how students learn; and (4) teachers working collaboratively to plan and monitor lessons based on evidence of student learning in light of teacher planning. Professional learning is thus an organizational self-renewal strategy focused on producing meaningful school change through the engagement and involvement of teachers.

**Professional Learning with the Ontario Context**

The Ontario Ministry of Education, Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, has invested “significantly in developing the capacity of education professionals, schools and districts to achieve provincial goals” (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2006, p. 51). Within the context of Ontario’s three core priorities – high levels of student achievement, reduced achievement gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publically funded education; – the government released the Report to the Partnership Table on Professional Learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). With quality of teaching identified as “the largest, single variable in a school’s impact on student learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 2), the government of Ontario committed significant funds to targeted professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Using the terminology ‘professional learning’ to recognize a broad range of formal and informal learning activities focused on deepening understanding and teacher practice, the Ontario Ministry of Education determined five characteristics that teacher professional learning experiences must embody to be successful. Within this context, success is defined as having a positive impact on students. The five characteristics to be considered when seeking out or
providing professional learning experiences include a commitment to being: (1) coherent, (2) attentive to adult learning styles, (3) goal oriented, (4) sustainable, and (5) evidence informed (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

While keeping these five characteristics in mind, and considering that the “ultimate outcome of teacher professional learning is increased teacher efficacy and a resulting positive impact on students” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5), an explicit acknowledgement in the Report to the Partnership Table on Professional Learning (2007) is that there is no single model of professional learning that meets the needs of all teachers. At times, professional learning must be directed by system priorities while other times professional learning is self-directed. The money directed to school boards from the Ontario Ministry of Education is an acknowledgement of the necessity to engage and partner with district school boards and teachers unions to implement supports and structures to assist in the coordination of meaningful teacher professional learning that meets external policy initiatives as well as local contextual needs and priorities.

Adult Learning Theory

The Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1980) may also be useful when considering the context of teacher professional learning in Ontario. The Adult Learning Theory describes seven factors identified as ideal for effective adult learning. They include: (1) a need to learn; (2) a conducive environment that includes trust, respect, helpfulness, freedom of expression and acceptance; (3) an alignment of learning and personal goals; (4) an ownership of planning and implementation; (5) participation; (6) a commitment to prior learning; and (7) a commitment to progress. This theory proposes that collaboration increases and teacher isolation decreases as each of these factors are addressed when seeking out or providing professional learning.
Collaborative Inquiry

In Ontario, one model of professional learning has been the implementation of collaborative teacher inquiry; a response to research that indicated that short term, ‘one shot’, ‘pull out’ programs are ineffective in changing or developing teacher practice. Rather, effective professional learning must be “sustained, ongoing, in-depth [and] requiring active engagement by the professional” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). Hence, the notion of teacher professional learning has been transformed as collaborative teacher inquiry has become a critical part of the daily work of teachers within professional practice across district school boards and schools in Ontario (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2010).

For the purposes of this study, collaborative inquiry is defined as a process in which participants come together to examine their own educational practice and “integrate new knowledge and understanding of student learning and classroom instruction into their existing knowledge of professional practice” (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2010, p. 1). This may include educators interested in addressing a school or classroom issue driven by the consideration of student learning needs. School teams work collaboratively to narrow the question, gather and analyze the evidence, determine actions and share their findings and next steps. Collaborative inquiry thus allows school staff to reflect upon current practices in an effort to improve student achievement.

Organizational, mutually adaptive approach. The collaborative inquiry approach to professional learning is premised on McLaughlin’s (2009) organizational, mutually adaptive approach. This approach aims to change schools from the ‘inside out’ by focusing on professional learning through teacher engagement, ownership, and autonomy. Professional learning through collaborative inquiry is thus an integral organizational self-renewal strategy that
provides an internal capacity to identify emerging issues and develop and implement school-based solution. A collaborative inquiry approach to professional learning acknowledges the conditions for improved student learning rest within the skills of the teachers in the school, leading to the approach of developing the capacity of the organization to support people in improving their own professional practices (Owens, 2004). Thus, learning opportunities are built in so that teachers construct their own reforms that are valued and appropriate within a local context, with successful change individualized as a mutually adaptive process (McLaughlin, 2009).

In practice, when utilizing collaborative inquiry, principals establish a collaborative organizational learning culture within the school that allows staff to meet frequently and work collaboratively to determine student instructional needs; develop a plan to improve student achievement and work collaboratively to improve instructional practices. The implementation of collaborative inquiry promotes organizational self-renewal by establishing internal staff capacity to identify emerging issues, establish objectives, and implement school-based solutions. By focusing on the teacher, the organizational, mutually adaptive approach assumes the importance of local variability is both inevitable and desired if innovation is to result in significant and sustained change at a local level (McLaughlin, 2009). Consequently, collaborative inquiry is an excellent example of how a mutually adaptive approach to professional learning allows for both an individual and collective learning process that provides direct ‘user’ involvement and ownership of sustainable change.

Collaborative inquiry may be viewed as a powerful design for professional learning in which new knowledge and understanding of instructional practices and student learning become integrated into existing professional practice. As a self-directed approach, teachers
become key players in ongoing school effectiveness through thoughtful actions aimed at improving instructional practices based on the careful use of evidence. Collaborative inquiry provides the platform upon which evidence-based decisions can be made about issues related to improved student learning thereby creating teachers who are producers of knowledge. Thus, collaborative teacher inquiry is a tool or strategy that principals, as leaders in educational change, can use to strengthen teaching and learning and may provide the educational system with the necessary yet “delicate balance between external standards that press for improvement and the school autonomy needed to create an engine for internal change” (Delaney, 2002, p. 106).

**Conceptualizations of Principal Leadership**

Principal leadership is recognized as a key lever for school reform (Fullan, 2002; 2008). Specifically, principals create the conditions of learning thereby supporting teachers in improving student achievement by improving their own practices (Hallinger, 2005; Hattie, 2012; Levin, 2010; Whalstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). With the direct effects of leadership on student outcomes being interpreted as insignificant (e.g., 0.02 effect size; having no or very weak impact) (Hattie, 2012), the relationship between principal leadership and student outcomes is conceptualized as indirect with principal’s impact occurring through the establishment of the conditions (i.e., learning improvement agenda, teacher and classroom conditions including teacher’s instruction and professional community) through which teachers directly impact students (Whalstrom et al., 2010). Thus, it is essential to determine those practices or variables over which principals have considerable influence and how successful principals exert such influence under such circumstances.
Definition of Principal Leadership

Historically, many models have been developed to define constructs of principal leadership that impact student learning including but not limited to instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership. Within each of these constructs, effective principal leadership may be defined as “working with and through people to achieve organizational goals” (Owens, 2004, p. 78). Likewise, the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) has defined effective principal leadership as the “exercise of influence on organizational members and other stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008, p. 7). In addition, Hallinger and Heck (2010) proposed that by using a collaborative approach, effective school principals guide the change process in schools by using structures that “shape conditions that build school capacity for change and foster effective teaching and learning” (p. 656) thereby actively engaging and involving teachers in the development, implementation, and sustainability of change.

Examples of specific constructs of principal leadership are evident in the work of Levin (2010) and Fullan (2008; 2011). Levin (2010) advocated for nine essential practices to ensure improved student outcomes which included a significant focus on collaboration and maintaining a focus on teaching and learning. Levin (2010) also promoted seven practicalities for leaders that clearly balanced key outcomes related to better teaching, building teacher capacity for improvement, and building motivation. Fullan (2008) identified ‘six secrets of change’ for leaders that ensure organizations continue to learn, grow and thrive: (1) love your employees; (2) connect peers with purpose; (3) building capacity; (4) learning is the work (job embedded professional learning); (5) transparency rules; and (6) systems learn. Moreover, Fullan (2011)
contrasted four ‘wrong’ drivers: accountability (using test results to punish or reward); promoting individual teacher and leadership solutions; assuming technology will carry the day; and fragmented strategies with four ‘right’ drivers: creating a powerful centrality of the learning-instruction-assessment nexus; building instructional culture; powering new teaching innovation with technology; and building systemic synergy. Regardless of the range of these and other leadership conceptualizations, the principal remains a central source of influence (Wallace Foundation, 2011).

**Instructional Leadership**

With the emergence of the effective school movement and large scale sustainable reform as the educational agenda, research focused on instructional leadership of principals. Instructional leadership is frequently described as a focus on improving student outcomes by improving the classroom practices of teachers and has referred to leadership practices that address the areas of curriculum, instruction, and student learning (Hattie, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2004) defined instructional leadership as “a focus on improving the classroom practices of teachers” (p. 6). Whalstrom et al. (2010) divided principal actions into two categories; instructional climate and instructional actions. Instructional climate included the steps that principals take to set the tone and culture in a school that supports professional learning. Instructional actions included those steps that principals take to engage individual teachers. Hallinger’s (2010) model consisted of three sets of leadership dimensions: (1) defining the school mission; (2) managing the instructional program; and (3) promoting a positive learning climate.

Principals who practice instructional leadership keep the quality of teaching and learning at the forefront of any decision making. Instructional leadership is thus focused on leadership
practices that create conditions for improved teaching and learning, including but not limited to: ensuring disruption to learning is minimized; setting high expectations; visiting classrooms regularly; and interpreting evidence of the quality of teaching and learning (Hattie, 2012).

Instructional leaders empower teachers. Consequently, Hallinger (2010) has identified instructional leadership as the precursor to ‘leadership for learning’. All this being said, Leithwood et al. (2004) have suggested that instructional leadership though ‘in vogue’ for decades as a desired model, is more of a slogan than a model or set of leadership practices.

**Transformational Leadership**

While valuing the role of the principal as instructional leader in improving student learning, Fullan (2002) suggested that such a view may be insufficient and too narrow a solution. Instead he suggested that lasting reform required “fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession” (p. 2) and identified five core components of ‘principal as leader in a culture of change’: (1) moral purpose; (2) understanding change; (3) relationship building; (4) knowledge creation and sharing; and (5) coherence making (Fullan, 2002). Robinson et al. (2008) suggested that principals who engaged in transformational leadership transformed an organization by energizing a commitment to a common vision thereby “developing [the organizations] capacity to work collaboratively to overcome challenge and reach ambitious goals” (p. 639). As defined by Leithwood et al. (2004), transformational leadership included a “broader array of school and classroom conditions that may need to be changed if learning is to improve” (p. 6). Within this model, transformation included the role of the principal in building relationships, building teams, and inspiring teachers. Hattie (2012) also defined transformational leaders “as attuned to inspiring teachers to new levels of energy and commitment towards a common mission” (p. 154).
Robinson et al. (2008) noted a considerable difference in mean effect size, (defined as a standardized measure of the magnitude of an effect) between instructional and transformational leadership with the impact of instructional leadership on student outcomes three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership. In fact, when considering transformational leadership, principal leadership effects were not always positive. Robinson et al. (2008) suggested this may be explained in part by the focus that transformational leadership has on relationships (leader/follower) rather than the quality and impact of instructional work (teaching/learning) of school leadership, with the quality of leader/follower relationships not predictive of quality of student outcomes.

**Shared Leadership**

Historically, instructional leadership was viewed as the responsibility of the principal in which the principal maximized quality of instruction within the school to improve student learning. Recent research embeds a more inclusive approach that embraces principals and staff in shared instructional leadership (Robinson et al., 2008). Shared leadership refers to “a group-or team-level mode of leadership in which staff members of a specific school share responsibility for leading-contingent upon the task, the time required and the expertise needed” (Whalstrom et al., 2010, p. 7). Shared leadership is not a unitary construct but comprised of a range of different strategies for involving others in decision-making. Hallinger and Heck (2010) suggested that such a definition encompassed both formal and informal sources of leadership aimed at school improvement. Shared leadership thus refers to the means by which principals and teachers change instructional practices in order to improve student learning and can be defined as “teacher’s influence over and participation in, school-wide decisions with principals” (Whalstrom et al., 2010, p. 7).
Whereas much current research related to principal leadership practices that support teacher professional learning propose a conceptualization of the main tasks of successful leadership; what leaders should do and how they should do it, such “leadership by adjective” or category often “masks the more important underlying themes common to [different models] of successful leadership” that impact learning and support school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 6). Hallinger (2010) suggested that the debate over which model offers the greatest leverage and understanding of how school leaders contribute to learning has reduced in recent years with empirical results across studies showing fairly consistent patterns of impact. Consequently, the term ‘leadership for learning’ has subsumed features of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership.

**Leadership for Learning**

Leadership for learning represents a blend of earlier leadership conceptualizations. Within this construct, principals are viewed as ‘learning leaders’ whose key role is to construct the learning of the adults in the school to have an impact on student achievement (Hallinger, 2010; Hattie, 2012). Thus, the term ‘learning leader’ places emphasis on student and adult learning. This model rests on the assumptions that leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context; that leadership is moderated by particular personal leader characteristics; and that leadership does not directly impact student learning but is rather mediated by school level processes and conditions. This conceptualization frames leadership as explicitly though not solely directed towards student growth and learning outcomes. In other words, leadership for learning provides a wide angle lens to view the contribution of principal leadership to school improvement and student learning.
The Wallace Foundation (2011) proposed five key responsibilities of ‘leaders of learning’
including: (1) shaping a vision; (2) creating a climate of learning; (3) cultivating leadership in
others; (4) improving instruction; and (5) managing people, data and processes to foster school
improvement. Within this model, principal leadership indirectly influences learning through the
establishment of vision and goals; academic structures and process; and people. Vision is
identified as one of the most significant avenues through which school leaders impact improved
learning in classrooms by inspiring and motivating collective and meaningful staff contributions
(Hallinger, 2010). Academic structures and processes are mediated and achieved through school
level conditions that directly impact teaching and learning. These include changes to teacher
practice, student behavior, and learning outcomes. Thus, principals as ‘leaders of learning’ act as
a driver in identifying school wide needs as well as devising strategies to ensure that academic
changes occur over time that impact growth in student learning indirectly through a school’s
capacity for academic improvement (Hallinger, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Using this model, a principal’s contributions to student learning depends on the judicious
choice of what parts of the organization to spend time and attention. Leithwood et al. (2004)
suggested that among school related factors, teaching most significantly impacts student
learning. Hattie (2012) proposed that teachers are the most powerful influences in learning when
they are actively engaged in the processes of teaching and learning. Similarly, the Wallace
Foundation (2011) suggested effective principals “work relentlessly to improve achievement by
focusing on the quality of instruction” (p. 10). Consequently, research evidence has suggested
that the establishment of the conditions for teacher professional learning is crucial. Thus,
effective ‘learning leaders’ work with teachers to create school environments that are safe to
learn, explore, make mistakes, discuss, collaborate, and change instructional practices.
Principal support for and promotion and participation in teacher professional learning has also demonstrated the largest effect size (.84) on learning outcomes of students; while the influence of professional learning on student achievement was ranked at .51 effect size (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 663). Promotion and participation in teacher professional learning takes into account the principal as participant and includes such structures as staff meetings, professional learning communities, collaborative inquiry, and informal discussions about specific teaching concerns. With student background factors accounted for, the more teachers reported principals to be actively participating in teacher learning, the higher the student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008). Such involvement in teacher learning provided principals with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable teachers to make and sustain instructional changes to practices to improve student outcomes. Hence, those leaders perceived as sources of instructional advice gained respect from teaching staff and therefore had greater influence over teaching and student achievement.

**Conceptual Framework**

Bringing together various discussions in the literature, the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) shows the synergistic impact of school context on principal leadership practices and principal leadership practices on school context. This conceptual framework is not static or unidirectional, but rather dynamic and reciprocal. That is, school context, or the location of a school in its school improvement journey is impacted by principal leadership practices in which leadership is exercise via relationships among individuals, groups, and settings; and vice versa.

Within this conceptual framework, ‘leadership for learning’ is framed as a process of mutual influences. That is, “effective leadership for learning is adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of the school over time” and is more “than a one-way process in which
leaders influence others” (Hallinger, 2005, pp.129,-234). Effective principals respond to the changing needs of their context, while principal behaviours are shaped by school context as well. This may best be understood through the contingency theory which suggests that successful leadership is contingent (Leithwood et al., 2004). Namely, leadership effectiveness is dependent or contingent upon the identifiable features of the context or situation in which the leader worked; context being defined as a source of constraints, resources, and opportunities that must be understood and addressed to lead effectively. Contextual variables include student background, community type, organizational structure, school structure, teacher competence and experience, fiscal resources, and size. Adherence to the contingency theory suggests that if principals behave differently depending on individual contexts; then leadership styles would be differentially effective across school contexts. If so, then the frequent and pervasive effects of ‘list logic’, a set of descriptors of effective leadership conceived to be suitable for all schools should be avoided in both action and policy as this one size fits all approach clearly fails to take into account contextual differences in which leadership is enacted.

Hallinger (2010) has suggested the “relationship between school context and leadership must continue to be illuminated in order to ensure that leadership is based on school need rather than normative prescriptions about ‘good’ leadership” (p. 135). Leithwood et al. (2004) proposed principals need to be developed “with large repertoires of practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed, not leaders trained in the delivery of one ‘ideal’ set of practices” (p. 10). It is the dynamic nature of this model that implies that leadership linked to learning cannot be reduced to a list of dispositions, strategies, or behaviours as no such list could account for the “contextually contingent nature of successful leadership practice” (Hallinger, 2010, p. 129).
LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

Dynamic and Reciprocal rather than Unidirectional

School Context
Location of School in School Improvement Journey

Mutually Influence

Principal Leadership Practices

Principal leadership is exercised via relationships among individuals, groups, and settings.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Summary

While effective leadership has emerged as one of the critical foundations needed to sustain and enhance system-wide improvement (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008), prior research has suggested that the effects of principal leadership on school learning are largely indirect and mediated by a diverse number of school level factors (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Principals thus contribute to student learning indirectly through their influence on other people. It is through linking leadership practices to student learning that the actual effect of principals on student learning becomes evident.

Within Ontario, the Leadership Framework (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2008) has documented the influence of a collaborative approach to leadership on teacher professional learning. The research discussed in this chapter acknowledged how leadership effects on student learning occur largely because principal leadership strengthens professional community and that teacher’s engagement in a professional learning community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with improved student achievement. Thus, through professional learning, principals build capacity for improved student achievement. This literature review has also suggested that effective leadership is flexible and responsive to context with principal leadership success dependent in part on the skill with which principals adapt their practices to the circumstances in which they work (Whalstrom et al., 2010).

Finally, I reviewed previously proposed models of principal leadership; all of which have some shared lists of similarities related to dispositions, strategies or behaviours. My research proposes that principal leadership cannot be viewed as a static or unitary construct. Accordingly, my research is aimed less at the development of a particular leadership model and more at discovering the influence that principal leadership has on one condition of learning; teacher
professional learning. Consequently, this research captures the local voices and experiences of teachers, principals, and supervisors to determine perceptions of what principals do effectively to influence teacher professional learning. Hence, competing constructs of leadership models are reconciled in favor of repertoires of flexible practices or conditions that can meet external policy initiatives as well as local contextual needs and priorities as related to meaningful teacher professional learning. In Chapter Three, I present the methodology that was used in this study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide details of the research methodology that was used in this study. Thus, I will outline the research design of this study, the process for data collection, including the setting and sampling and recruitment process, as well as the approach to data analysis and the establishment of trustworthiness.

Methodological Framework-Qualitative Approach

The importance of the role of principals in shaping organizational culture cannot be overlooked. School leaders are expected to exhibit leadership that enhances teaching and learning in the school. Present research related to this phenomenon is often quantitative (Hattie, 2012). Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to narrow the gap in current literature related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Qualitative inquiry allows data to be gathered directly from the source through direct interaction with participants. Further, a qualitative approach provides the opportunity and flexibility for an emergent research design so that as McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated, “pre-determined hypothesis [will not] limit what will be collected” (p. 323).

Specifically, this study is guided by a phenomenological perspective. That is, it is designed to “describe the meaning and interpret the [lived experiences] of participants regarding a particular event in order to understand the participants’ meaning ascribed to the event” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). Such an approach provides the opportunity to investigate within a natural setting the phenomenon or lived experiences of elementary principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers. Thus, a phenomenological approach not only raises awareness of this phenomenon, but also opens up
new ways of understanding by creating a picture from the recollections and information collected thereby providing access to and understanding of individual and group perceptions and experiences.

**Data Collection**

This study involved three focus group interviews based upon six teachers, six principals and five supervisors (supervising principals or superintendents responsible for instructional and administrative supervision of specific groups of schools and principals) within one Eastern Ontario school board. This section outlines the process of the data collection method.

**Setting**

The setting for this study was an Eastern Ontario school board where I am currently employed. The board has 55 elementary schools situated in both rural and urban settings with a predominately Caucasian student and staff population. I chose this board for two distinct reasons. One, as a current employee, I have developed authentic and trustful relationships within this setting with teachers, principals, and supervisors. These relationships provided credibility, encouraged participation, enhanced rapport and quickly created a respectful and safe relationship and environment within which to carry out the research.

I also chose this setting due to an awareness of current professional learning practices. All administrators are expected to engage staff in professional learning through many means including that of collaborative teacher inquiry. This expectation is supported by a professional learning funding model which requires schools to provide release days for collaborative teacher inquiry to occur. Such a structure establishes internal staff capacity to identify emerging issues, establish objectives, and implement school-based solutions. Hence, I was confident that this setting had the infrastructure in which this study could be carried out.
Participants

Research sample. The research sample for this study comprised elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors who have experienced the phenomenon of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning, five to six to comprise each group. It had been my intention to include five to seven participants in each focus group. Those participants who were invited and were able to participate did so. I considered elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to be integral to the study as each participant group, based on their roles, provided a different and unique perspective of how principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning. Purposeful sampling, in which subjects were selected purposefully and strategically, was used to allow the researcher to capture a particular perspective in a natural setting thereby furthering understanding of a phenomenon through examination of information rich cases (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This sampling technique not only provided the best information to address the purpose of this research but also permitted easier identification of participants and therefore may have increased participation. In this case, teachers, principals, and supervisors were considered characteristically representative of this topic of interest and therefore information-rich participants who could provide information that directly related to the purpose of this study. Hence, purposeful sampling allowed for a readily attainable and representative board sample while the ‘voices’ of three diverse groups of participants allowed for a deep and rich understanding of the lived experiences of elementary principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. It is noteworthy that while this sampling technique precluded “generalizing from the sample to any
type of population,” the primary purpose of this research was “not to generalize but to better understand relationships that may exist” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 137).

All participation was voluntary and educators within each participant group were chosen based on willingness to participate. Gender, ethnicity, and years of experience were not considered during recruitment. Through the recruitment process, permission was sought via email from all individuals invited to participate. Email addresses of supervisors and principals are publicly accessible on the school/board websites. As an employee of this school board, I have internal access (as do all employees) to teacher, principal, and supervisor email addresses.

**Recruitment of supervisors.** Excluding myself, all six supervisors of elementary principals were contacted via a recruitment email (Appendix A) and invited to participate through a Letter of Information (Appendix B) and Consent Form (Appendix C) provided via email. Five of the six supervisors expressed an interest in participating, meeting my need for five to seven people in the focus group.

**Recruitment of elementary principals.** All forty-two elementary principals in this school board were contacted via a recruitment email (Appendix A) and invited to participate (excluding those that I directly supervised in an effort to avoid issues of coercion and power imbalances) through a Letter of Information (Appendix B) and Consent Form (Appendix C) provided via email. Neither the Director of Education or current supervisors made personal contact with principals in order to mitigate any pressure or expectations for them, to participate. Six principals expressed interest in participating, meeting my need for five to seven people in the focus group.

**Recruitment of elementary teachers.** Elementary teachers were recruited from schools that have undergone District Reviews. District Reviews are part of a district monitoring process
that involve central and school staff assessing the impact of the School Effectiveness Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) on individual school sites. As part of this process, additional support had been provided to each of these schools to focus on teacher professional learning opportunities. Specifically, one elementary school from each of the ten school groups (excluding my own school group) that had participated in a District Review was randomly chosen with all elementary teachers from each of the ten schools invited to participate. Teachers from these schools were contacted via a recruitment email (Appendix A) and invited to participate (excluding those schools that I directly supervised in an effort to avoid issues of coercion and power imbalances) through a Letter of Information (Appendix B) and Consent Form (Appendix C) provided via email. Six elementary teachers expressed interest in participating, meeting my need for five to seven people in the focus group. Teachers were made aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and that deciding not to participate would not result in any negative consequences.

**Focus Group Interviews**

Three focus groups were used to collect data: one focus group consisted of elementary teachers; one focus group consisted of elementary principals; and one focus group consisted of supervisors. Focus group interviews were approximately one and a half to two hours and occurred during the month of November 2012. Each participant received a Letter of Consent (Appendix C) via email to be signed prior to beginning the study. Participants were asked to bring the signed consent form to the focus group. Additional copies of the consent form were also provided at the focus groups.

A structured, open-ended approach to questioning was used with focus group questions written to reflect the purpose of the study and to elicit responses that expanded upon participant
perceptions of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. This approach allowed for a static framework of questions, provided flexibility for interviewees to comment, and allowed the interviewer to probe and pose unanticipated questions thereby clarifying and exploring information in greater detail. Consequently, the focus group created “a social environment in which group members were stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas” improving the “quality and richness of data” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 363) beyond that of one to one interviewing. Focus groups enhanced the emergence of broad collective themes. However, a limitation was that not all participants share a collective viewpoint and some chose not to speak up.

A focus group protocol was used to facilitate discussions (Appendix D). Protocol questions were designed to elicit responses that would provide a rich description of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning within the local, school board context. Prior to beginning this research and in order to improve clarity of questions and therefore trustworthiness of the study, I piloted the focus group questions with three colleagues – a teacher, a principal, and a supervisor. Based on the results of the pilot study, I altered the questions as necessary to better reflect the data that I wished to collect. The data from this pilot were not used in this study.

Each of the three focus groups occurred at the Education Centre, a geographically convenient location for the participants. All focus groups occurred at a convenient time for participants. I had provided a light dinner to acknowledge the time commitment (and that may have acted as an incentive to participate). I facilitated the focus groups and audio recorded responses. I summarized key points at the end of each focus group session to ensure data accuracy through agreement. This type of member checking replaced sending focus group
transcripts to each participant for verification which can be time consuming and create issues of breach of confidentiality.

In addition to focus groups, I also used field notes throughout the focus group interviews. During and right after each of the three focus group interviews I recorded what I saw and heard from participants. I also used field notes as a tool to document my reflections including personal reactions and thoughts to the information that was shared by participants as well as non-verbal participant behaviour.

Focus group transcripts were transcribed verbatim using the services of a transcriber (who completed confidentiality agreement, Appendix E). In order to ensure privacy and confidentiality for the participants to the extent possible, all names were changed to pseudonyms prior to data analysis and reporting of data. All data from the focus groups are securely stored and will be retained for five years in a locked cabinet and electronically on password protected computer files in a locked office. The pseudonym list is stored separately from the data and is kept on a memory stick in a locked filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

Focus Group Interview Analysis

In order to organize, store and then analyze the data, a manageable coding system was required. First, focus group data were transcribed verbatim. Whenever appropriate, in the presentation of data, I used direct quotation from participants to give the reader insight into teacher, principal, and supervisor perceptions. I separated each quotation by the type of participant (e.g., T stands for teacher, S stands for supervisor, and P stands for principal), and the pseudonym (e.g., Victor etc.). All research occurred during the same calendar year; 2012.
In order to facilitate timely, organized and efficient coding and analysis of the data, verbatim transcripts from the focus groups were imported into and analyzed using the qualitative software, ATLAS.ti (2013). I also coded the data manually. ATLAS.ti provided me with an efficient means to manipulate the data, add new codes, modify codes or collapse and eliminate codes. Manually and using this software, I coded the data into categories, patterns of relationships, and then into themes related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Emic codes were used to fix meaning to the data, permitting the data to speak for themselves thereby allowing categories, patterns, and themes to emerge without relying solely on prior theories and assumptions. Thus, as I analyzed the data, I developed a descriptive framework of how elementary principal leadership practices influenced teacher professional learning. This will be explored more fully in Chapter Four-Research Findings and Chapter Five-Discussions, Implications and Conclusions.

**Trustworthiness**

This research study has employed a number of strategies to enhance trustworthiness. As Stake (2010) noted, multi-method strategies permit triangulation of data: “the grand strategy for testing the quality of evidence” (p. 132). Focus group interviews allowed for documentation of non-verbal participant behavior, while field notes allowed for reflexivity and the opportunity to monitor the impact of subjectivity through the recording of personal reactions and thoughts. Further, the use of an audio recorder to record precise statements from participants coupled with verbatim transcriptions of participant accounts provided exact and accurate participant statements thereby increasing confidence in the study.

Likewise, key points were summarized at the end of each focus group session which encouraged data accuracy and ensured that both participants and researcher shared the same
meaning. Due to a limit of the focus group design, it would have been preferable to have the participants review the transcripts in some way. Also, prior to beginning research, a pilot interview (albeit of one person per group) determined whether the focus group questions were clear and addressed specifically those areas intended. Hence, this provided an opportunity to review and change the questions to better reflect the purpose of the research. Indeed, such multi-method strategies and techniques improved the validity and credibility of this study’s findings.

**Ethics Review**

In accordance with Queen’s ethics policies and the Tri-Council Guidelines, ethical approval for this study was received from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen’s University in September 2012, prior to the collection of data (Appendix F). Once ethics approval from Queen’s was received, I applied for ethics approval through the District School Board. Once ethics approval was received from the District School Board in October 2012, all participants were contacted via a recruitment email (Appendix A) and invited to participate via email through a Letter of Information (Appendix B) with permission sought through a Consent Form (Appendix C) provided via email and at the focus group interview. As stipulated in the ethics guidelines, each participant retained a copy of the letter of information and consent form for his or her own records.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the research methodology used in this study to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. I have outlined my research design, the selection and recruitment of participants, the process of data collection using focus group interviews, and a brief overview of my approach to data analysis as well as how trustworthiness was at least partially established. Within the next chapter,
I present my research findings within a descriptive framework which documents and examines how elementary principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. In this chapter, the research findings are categorized according to each research question: (1) What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning; (2) How do elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth; and (3) From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors is there a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning. For the first research question only, under each category, I present the themes related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning according to perceptions of each of the teachers, principals, and supervisors, as reported by the group. For the second research question, I present synthesized data using Peine’s (2009) five criteria of professional growth. For the third research question, I present only those themes commonly identified across the three participant groups. Whenever appropriate, in the presentation of data, I use direct quotations from participants to give the reader insight into teacher, principal, and supervisor perceptions. I separate each quotation by the type of participant (e.g., T stands for teacher, P stands for principal, and S stands for supervisor), and the pseudonym (e.g., Victor etc.).
Principal Leadership Practices Influencing Teacher Professional Learning

Teacher Perceptions

Principal leadership practices perceived by elementary teachers to influence teacher professional learning are separated into seven main themes: a) establishing structures of collaboration, b) providing release time, c) making learning relevant, d) providing opportunities for differentiation, e) building teacher capacity, f) providing feedback, and g) using research. Each is expanded upon below.

Establishing structures of collaboration. The practice of establishing structures of collaboration was one of the most frequent themes identified by teachers as influencing teacher professional learning. Collaborative structures were identified as any structure that allowed colleagues to have conversations and work and learn from each other and their students. Examples included networking among schools, collaborative inquiries for literacy, collaborative inquiry learning for math (CILM), opportunities to co-plan and co-teach, and opportunities to observe colleagues.

The development of a safe, learning culture was identified as necessary for the establishment of collaborative structures for learning. A safe, learning culture provided a risk-taking environment where teachers felt safe teaching in front of colleagues, observing each other in classrooms, engaging in courageous conversations and providing feedback to peers around teaching practices. Teachers identified the importance of taking a risk, “having to put myself out there and teach in front of my colleagues” as “really challenging” yet “good for me” (T, Eva).

On one hand, teachers expressed the desire for principals to visit classrooms, a desire for principals to co-teach and co-plan and “really be a collaborative partner in the teaching experience” (T, Eva), a desire for principals to provide feedback on teacher practice, and a desire
for the principal to take on the role of ‘expert teacher’. On the other hand, teacher participants indicated that the presence of principals in collaborative inquiry “restricts the freedom and the flow of ideas” (T, Charles). As one participant reinforced, in colleague-to-colleague situations, teachers are “willing to admit or say I don’t understand, did you get this, I don’t get this, what’s this new thing?” [But when there’s an] “administrator present, even the most friendly, supportive, wonderful administrator, ….it just sort of changes” (T, Eva). This leads to further consideration of the significance of principals establishing a safe, trusting, risk-free professional learning climate.

**Providing release time.** The provision of release time was recurrently cited as a necessary component of establishing structures of collaboration. All teacher participants reinforced the value of co-planning as well as the value of teaching in front of a colleague or the value of observing someone else teach. Time to co-plan, co-teach, model, or observe in others’ classrooms during the school day require release time. As one teacher stated release time provided teachers with the “chance to work [collaborate] with colleagues instead of just being presented with something and then you’re off on your own to try to apply it” (T, Charles). Another participant echoed a pervasive thought among participants about the value of release time; “There’s so much to be learned from that [co-plan, co-teach] and that would be really meaningful for me to have more of that” (T, Lillian).

Principals provided release time to teachers either through centralized funding or through other unique means such as common planning times or administrative coverage of teachers’ classes. For example, in this board, release days were provided to schools based on the number of teachers in each school location. Release days were then allocated by the principal to the teachers. “Those release days…your principal being able to use them on his/her discretion, I
think is a great use of resources for professional learning” (T, Eva). Participants noted that the funding provided for release time and the way a principal chose to use the release days at their school was a significant factor in influencing teacher professional learning. Conversely, the absence of release time was identified as a barrier to teacher professional learning.

**Making learning relevant.** Another very frequent teacher perception was that principals must make professional learning relevant for teachers. Teachers indicated that learning was relevant when it was applicable to their own professional needs and the needs of their students. Thus, applicable, worthwhile, and valuable professional learning was learning that met immediate student need and that could be applied or tried in the classroom.

Teachers also identified the importance of student work to guide discussions and decisions during professional learning. The use of student work personalized the professional learning experience for the participants, created a sense of importance and urgency and reinforced the meaningfulness of the professional learning. As one participant (T, Stella) noted, “now we’re not thinking that it’s going away” but rather “we’re committed to trying it and keeping [it] going” for the students.

Three teachers specifically identified that relevant professional learning is considered rich and meaningful when it is built upon current teacher knowledge in order to create new knowledge. One participant suggested the topic of professional learning “doesn’t need to be fresh…brand new…but…it’s propelling forward maybe what I’ve done in the past years…[and I can now] think about it progressively” (T, Laura). Another teacher described it as “oh I hadn’t thought of it in that way!” or it “puts a new spin on things, and that makes it exciting” (T, Lillian). By providing a connection to past practice, principals established opportunities as well as enthusiasm for professional learning.
Providing opportunities for differentiation. Teachers also repeatedly identified the provision of differentiated professional learning as a practice that strongly influenced teacher professional learning. Differentiated learning opportunities were highlighted as an important component of making professional learning relevant for teachers by acknowledging the value of teacher voice, teacher perspective, and teacher expertise within the school. Teacher participants defined differentiated learning opportunities as opportunities for teacher choice and opportunities to access a variety of professional learning models including collaborative inquiry learning for mathematics, collaborative inquiry in literacy, opportunities to co teach and co plan, system wide networking, and opportunities to engage in carousel learning. As one teacher noted, “Kids like choice, obviously we like choice too” (T, Laura). Differentiation was further described by one teacher participant as “when a principal does what any teacher is supposed to do and looks at what has to delivered and decides what are the key points that have to be delivered, how much of this is going to be…. principal directed, how much is going to be teacher directed” (T, Charles). Differentiated learning opportunities were perceived to allow teachers to choose learning that met their needs and the needs of their students. This subsequently energized teachers to implement the learning within their classrooms.

Providing differentiated learning opportunities was also acknowledged by teachers as one of the most difficult components of a principal’s job due to the number of teachers within a school and the variety of individual needs teachers have themselves and within their classroom. As one participant stated, the “different needs of different teachers”…”that’s why it’s so hard to individualize professional learning, but every attempt should be made” (T, Charles).

Building teacher capacity. Several teachers also believed that building teacher capacity strongly supports and influences teacher professional learning. Principals build teacher capacity
when they supported teachers to become leaders within the building, thereby extending the base of professional knowledge within the school. Teacher leaders took on the role of expert in particular instructional areas and were provided with release time to work with other teachers. Building teacher leaders was perceived to support all teachers in enhancing their instructional capacity. This belief was reinforced by one participant, who said, “I remember thinking ‘oh I wish they’d come over and tell us because they got to know it all and we didn’t…I wish that it wasn’t a secret’” (T, Lillian). Another teacher mentioned that in some schools “we’re not getting all the information [related to professional learning] that we feel is out there” (T, Helen). Consequently, building capacity in teacher leaders was viewed as a mechanism to enhance school wide instructional capacity by more equitably sharing system professional learning.

**Providing feedback.** Feedback was identified, although with less frequency, as influencing teacher professional learning. Feedback was defined by the teachers who participated in this study as dialogue between principals and teachers about instructional strengths, instructional needs and next steps. One teacher stated that “principals…in the classroom on a regular basis allows us to feel accountable for applying our professional learning practices, but it also allows us to ask questions or clarify if we’ve put them into practice the way [we were] supposed to” (T, Stella). Teacher participants indicated that those principals who were involved in classrooms and provided feedback; added value to the role of the teacher, provided recognition of teachers’ work, and encouraged further professional learning. This belief was expressed succinctly by a participant who said, “give me some feedback….I am going to continue my professional learning if I know that it’s being valued by somebody else who is knowledgeable and sees that it is happening” (T, Helen).
Using research. Some teacher participants indicated that professional learning should be based on research and that research lent credibility to the professional learning that they were engaged in; it provided teachers with an “expert in the field” (T, Stella). As one teacher indicated, for professional learning “to be meaningful I need to know that it’s based in research…I need to know that it’s not a fad” (T, Eva). When professional learning was based in research, teacher participants indicated that they were more willing to engage and apply the professional learning in their classrooms.

Principal Perceptions

Describing their own perceptions of how leadership practices influence teacher professional learning, the principals seemed to have discussed seven main themes: a) establishing structures of collaboration, b) making learning relevant, c) providing opportunities for differentiation, d) being an instructional leader and co-learner, e) maintaining focus, f) establishing and putting into action core beliefs, and g) creating a climate of risk taking.

Collaborative Inquiry. Establishing structures of collaboration was most frequently indicated by principals as influencing teacher professional learning. Of utmost importance was the role of the principal in establishing the structure of collaborative inquiry, which, as one principal stated, is “grounded in dialogue and collaboration with colleagues” (P, Victor). Collaborative inquiry was described by that same principal as “rich professional development [which] challenges us, challenges our practice, and our thinking” (P, Victor). Principal participants considered collaborative inquiry as the opportunity for teachers to engage in collegial discussions, reflect on instructional practices, provide feedback to one another around best practices, and generally challenge one another to improve teaching practices and student learning. Principals who committed to using the structure of collaborative inquiry saw teachers
applying learning together and reflecting upon personal practice, including reflection upon how
to improve, how to work more effectively with others, and how to impact student learning.
Teacher observations of “their colleagues in their classrooms in action” (P, Margaret), classroom
visits and team teaching were also perceived by principal participants to be collaborative
structures employed by principals that influence teacher professional learning.

**Making learning relevant.** Another frequent perception was that principals must make
the learning relevant for teachers, as it promotes teacher engagement in professional learning. In
order to influence teachers in a meaningful way, principals must ensure that the focus of
professional learning is applicable to a teacher’s current situation, practical, and subsequently
have an impact on current teacher practices and current student learning. Relevance is supported
when principals make sure that professional learning is linked to data that are relevant to the
school community, such as current student work and classroom based assessment data. One
principal indicated that professional learning is relevant when it has been “internalized. They
[teachers] actually have to have shown that they’re starting to use it and manipulate it” (P,
Joseph). Another principal articulated the concept of relevance referencing the “idea of the
Goldilocks’ principle, just right, just for me, right now” (P, Catherine). Furthermore, yet another
principal participant articulated the importance of making learning relevant by stating that
professional learning must be “embedded…in the here and now, so the learning has come from
need..., like I need to know information to solve that mystery or to figure out something about
my own professional practice” (P, Victor).

**Providing opportunities for differentiation.** Differentiating professional learning for
staff was also articulated multiple times. According to some participants, examples of
differentiation took the form of principals determining staff readiness, or principals providing
teachers with a specific type of feedback intended to move forward individual teacher practice. Many principals articulated that their role is to adapt professional learning to the needs of staff to ensure that teachers did not become overwhelmed. As one principal stated, without differentiation, teachers say “well this is just too much; I guess I won’t do anything” (P, Sarah). Further, differentiation was perceived to support a culture of risk-taking. Thus, principals suggested that they must continue to ask themselves, “How do you make it work for this group of people, in this culture, at this time” (P, Sarah).

**Being an instructional leader and co-learner.** Most of the six principals framed their involvement in teacher professional learning within the role of an instructional leader. While some principals acknowledged the importance of being knowledgeable about and leading the instruction process, others used the vocabulary of beginner’s mindset to describe their role in teacher professional learning. A beginner’s mindset was perceived by some principals to support the establishment of a culture of learning and risk-taking. As stated by one principal, “it’s important for teachers to see me with that beginners mind and that I’m not the ‘know it all’ about professional learning or learning in general or students or pedagogy” (P, Sarah).

Using a beginner’s mindset, principals perceived themselves as co-learners in which they participated fully in professional learning. One principal indicated that teachers were motivated when principals ‘walked the talk’, described as “being at the table with teachers doing the learning together” and “exploring together” (P, Victor). As co-learners, principals mobilized effort and bred excitement through their participation in the professional learning journey. Principals indicated that their active involvement in the learning process built trust and a culture of risk-taking. Principals with strong instructional leadership who committed to learning together
with their staff reveals that they were perceived as influencing and motivating teachers to challenge their own practices and the practices of others.

In order to act as an instructional leader and co-learner, school administrators identified the importance of clearing their schedule in order to be available to participate. As one participant stated, clearing the schedule allowed being…

…as uninterrupted as possible, there with the teachers for that whole time, and that’s difficult and challenging, but I think it makes a huge difference because you’re not coming and going and being in and out of conversations, you’re helping to facilitate those conversations as well as being an equal participant in them. (P, Susan)

However, all principals noted that the frustrating and challenging part about professional learning is that they would love to spend their whole day working alongside teachers. Sadly, “that’s just not reality, but those have been the moments that I felt like my leadership actually had an impact” (P, Victor).

**Maintaining focus.** The leadership practice of maintaining focus, also identified by principal participants as keeping the main thing the main thing, was echoed multiple times by principals as a factor that strongly influences teacher professional learning. Principals continually balance competing interests for their time and attention such as the immediate needs of their staff and students against the needs and direction of the system. One principal indicated it was difficult to ensure the experience of professional learning was authentic when it felt as if central data accountability was driving the process. For instance, data submission timelines were viewed as artificial, “big brother-esk” (P, Victor), unreflective nor “truly valu[ing] the professional learning that is going on” (P, Victor). Thus, principals keep the main thing the main thing by
Bringing purpose to the process – in this case, insulating staff from this request and advocating for a more fluid process of accountability.

Principals also considered it necessary to balance their role as instructional leader with day-to-day competing needs, for example, addressing student behavior, supporting teachers at risk, completing administrative paper work, and the general demands of running a school building.

They need our leadership as instructional leaders, and that is very difficult to do with the workload and the time constraints that are placed upon us presently. Not only have we had an increase in our roles as instructional leaders, but also in every parameter of anything to do in our roles. There have been huge increases in terms of implementation, accountability and all of those things, when truly if we’re wanting to move our students forward by moving our teachers forward, we need more time to be [focusing on]…instructional leadership. (P, Joseph)

In order to maintain focus and keep the main thing the main thing, principals identified the need to be adept at juggling competing agendas in order to continue to adequately and authentically focus on instructional leadership that influences teacher professional learning.

Establishing and putting into action core beliefs. The two most frequent core beliefs included “recognition of the importance of our [principal] leadership practice on influencing teacher practice” (P, Victor) and recognition that it is our job to “move our students forward by moving our teachers forward” (P, Joseph). Administrators identified that internalization of these core beliefs reinforced the significance of their role within teacher professional learning as well as guided the structure and context of professional learning in their schools. Central structures such as elementary principal meetings, as well as principal collaborative inquiry groups were
perceived to support principals and increase principal confidence. As one principal stated, “elementary principal meetings are very much about learning, and learning is the work…[elementary principal meetings] impact… my own comfort level to then be able to go out and lead that type of learning in my school and embrace it and get others excited about it” (P, Susan). Another participant concurred, “in our principal meetings, we do have a chance to go over the learning, we learn…and look at student work and think of what we’re going to do with our teachers, have professional conversations with each other to support each other in ways that we’re going to lead back in our own buildings” (P, Margaret).

Creating a climate of risk taking. One principal described a climate of risk taking and trust “as a culture which beckons people in” (P, Catherine). Other participants indicated the creation of a climate of risk taking allows teachers to move out of their ‘comfort zones’ in order to extend their instructional practices. When principals committed through their behaviours and actions to ensuring school environments were built on a culture of trust, teachers were believed to take risks which challenge their professional practice. Many principals indicated that once the culture of risk taking is built, professional practices continue to be stretched and enhanced.

Supervisor Perceptions

Principal leadership practices perceived by supervisors to influence teacher professional learning are separated into six main themes: a) establishing structures of collaboration, b) making learning relevant, c) providing opportunities for differentiation, d) viewing principal as co-learner, e) using research, and f) being persistent and courageous.

Establishing structures of collaboration. The practice of establishing structures of collaboration was most frequently perceived as significant for teacher professional learning. Supervisor participants used words such as collaborative, and working together to describe
professional learning structures utilized by principals (e.g., collaborative inquiry). Such structures included opportunities to have conversations with colleagues so that “everyone at the table has a voice in the learning” and included “discourse with each other to discuss both the old knowledge and the new knowledge and how that might come together to create something new” (S, Elizabeth). Supervisors also identified implementation of structures of collaboration as a way to “slow down and pause everything, to think about the thinking” (S, Grace). As such, collaborative structures provided thinking time or built-in reflection to challenge one’s thinking and question assumptions about practice before jumping into action. Supervisors believed that principals who provided structures such as collaborative inquiry allowed teachers to reflect meaningfully on their own practice, therefore creating meaningful implementation of professional learning in the classroom. It was also noted by supervisors that the development of a safe, risk-free environment was essential for collaborative structures to be effectively used.

Making learning relevant. Supervisors too identified the practice of making learning relevant as a factor that influenced teacher professional learning. Supervisors described relevance as being applicable, practical, or essential to teachers’ current work. Relevance was also described as job embedded; where the work is purposeful and directly related to current teacher practice and student needs. One supervisor described relevance as being “based on where our students are at and where we are at in our teaching” (S, John). Another supervisor noted that relevant and purposeful professional learning allows teachers to “see that they can use something in their classroom that’s going to benefit the students” (S, Henry), thereby increasing teacher engagement. Many supervisors also noted that relevance of learning included the introduction of new or external knowledge that is applicable to a teacher’s current thinking. Specifically, this was described by one supervisor this way, “So I’m building on my prior knowledge, my prior
experience, but I’m open to new learning that’s going to deepen that understanding…it’s directly applicable to the work that I need to do in my current setting” (S, Anna). Thus, principals who make the learning relevant were perceived by supervisors to provide teachers with opportunities to not only build on their preexisting knowledge but also to apply and transfer that knowledge and learning to their classrooms, “come back to critique it, and then go out and try again” (S, Elizabeth).

Providing opportunities for differentiation. Although articulated less frequently than by principals and teachers, differentiated professional learning for teachers was perceived by supervisors to strongly influence teacher professional learning. Supervisors described the importance of principals meeting teachers where they were in their practice. Thus, differentiation was described as being intuitive to staff needs and providing each teacher with what best meets their needs, including participation in collaborative inquiry, release time to visit colleague’s classrooms, and opportunities for co-teaching or other resources necessary for their professional development. As one supervisor stated, principals must “make sure that indeed all the teachers, just like we do for students, are set up to be successful” (S, Elizabeth). As another supervisor participant noted, in professional learning there needs to be “somewhat of a choice, so teachers are involved in professional learning based on their need as well to make it meaningful and purposeful and transferrable to the classroom” (S, Elizabeth). Providing opportunities for differentiation was perceived as a tool to engage staff in relevant professional learning, with staff engagement leading to implementation of new learning in their classrooms.

Viewing principal as co-learner. All supervisors also identified the practice of principals committing to being a co-learner. A co-learner was defined as principals participating actively and being fully engaged in the learning with their teachers. One supervisor noted that
principals “don’t necessarily have to be better at it [the topic of professional learning] than every other teacher in their building…but…they can’t simply expect it to happen without their input and engagement in the learning process” (S, John). Supervisors believed that the principal’s involvement in professional learning demonstrated the value of teacher’s work which therefore led to increased teacher motivation to participate in professional learning and increased implementation of professional learning in classrooms. Supervisors also suggested that principals who participated as co-learners in professional learning created stronger relationships between themselves and their staff as they honed their skills and knowledge in the area of instruction. Supervisors suggested that when principals were viewed as being able to teach, teachers were more likely to listen to and implement suggested instructional feedback provided by principals.

**Using research.** Two supervisors in particular identified “the importance of research in practice” (S, Grace). Research was identified as having a synergistic relationship to teacher practice. One supervisor described research as “really important because it guides where we need to go in terms of effective instruction for the students in our system…and is [that] information that we can directly apply to the work that we’re doing” (S, Anna). Some supervisors indicated that a focus on research-based strategies within professional learning structures translated into teacher use of these same strategies within the classroom.

**Being persistent and courageous.** One supervisor in particular considered principal persistence and courage to have a strong influence on teacher professional learning. Persistence was described as a “commitment to keeping at it” (S, Grace). Being courageous was described as identifying and tackling an issue such as taking on tough conversations with teaching staff related to growth of instructional practices. Principals who were persistent and courageous maintained high expectations, a focused vision, and engaged in courageous conversations with
staff. As one supervisor stated, “principals need to have that courage to take it on so that we’re constantly modeling that we’re about student learning, support of students, and our own professional growth” (S, Grace). By being both persistent and courageous, principals were able to tackle the “tough things that we need to tackle in professional learning” (S, Grace). Tackling the tough things lead to teacher professional learning.

**Summary**

The data from this research question showed a variety themes identified by teachers, principals, and supervisors related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Establishing structures of collaboration was the most frequent theme identified by teachers, principals, and supervisors. Other common themes included making learning relevant, providing opportunities for differentiation, and creating safe learning environments. Each of these themes will be discussed in further detail as part of research question three. The theme principal as instructional leader or principal as co-learner was identified by principals and supervisors as a principal practice that influenced teacher professional learning while the use of research was a theme identified by teachers and supervisors as a principal practice that influenced teacher professional learning. Teachers only identified the themes of building teacher capacity and the provision of release time, while principals identified maintaining focus as well as establishing and putting into action core beliefs. Supervisors identified being persistent and courageous as principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning.

**Professional Learning Experiences Leading to Professional Growth**

For the purpose of this study, professional growth has been operationalized as a combination of the following five criteria: 1) acquisition of new knowledge and skills, 2)
application and transfer of the new knowledge and skills when and where appropriate, 3) improvement in student achievement, 4) enhancement of reflective practice, and 5) contribution to the learning community (Peine, 2009). It could be expected that the degree to which these characteristics are evidenced varies between/among individuals and is based on the professional growth experience. With this in mind, participants most frequently described professional learning experiences grounded on the tenets of collaboration as fundamental to professional growth.

Professional learning that provided opportunities to collaborate was described by teachers, principals, and supervisors to have led to professional growth in a variety of different ways. Participants felt that once a culture of risk-taking was developed, teachers were more willing to engage in collaborative practices such as collaborative inquiry, co-teaching, co-planning, and classroom visits. Within a culture of risk-taking, teachers work and learn together as part of a learning community. They reflect upon and dialogue about student needs and teacher practice. They experiment with and challenge their own instructional practices as well as the instructional practices of their colleagues therefore increasing their knowledge as well as the quality of teaching and learning. As one participant noted, such dialogue “often generates more questions, which generates more learning” (P, Victor). Many teachers also identified that they were thankful for the opportunities that collaborative structures provided for self-reflection, were necessary for professional growth, although not often available in the busy world of classrooms.

Participation in collaborative learning communities which permitted teachers to break down the private or individual practices that occur in classrooms and jointly take responsibility for student growth was also described by supervisors as having led to professional growth. One supervisor stated,
Teachers have grown in their understanding that the skills that students need today and need to be explicitly taught today are a whole lot different than they were fifteen years ago. And so [now teachers are] coming together instead of working in isolation and keeping doors shut. They do have to work together because they have to learn how to teach these [new] critical thinking skills. We are counting on each other. (S, Elizabeth)

Another supervisor stated that, because of collaborative structures, “I think a lot of barriers have broken down and [then] professional learning [and professional growth] takes off because people are putting it out there and they are not afraid” (P, John). Teacher participants also stated that opportunities for collaboration combatted isolation, supported school wide development of best practices, and inspired confidence. As one teacher said,

I always feel as a teacher sometimes we teach in isolation and I love the opportunity to be with my colleagues and…get feedback from them. Oh this worked well, how did this work, and so I always feel more confident, and more sure of myself that yes I’m doing what I need to for my students…it’s good, it’s important to have people give you feedback on your teaching. (T, Eva)

Professional growth was also perceived to occur when collaboration became a means to acquire new skills and knowledge and then apply and transfer these skills to the classroom. One teacher participant indicated that the learning that is occurring through collaborative practices is “changing the entire program” (T, Stella); another participant said, “through my professional learning [that] I’ve applied to my classroom, my teaching practices are completely different than what they were even two years ago” (T, Helen); another participant noted that collaboration allows us to “play together and work together through the bumps and starts…that has definitely changed us” (T, Stella). Participants described how collaborative inquiries, co-teaching, and co-
planning had changed their instructional practices by providing opportunities to offer and receive feedback from colleagues and apply feedback in the classroom. The importance of collaboration and teacher-to-teacher feedback was summed up by a teacher participant who said,

The most effective professional learning has been those times when you actually can collaborate and co-teach or co-present or however you want it, but you have a colleague, at least one colleague with you to give you some feedback to give you an impartial, you know, observation of how you’ve implemented this …because teaching is a solo job so often and it’s so nice when it’s not a solo, when it is a duet or a trio. (T, Charles)

Teacher participants also described that their participation in collaborative professional learning has changed their instructional practices and that a change in their instructional practices and application of these new instructional strategies within the classroom and across the school has improved students achievement. Improvements in student achievement were evidenced from data collected through large-scale assessment such as EQAO as well as formative and summative class assessments. Improvement in student achievement was also evidenced from qualitatively documented changes in student understanding and learning. For instance, student growth is demonstrated “when students are knowing the goal, knowing how to reach their goal…wondering and wanting to know more and just excited about learning” (T, Lillian). Many teachers referenced learning that has occurred in collaborative inquiries and then applied in the classroom. One participant noted that “you’re actually seeing it making a difference in their [students’] learning” (T, Lillian). “They’re becoming able to communicate in mathematics or they’re becoming problem solvers…and if I am seeing that a gap has closed and we’re making great gains, then I feel like I’m on to something” (T, Stella). Hence, collaborative practices were observed to enhance teacher professional growth as evidenced in improved student achievement.
Supervisors described that collaborative practice that focused on the use of data and student work also facilitated teacher professional growth. The majority of teacher professional learning that occurs in the board in which this study took place is based on student need, rather than teacher deficit. In other words, improvement of teacher instructional practices is “through the student work [data] and through what the student needs as opposed to as a teacher, what are my deficits” (S, Anna). When student work constitute the data that demonstrate that students are ‘not getting it’, teachers respond by engaging in professional learning that meet those student needs. Hence, the current use of student work/data to drive professional learning has resulted in an increased “desire for [teacher] professional learning” (S, Anna) so that student needs can be met. The use of student work and student data within collaborative structures have also created professional learning that is relevant and applicable to teachers and their students. Teacher, principal and supervisor participants indicated that relevant and applicable professional learning lead to application and transfer of new knowledge to the classroom – a further indication of teacher professional growth.

Summary

Using the five criteria of professional growth (Peine, 2009), the data from this research question showed that participants most frequently described professional learning experiences grounded on the tenets of collaboration as fundamental to professional growth. Collaborative practices was the only theme consistently identified by each participant group; with teachers, principals, and supervisors indicating collaborative practices broke down the barrier of private practice in classrooms. Collaborative practices were perceived to create cultures of openness and risk-taking that lead to teacher collaboration; and teacher collaboration was perceived to challenge instructional practices leading to teacher growth. As part of collaborative practices,
teacher participants specifically identified the importance of feedback, from both colleagues and principals, as a means to encourage and facilitate teacher professional growth.

The use of data/student work was another way that collaborative professional learning had led to teacher professional growth. Supervisors perceived that the focus on student work/data within collaborative inquiries shifted the focus of professional learning from teacher deficit to student need and that this shift had resulted in an increased desire for teacher professional learning and consequently resulted in teacher professional growth.

Finally, teacher participants indicated that improvement in student achievement as a way that professional learning had led to teacher professional growth. Teacher participants described that their participation in collaborative professional learning had changed their instructional practices. Teacher participants also described that the change in instructional practices and application of new instructional strategies had improved student achievement as evidenced by EQAO, formative and summative assessment tasks as well as qualitatively documented changes in student learning and understanding.

Core Leadership Practices for Teacher Professional Learning

For the purposes of this study, core leadership practices are principal leadership practices perceived by teachers, principals, and supervisors to support and influence teacher professional learning. I defined the themes that are common across the three participant groups as core practices and therefore addressed in this question. Consequently, a set of core principal leadership practices included: a) establishing structures of collaboration, b) creating a culture of risk taking, c) making learning relevant, and d) providing opportunities for differentiation. I expand on each below.
Establishing Structures of Collaboration

Teacher, principal, and supervisor participants suggested that establishing collaborative structures such as collaborative inquiry, colleague observations, classroom visitations, and opportunities for co-teaching and co-planning were a core leadership practice that strongly influenced teacher professional learning. Collaborative inquiry was most frequently cited as having “the most positive impact on professional learning” (P, Sarah). Collaborative inquiry was defined as a “predictable process [with] autonomy built in so that teachers can choose what they need to do next based on the data and the students that they’ve got” (P, Sarah). In other words, collaborative inquiry provides a tight-loose professional learning model that includes clear and attainable expectations along with ownership and autonomy so that teachers can choose the learning that best suits the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Participants indicated that the establishment of collaborative structures such as collaborative inquiry, co-teaching and co-planning, and colleague observation provided opportunities for authentic collaboration between colleagues. That is, opportunities to engage in both dialogue and action and that such opportunities influence professional learning. A teacher participant noted that, as a group of teachers collaborating and dialoguing, “we decide okay this is our direction and then we end up changing that direction because of input made by somebody else” (T, Helen). Collaborative structures were also regarded by teachers, principals, and supervisors as “directly connected to the work ….at the school” (S, Anna), thereby allowing teachers to embed the professional learning back in their classrooms. Using structures of collaboration, teachers, and principals were co-learners who applied learning together and reflected upon personal practice; in particular how to improve, how to work more effectively with others, and how to impact student learning. Participants said that they felt that structures of
collaboration encouraged teachers to apply their new and expanded learning with the support of their colleagues in their classrooms. On the other hand, train-the-trainer models were identified as ineffective models of professional learning due to the lack of collaboration inherent in the model as well as the absence of a genuine connection to the work that occurs in the classroom.

**Creating a Climate of Risk-Taking**

Teachers, principals, and supervisors described the importance of establishing structures of collaboration within safe learning environments as a common, core leadership practice that influences teacher professional learning. Teachers, principals, and supervisors clearly connected the development of safe learning environments to the importance of relationship building at the school level. For instance, in order to build positive relationships with staff, principals need to be “open…demonstrate integrity, and [demonstrate] that they value conversation” (S, Anna). There was consensus among teachers, principals and supervisors that, when safe relationships are built, safe, risk-taking learning environments are established. There was also agreement by all participant groups that it takes an enormous amount of time and professional skill to develop the relationships necessary to produce a safe learning environment in the school in order to engage effectively in collaboration that leads to professional learning.

**Making Learning Relevant**

The participants termed professional learning as relevant when it was job-embedded and applicable to immediate student and teacher needs. All participant groups indicated professional learning that was applicable was more likely to impact teacher practice and therefore student learning. That is, teachers who were engaged in relevant and applicable professional learning were more likely to implement the new professional learning within their classroom.
It was also noted by all participant groups that the most relevant teacher professional learning comes from within; that is driven by an internal need for specific knowledge. A supervisor noted that teachers are “less engaged if something is done to [them] as opposed to when [they] are part of the decision making around where we’re going and why we’re going there” (S, Anna). Principals who make learning relevant give teachers ownership and “a strong voice in making decisions about the goals for the school improvement plan and then subsequently their involvement in their professional learning to support what those needs are” (S, Anna).

**Providing Opportunities for Differentiation**

Differentiating professional learning opportunities was also a core leadership practice believed by the participants to support and influence teacher professional learning. Differentiation was defined by all participant groups as teacher access to and choice of a variety of professional learning opportunities such as collaborative inquiries, book studies, classroom visitations, and networking. Teachers in particular identified ‘cookie cutter’ professional development, in which everyone received the same thing, and does the same thing, as non-supportive of teacher professional learning. Instead, teachers viewed themselves as “students of the board” and felt that principals “should be applying those things [principles of differentiation] that we are trying to apply to our kids” (T, Charles). Good professional learning “will use that same model with the teachers as the students” (T, Charles).

Differentiation was also identified by each participant group as hard work, specifically in reference to meeting the great variety of professional learning needs. This notion was reinforced by a supervisor who said, “No two schools may look the same [and so neither will the professional learning] and that’s okay because it needs to be about the students that you have in
your building and what your job is going to be to support those students” (S, Anna).

Differentiation was further summed up by one principal who said it is about how “you make it work for this group of people, in this culture, at this time” (P, Sarah). Time and workload were identified by all participant groups as barriers to the work of differentiation. As one principal stated, differentiation is “hard to do in the present working [conditions]” (P, Joseph).

**Summary**

The data from this research question revealed a commonality of themes identified by teachers, principals, and supervisors. Providing opportunities for differentiation, establishing structures of collaboration, creating a climate of risk-taking, and making learning relevant were themes similarly identified. Participants identified the importance of providing choice of activities to teachers in order to meet their individual and student needs. Participants also noted that differentiation was hard work, with time and work load identified as barriers. Structures of collaboration included collaborative inquiry, co-planning, co-teaching, and common grade level planning time. All participant groups, but supervisors in particular, indicated that the development of relationships was imperative in order to establish safe learning environments in which collaboration could occur. Finally, the practice of making learning relevant was perceived to engage, influence and motivate teachers to challenge their existing practices and apply new professional learning in their classrooms.

**Chapter Summary**

Six elementary teachers, six elementary principals, and five supervisors participated in three distinct focus groups which sought to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning. In this chapter, I have discussed the major themes that the data revealed. I began by describing those themes related to principal leadership
practices that were perceived to influence teacher professional learning. Next I discussed how professional learning experiences have led to professional growth. Professional growth was operationalized using Peine’s (2009) five criteria. Finally, I provided an overview of the core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning. Themes common across all three participant groups were defined as core practices. In Chapter Five, I discuss the findings from this research. I also present implications of this research.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the purpose, research questions, research design, data collection, and analysis. The findings for each of the three research questions are summarized and discussed in relation to the extant literature. Implications for theory, practice, policy, methodology, and further research conclude this chapter.

Overview of the Study

In order to provide a context for the discussion of collected data, in this section I include an overview of the study’s purpose, research design, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. The following research questions explored perceptions and experiences of elementary principal leadership practices in support of teachers’ professional learning from the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors:

1. What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning opportunities?

2. How do elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?

3. From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors is there a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?
Research Design

I chose to use a qualitative inquiry guided by a phenomenological perspective. Such an approach provided the opportunity to investigate within a natural setting the phenomenon or lived experiences of principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers. A phenomenological approach not only raised awareness of this phenomenon but also opened up new ways of understanding this phenomenon through access to individual and group perceptions (teacher, principal, and supervisor) and experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data throughout the month of November 2012. First, I conducted a focus group of five supervisors; next I conducted a focus group of six elementary principals; and finally, conducted a focus group of six elementary teachers. All focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Once all focus group interviews were transcribed and reviewed to ensure accuracy, I began coding the data from each focus group using emic codes. I then analyzed the focus group data from elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors to confirm and compare common themes as well as differences. I analyzed the data based on the three research questions provided.

Discussion

The following discussion highlights the convergences and divergences between the data and the literature related to how principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning from the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors.

Principal Leadership Practices Perceived to Influence Teacher Professional Learning

The analysis revealed that a wide variety of principal leadership practices are perceived to influence teacher professional learning. While a few themes were similar across teacher,
principal, and supervisor participant groups and will be discussed further along in this analysis, the majority of identified themes were diverse. The variability or divergence among themes is in alignment with literature referenced in this study and the conceptual framework (Figure 1) upon which this study is based. Although all participants were employees of the same south-eastern Ontario school board, each participant; teacher, principal, and supervisor is a distinct product of their professional experiences and context. That is, each participant is mutually influenced by the colleagues with whom they have worked as well as the context in which they have worked resulting in varied experiences related to principal leadership and teacher professional learning from which to draw upon (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004).

The contingency theory (Leithwood et al., 2004) as well as the concept of ‘leadership for learning’ (Hallinger, 2010; Hattie, 2012) further suggested differential effectiveness of leadership styles across school contexts if principals behave differently depending on individual context. If so, then one may assume that there is not a set of descriptors or dispositions of effective leadership practices that influences teacher professional learning and conceived to be suitable for all schools, as no such list could account for the “contextually contingent nature of successful leadership practice” (Hallinger, 2010, p. 129). Accordingly, one could presume that the context within which principal leadership is executed would result in a variability of themes related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Consequently and herein, the themes identified in this study should not be considered a list but rather leadership practices capable of addressing identifiable needs within a particular school context (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The remainder of this section outlines particular convergences and divergences between the data and the literature.
Principal as a co-learner was a theme identified within this study by principals and supervisors that demonstrated strong convergence with the current literature. In this study, principals spoke of the importance of being a co-learner (or participant learner) as opposed to an expert when engaging with teachers in professional learning. In the role of co-learner, principals demonstrated a belief in and commitment to organizational self-renewal strategies that changed the power relationships in the school. The findings of this study support McLaughlin’s (2009) perspective that involvement in internal, systemic, collaborative problem-solving fosters the growth and development of staff. Principals and supervisors in this study stated that the principal practice of being a co-learner produced meaningful school change through the engagement of teachers. That is, teachers who are engaged are more likely to embrace and implement new learning in their classrooms.

Being a co-learner was also perceived by supervisors as a means for principals to build credibility with staff in the area of instructional practices. Emihovich and Battaglia (2010) indicated that teachers respect and value the role of principal as co-learner, citing teacher testimonials such as, “What made our action research group work was that our principal was right there learning with us” (p. 233). Additionally, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) suggested that principals must continue to develop expertise in curriculum, instruction, and assessment with hands on approaches and in the company of teacher colleagues in order to improve the quality of instructional practices within their schools. The role of principal as co-learner was further supported by Robinson et al. (2008) who discovered that principal promotion and participation in teacher professional learning had the largest effect size (.84) on learning outcomes of students. In this study, participation in teacher professional learning, including staff meetings, professional learning communities, collaborative inquiry, and informal discussions
provided principals with a deeper understanding of the conditions required to enable teachers to make instructional changes to practices. In the role of co-learners, principals who were perceived as sources of sound instructional advice gained respect from teaching staff and therefore had a greater influence over teaching and learning.

Teachers in this study identified the desire for principals to be involved in classroom visits, principals to co-teach and co-plan, and principals to provide them with feedback. Yet these same teachers did not articulate a desire for principals to participate as co-learners in collaborative inquiry. This finding is in sharp contrast to the literature that noted that

Teachers want and expect school leaders to do more than merely support their efforts in re-conceptualizing practice. They shared an expectation that school leaders become authentic learners and integral players in the learning environments they endeavor to create. (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2010, p. 233)

I believe this finding points to the importance of establishing safe, trusting, risk-free professional learning environments by principals and cultures that de-emphasize status-power relationships prior to further meaningful involvement in collaborative inquiry process. This will be further discussed in the implications section of this paper.

Building teacher capacity was identified both within this study by teacher participants and within the literature as a principal leadership practice that has a significant positive effect on teacher professional learning (Hattie, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2011). If professional learning is directly linked to educational improvement, there needs to be more attention paid to how principals build the capacity of teachers to engage in professional learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Locally, the board in which this study occurred has invested significantly in developing the capacity of teachers to achieve provincial goals related to improved student achievement.
Such an investment is based on research that identifies teaching as the largest, single variable in a school’s impact on student learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Capacity building is thus an acknowledgement of the value of collective leadership aimed at improving student learning as it allows teachers to be pivotal leaders rather than the target of hierarchical change.

While the practice of capacity building acknowledges the conditions for improved learning rest within the skills of the teacher, simply providing teachers with this responsibility will not in itself bring about a change in the learning culture. Data from this study supported the notion that principals build teacher capacity when they empower and support teachers to become leaders in the building, thereby extending the base of professional knowledge within the classroom, the school, and also within larger educational contexts. This practice is a distinct shift from the concept of principal as “heroic leader - one-person with all the answers - to an approach that increases the number of people engaged in leadership roles” (Ontario Leadership Strategy, 2010, p. 9). In building teacher capacity, power and leadership are dispersed resulting in a community of learners with a deep sense of autonomy, empowerment, and personal commitment (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Thus, data from this study supported the assertion that capacity building is a powerful and influential principal practice that develops the capacity of teachers to support improvement of professional practice.

The provision of release time was a further theme identified by teachers that demonstrated strong convergence with current literature. Throughout the study, teacher participants cited and reinforced the value of release time to collaborate, co-plan, co-teach, model, or observe in others’ classrooms. Literature indicates that an essential condition to effective professional learning is sufficient time for teachers to meet regularly during the school day (David, 2009). Additionally, time constraints were identified within this study and within the
literature as barriers to the viability of effective teacher professional learning. Professional learning grounded on collaboration needs to be built into the school day so that colleagues may work together on instructional areas of need. The provision of release time transcends the more limited notions of support based on dollars for resources or specific training into more of a re-culturating process that takes into account teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and time demands, as well as the principles of shared leadership (Nelson & Slavit, 2008).

Finally, the theme maintaining focus, identified solely by principals, also demonstrated a strong convergence with current literature. In this study, principals saw themselves daily balancing competing interests for their time and attention, including balancing the important role of instructional leadership with addressing student behavior, supporting teachers at-risk, completing administrative paper work, and handling the general demands of running a school building. This finding of maintaining focus leads credence to the fact that, while principals are aware of the importance of instructional leadership, they too often find themselves in the more traditional roles of supervisor, disciplinarian, or manager rather than that of transforming teaching and learning. In order to maintain a focus on instructional leadership, principals must become adept at prioritization of instructional leadership. Without this focus on teaching and learning, as Emihovich and Battaglia (2010) so eloquently stated, school cultures that value instructional leadership will “die from benign neglect” (p. 233).

Core Leadership Practices that Support and Influence Teacher Professional Learning

The themes that are common across the three participant groups in this study were defined as core leadership practices. Through analysis of the data, four core practices were identified: establishing structures of collaboration, creating a culture of risk taking, making
learning relevant and providing opportunities for differentiation. The following section examines the convergences and divergences between select themes and the literature.

Establishing structures of collaboration was the most frequently mentioned core leadership practice by three categories of participants. It is also one of the Ontario Leadership Strategy’s (2010) five core capacities of effective leaders to leverage time, energy, and resource to generate improved student success. Within this study, examples of structures of collaboration included collaborative inquiries, co-teaching, co-planning, colleague observation, and networking. Each of these structures is a means to break down the barrier of private practice in classrooms. That is, collaborative practices provide teachers with opportunities to learn together and then apply learning back in their classrooms and thus creating coherence of instructional practices and student learning across the school. Principals who implement and model structures of collaboration actively engage teachers in the processes of teaching and therefore powerfully influence learning (Hattie, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2011).

Within this theme, the structure of collaborative inquiry was most frequently cited by teachers, principals, and supervisors. In both research and practice, collaborative inquiry is envisioned as a cyclical process that fosters ongoing dialogue between colleagues related to instructional practices and therefore student achievement (Nelson & Slavit, 2008). Participants in this study regarded the implementation of collaborative inquiry as a positive response to previously unsuccessful professional learning practices that were ineffective in changing or developing teacher practices. Collaborative inquiry was viewed by participants as sustainable, ongoing, in-depth, and engaging – a description in stark contrast to ‘one-shot’, ‘pull-out’, ‘event driven’ professional development opportunities in the past. Collaborative inquiry as an organizational, mutually adaptive approach provides a structure to develop an internal capacity
to identify emerging issues and implement school-based solutions. Collaborative inquiry acknowledges that the conditions for improved student learning rest within the capabilities of the teachers in the school. Such an approach values teacher voice, teacher perspective, and teacher expertise within the school. Thus, principals who utilize the practice of collaborative inquiry allow teachers to construct their own reforms that are valued and appropriate within their local context. Successful change is therefore individualized at the local level.

The establishment of a culture of risk-taking was identified in this research as a necessary precursor to effective collaboration. Supervisors identified principals as effective learning leaders when they built strong, respectful relationships with teachers. Strong, respectful relationships in turn created school environments in which teachers were safe to learn, explore, and make mistakes. Kruse and Seashore Louis (2009) suggested that schools with high levels of professional community and trust show significant improvements in student learning. Such learning communities require a different type of organizational structure than that found in most schools and thus safe, high-functioning, collaborative learning cultures are not naturally part of teachers’ daily work environment (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001; Nelson & Slavit, 2008). Instead, traditional structures within schools have separated and isolated principals and teachers, reducing professional discretion and therefore impeding teacher professional learning and improved student learning.

Trust-related matters in particular are complex and multi-faceted. School-based trust may be defined as

The extent to which one engages in a reciprocal relationship such that there is willingness to be vulnerable to and assume risk with the confidence that the other party will possess some semblance of benevolence, competence, honesty, openness, reliability, respect,
Understanding the necessity as well as the fragility of trust within school settings is imperative for principals. Trust is essential within learning cultures which require a high level of personal interdependence and reliance on each other. Those members of the school community who do not feel trusted are less likely to commit to the school team, thereby diverting energy away from teaching and learning and undermining solid attempts at school improvement (Walker et al., 2011). This research supports the necessity that principals continue to provide ongoing and explicit attention focused on re-culturing rather than restructuring schools in order to build safe, trusting, and respectful organizational cultures – cultures that focus on the development of authentic, collaborative relationships that impact collective teacher practice.

Making learning relevant was also identified as a core leadership practice amongst the three categories of participants. The participants defined relevant learning as learning that is applicable, practical, or essential to teachers’ current work – that is, explicitly and directly linked to classroom instructional practices. Professional learning is thus relevant, urgent, and important when it is applicable to student need and therefore teachers’ current professional circumstances. Professional learning that is embedded within the needs of the student becomes internalized in teaching practices. Relevant, rich, and meaningful professional learning is also built on current teacher knowledge. Principals thus create relevant learning opportunities when they introduce new knowledge that is applicable to a teacher’s current thinking. In other words, principals must create professional learning opportunities in which new professional learning layers onto prior layers of teacher knowledge (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). In such situations, teachers build on pre-existing knowledge as well as apply and transfer the new knowledge and learning back to their classroom.
Finally, providing opportunities for differentiation was also unanimously identified across participant groups as a core principal leadership practice. Providing choice of professional learning activities was viewed as both a path to meet classroom-based student need as well as a necessary support for teachers. Differentiation, in fact, provides the means by which principals as leaders of learning judiciously choose what facets of teaching and learning to spend time and attention (Leithwood et al., 2004). Principals who provide opportunities for differentiation engage staff in relevant professional learning, with staff engagement leading to implementation of new learning in the classroom.

The core practice of differentiation aligns closely with the research that suggested that no single model of professional learning meets the needs of all teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Rather, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) suggested that effective professional learning should be a combination of the following five characteristics: coherent, attentive to adult learning styles, goal orientated, sustainable, and evidence informed. Such an approach gives school leaders and teachers discretion in how to approach professional learning in order to meet school improvement goals. This is an example of a meaningful support mechanism that acknowledges the broad spectrum of professional learning opportunities that can have a positive impact on teacher efficacy and student outcomes.

**Professional Learning Experiences That Led to Professional Growth**

Professional growth was operationalized in this study as a combination of the following five criteria: 1) acquisition of new knowledge and skills; 2) application and transfer of the new knowledge and skills when and where appropriate; 3) improvement in student achievement; 4) enhancement of reflective practice; and 5) contribution to the learning community (Peine, 2009). It could be expected that the degree to which these characteristics are evidenced varies
between/among individuals and is based on the professional growth experience. With this in mind, participants most frequently described professional learning experiences grounded on the tenets of collaboration as fundamental to professional growth. Research too supported teacher growth enacted within collaborative settings with experiences that involve opportunities for teachers to engage as learners (Nelson & Slavit, 2008). The remainder of this section examines the data related to use of student work in relation to professional growth and the extant literature.

Teachers, principals, and supervisors described that collaborative practices focusing on the use of data and student work strongly facilitated teacher professional growth. This was a central finding in this study, as well as from the review of the literature (Ontario Leadership Strategy, 2010; 2011; Ontario Literacy & Numeracy Secretariat, 2007; 2008). In this study, participants indicated that student work personalized the professional learning experience for teachers, reinforced the relevance and meaningfulness of the professional learning, as well as creating a sense of urgency and importance. Student work (i.e., data) shifted the focus of professional learning from teacher deficit to student need. That is, when student work are the data that demonstrate that students are not getting it, teachers respond by engaging in professional learning relevant to the learning needs of those students. Levin (2010) suggested that student work (as evident through data) is an effective means of feedback to support both teacher and student growth. Student work therefore becomes an impetus for determining teacher professional learning needs. Subsequently, student work results in an increased desire for professional learning and therefore sustainable professional growth.

The analysis of data should be one of the most central activities in any re-culturing process in support of improving teaching and learning; data provide a foundation for analysis of the relationship between practice and the effects of one’s practice (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001;
Nelson & Slavit, 2008). Without data, teachers may resort to past instructional practices that may be unsupported and ineffective. Thus, a teacher’s ability to use data to improve practice is central to ensuring ongoing professional growth. Consequently, the use of student work as artifacts of the teaching process allows analysis of the relationships between a teacher’s teaching and a student’s learning or understanding. Principals play an important role in establishing expectations around the purpose and use of student work. Where principals do not make student work a priority, teachers typically are not using it on their own. The process of collaborative inquiry particularly lends itself to the analysis of data. Within this structure, data are an integral component as they are collected, and then analyzed within a collaborative setting to provide teachers with information to support learning. Such data thus drive the actions and activities of teachers, with the goal of both teacher professional growth and improved student achievement.

Research Implications

Based on the key findings of this research study, I present implications for theory practice, policy, methodology, and further research. Results from this study may provide direction for the Ontario Ministry of Education, district school board, and district leaders’ attention and time.

Implications for Theory

Much of the theory referenced in the literature related to principal leadership has focused on conceptualizations of successful principal leadership, including models such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership. Within these conceptualizations, researchers have often categorized effective leadership into specific categories and constructs (Fullan, 2002; 2008; 2011; Hallinger, 2010; Levin, 2010). Leithwood et al. (2004) have
suggested that such leadership by adjective or category often masks the more important underlying themes common to different models of successful leadership that impact learning.

The construct, leadership for learning is a model in which principals are viewed as learning leaders whose key role is to construct the learning of the adults in the school to have an impact on student achievement (Hallinger, 2010; Hattie, 2012; Whalstrom et al., 2010). This model rests on the assumption that leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context; that leadership is moderated by particular leaders’ characteristics, and that leadership does not directly impact student learning but is rather mediated by school level processes. Leadership for learning best describes the flexible leadership approach required to support teacher professional learning and provides a wide-angle lens to view the influence of principal leadership practices on teacher professional learning. Hence, leadership for learning underpins this study and is representative of the conceptual framework (Figure 1) upon which my study was based.

Analysis of the data precipitated a reconceptualization of this framework (Figure 2) for use in this particular district school board. Within this study, elementary teachers, elementary principals, and supervisors identified a great variety of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. A closer review of the data revealed a core group of common leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning, including: establishing structures of collaboration, creating a culture of risk-taking, providing differentiation, and making learning relevant. Core practices were those practices identified by each of the three participant groups. Taking into account this re-conceptualization, data from this study should
LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING
Dynamic and Reciprocal rather than Unidirectional

School Context
Location of School in School Improvement Journey

Mutually Influence

Principal Leadership Practices

Elementary Teachers
Elementary Principals
Supervisors

CORE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
Establishing Structures of Collaboration
Creating a Culture of Risk-Taking
Providing Differentiation
Making Learning Relevant

Principal leadership is exercised via relationships among individuals, groups, and settings.

Figure 2. Re-conceptualized framework
continue to be considered a synergistic result of school context on principal leadership practices and principal leadership practices on school context.

The contingency theory further suggests that principal leadership is considered dependent or contingent upon the context in which the principal works (Leithwood et al., 2004). I propose that the data from this research project reinforced the dynamic nature of this model, that is, the influence of context on the variability of principal practices that influence teacher professional learning. As such, and using the aforementioned re-conceptualized framework (Figure 2), the data from this study are representative of how elementary principal leadership practices have influenced the professional learning of teachers within the contexts of the schools in which these participants work. Consequently, the data, rather than being considered an ideal set of practices for all principals, contribute to a larger repertoire of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning from which principals have the capacity to choose based on school needs.

Thus, none of the leadership practices, including the core leadership practices that were identified, should be considered a definitive list of descriptors of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning, conceived to be suitable for all schools; this assumption would clearly fail to take into account the contextual differences in which leadership is enacted within schools and across boards. Instead, this reconceptualization allows this particular district school board to specifically consider the impact of school context on each of the identified principal leadership practices, including the core leadership practices and the influence that the identified principal leadership practices, including the core leadership practices, may have on school context.
Implications for Practice

This research revealed that a variety of themes were identified by teachers, principals, and supervisors surrounding the perceptions of elementary principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers. The most common themes identified were: making learning relevant, providing opportunities for differentiation, establishing structures of collaboration, creating cultures of risk taking, and principal as instructional leader or principal as co-learner. Themes noted less frequently included: using research, being persistent, providing release time, using data/student work, establishing core beliefs, keeping focused, being courageous, building teacher capacity, and providing feedback. At a practical level, these data can be used to support an understanding of and development of a repertoire of principal leadership practices that support meaningful teacher professional learning.

Much of the data from this study reinforced many of the structures currently in place related to principal leadership and teacher professional learning within this board and its schools. For instance, the structure of collaborative inquiry was cited frequently as a practice that supported teacher professional learning. Collaborative inquiry, focused on student work and therefore student need, is engaging, relevant, and meaningful for teachers. These data thus reinforced the continued importance of funding collaborative inquiry through teacher release time; a barrier identified by teachers to effective professional learning. These findings also reinforced the importance of using student work within collaborative inquiry to drive relevant and meaningful professional learning. Student work can become the vehicle through which teacher professional learning meets student need.

Principal as instructional leader as well as principal as co-learner were also frequently cited as principal leadership practices that influenced the professional learning of teachers.
Principals revealed that the current structure of principal meetings within this board supported the development of their instructional practices. These data thus suggest that principal meetings should continue to be structured in such a way that principals have the opportunity to experience and participate in collaborative inquiry with their peers in order to continue to develop instructional practices that can be transferred to the classroom. While principals identified the importance of being co-learners, clearing schedules to be present during professional learning was identified as a barrier. Principals noted multiple demands on their time prohibited their full presence and active involvement during collaborative inquiry and other forms of professional learning. In this board, this barrier is one that will need to be discussed and addressed at a central level if the value of having principals at the professional learning table continues to be identified as meaningful.

While teachers identified the desire to have principals involved in classroom visits and provide feedback on instructional practices, teacher participants also indicated that the presence of principals as co-learners in collaborative inquiries restricted the freedom and flow of ideas. I believe that these data highlight the significance of principals building authentic relationships with staff as well as safe, trusting, and risk-free learning environments. I would suggest that, based on this data, more time should be spent in this board at both a system and school level addressing how the development of organizational cultures can more positively support meaningful teacher professional learning.

Differentiated professional learning opportunities were also frequently cited by participants, especially teachers, as a principal leadership practice that influences teacher professional learning. Provision of differentiated professional learning opportunities was perceived as recognition of the local voices and experiences of teachers. While the structure of
collaborative inquiry was positively cited, teachers also identified a desire for further opportunity to choose from a variety of professional learning activities. Such choice acknowledges individual teacher experiences and contexts. These data thus call into question how funding for differentiated professional learning could be extended and enhanced beyond the current funding structure for that of collaborative inquiry. Finally, the data in this study indicated that providing differentiated professional learning is difficult and hard work for principals. Such an assertion suggests that the system needs to better support principals in understanding how best to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of the teachers in their buildings, within the confines of time and current resources.

Data from this study also reinforced the establishment of safe and trustful relationships between principals and teachers and the establishment of safe and respectful learning environments as a condition that influences teacher professional learning. If positive relationships are built over time (Owens, 2004), then these data lead me to consider the negative impact that frequent leadership changes may have on teacher professional learning and ultimately student success. The Wallace Foundation (2011) proposed that frequent principal mobility can have a negative impact on school culture and that “district leaders need to recognize the downside of rapid principal turnover and examine whether district policies and practices—such as required principal rotation, promotion of successful principals to central office positions or easy transfer opportunities—encourage it” (p. 3). Acknowledging this possibility may result in a change in system thinking around frequency of principal mobility. Although there is no ideal amount of time for a principal to serve in a school, a suggested time frame is five to seven years in order to counteract the negative effects of principal mobility on school culture and student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2011).
The theme of capacity building also presented implications to practice. Capacity building was identified by teachers as a principal leadership practice that supports and influences teacher professional learning. Principals built teacher capacity when they supported teachers to become leaders in their schools. The value inherent in building teacher capacity was reinforced by a perception that only some teachers were chosen to receive such coaching and knowledge to extend their instructional practices. That is, teachers expressed a desire for more colleagues to be given the opportunity to take on a leadership role and extend their personal base of professional knowledge. If, according to these data, such is the desire, both the district school board and school principals must begin to consider the current structures that are used to build teacher capacity. Currently, a very small number of teachers is chosen to participate in system wide events and then are asked to share the new knowledge and strategies back at their schools. A desire for a wider berth of knowledge precipitates the need to consider other structures of participation, to be more inclusive of a wider range of staff.

Finally, data from this study may also impact and change system-wide principal hiring practices. If, as this study suggested, there is a repertoire of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning, and if teacher professional learning contributes to improved student learning (Hattie, 2012; Robinson et al., 2008), then it may be prudent to review succession planning processes to ensure that a variety of indicators of best practice are reflected in the current board hiring structures in order to meet the variety of local school and community contexts. Such a change would recognize both principal leadership and teacher professional learning as key determinants in how schools approach and sustain successful school reform (Hattie, 2012). Such a premise also challenges the wisdom of leadership development initiatives...
that refuse to acknowledge differences in leadership practices required by differences in school contexts. Thus, this study may serve as a basis for further development of successful leaders.

**Implications for Policy**

Policy remains a powerful force within the educational system, influencing local school board decisions, especially in the area of resource allocation. Within the current context, the Ontario Ministry of Education plays a large role in constructing the parameters through which professional learning is implemented within district school boards and therefore schools. Money is provided by the Ministry to school boards through specific funding envelopes with specific parameters upon how the money can be spent. Results from this study, specifically that of the influence of release time for teachers and principals to engage in collaborative professional inquiry, the influence of teacher capacity building, and the influence of differentiated professional learning activities could be considered evidence in an effort to alter current Ministry policy to better reflect the importance and impact of sufficient funding for professional learning. In particular, teacher capacity building requires a policy commitment of funds, resources, and expertise directed towards teachers and schools for job-embedded professional learning based on student need and student work. Capacity building, as a centralized/decentralized approach to policy, would allow for a balance between external standards that press for improvement and school autonomy required to ensure internal change (Delaney, 2002).

Robinson et al. (2008) said that a “major reason for the interest in the links between leadership and student outcomes is the desire of policy makers in many jurisdictions to reduce the persistent disparities in educational achievement…and their belief that school leaders play a vital role in doing so” (p. 636). I would suggest that this study supports this premise in terms of the influence that principal leadership practices have on teacher professional learning. This study
provides a well-documented repertoire of leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning across contexts, rather than a definitive model or list of one size fits all. Such a conceptualization may very well provide a beginning framework or structure upon which policy related to principal leadership practices and professional learning can be based. The findings from this study may therefore be used by policy makers as a catalyst to pay greater attention to and to invest in principal leadership as a pathway to larger-scale educational improvements (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Implications for Methodology**

While I believe that a qualitative approach was appropriate within the context of this research study, as a novice researcher, I was frequently uncertain around my ability to accurately and efficiently collect and analyze such data. Without a pre-determined hypothesis and with the flexibility of an emergent design, I frequently felt unsure of the direction in which I and the study were proceeding. Perhaps, inclusion of a quantitative component, such as individual survey data, would have delivered data less likely open to subjective interpretation.

Although focus groups, which allow participants to expand and build upon one another’s answers seemed an expeditious and methodologically appropriate way to collect data through direct interactions with participants, concerns of confidentiality were expressed. These concerns came from the local Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) who perceived that this study put teachers at risk for principal retribution. Further, the local Ontario Principal’s Council (OPC) raised concerns that during the focus group, teachers might identify and speak negatively about individual principals. This last concern did precipitate the removal of one teacher focus group question that asked teachers to identify principal leadership practices that least influenced
teacher professional learning. Upon reflection, while more time consuming, perhaps the use of individual interviews would have assured concerns around confidentiality.

Not having run or even participated in a focus group, I initially found the focus group difficult to facilitate. As I gained experience, I began to feel more confident. By the last focus group, teachers were eagerly responding not only to the questions but also feeding off the responses of their colleagues, many of whom had never met one another before. The data collected in this focus group were detailed and rich with participant experience. This was in sharp contrast to the supervisor group, in which all participants were intimately acquainted but in which discussion was more stifled and stilted due to what I perceive as this researcher’s weak facilitation skills. This resulted in the collection of data that at times seemed extraneous to the questions in the study. I would suggest that researchers, who are not familiar with facilitating focus groups, engage in a focus group as part of another’s research and then facilitate pilot focus groups prior to formal research beginning. Certainly, my study would have benefitted from such experience.

For a variety of reasons, I choose to conduct the focus group interviews in the order of supervisors, principals, and then teachers. I choose to conduct first the supervisor focus group as I was most connected with this specific group and felt most comfortable honing my focus group facilitation skills with these colleagues. Timing also played a role. Within this particular board, there is an agreement that for two weeks prior to the reporting deadline for term 1 and term 2 report cards, teachers will not be asked to participate in after school activities. Although this project was not a district school board activity, I felt that the likelihood of teacher participation would be limited if I attempted to collect data during this period. I therefore collected data from supervisors and principals during this time frame and immediately following, I conducted the
teacher focus group interviews. I considered the last focus group, comprised of teachers, to provide the richest data, in part due to my improved facilitation skills. Having more experience in collecting data, I would consider rearranging the order of the focus groups in order to begin with teachers. The rich and relevant data collected from the teacher focus group could then be used to further probe and expand upon identified themes with both supervisors and principals.

Teachers, principals, and supervisors provided a unique perspective to this study. Supervisors spoke from both their role as supervisors as well as from their personal experiences as principals. Their unique perspective resulted in the identification of leadership practices that differed from the other two groups including using research and being persistent and courageous. Further, at a district school board level, the involvement of supervisors in this study created an awareness of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional which may impact further implications to policy, especially in the area of collaborative practices.

The inclusion of practicing principals provided a very current and practical perspective on principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Practicing principals provided a perspective which resulted in the identification of the leadership practices maintaining focus and establishing and putting into action core beliefs; practices that differed from the other groups. Additionally, the perspectives that principals provided were integral as the data from this study are most likely to directly influence principal roles and practices.

The inclusion of teachers exclusively in the study would have provided only one, albeit valuable, perspective on principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. The inclusion of three distinct participant groups provided an opportunity for comparison of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning across three distinct groups. The voices of three diverse groups of participants allowed for a deep and
rich understanding of the lived experiences of elementary principals leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning.

This study also reinforced the importance of developing research questions that provide a variety of relevant and useful data. As a novice researcher, the development of the research questions was far and away the most important yet difficult component of the research. As I began to collect the data, and then analyze the data, it became apparent that my research questions were redundant and in the instance of question two, did not adequately address the purpose of this study. In retrospect, I believe this was a case of ‘I didn’t know what I wanted to know’ until I got deeper into the research. If I were to replicate this research, I would rework some of the research questions to more deeply address the purpose of this study. Having said this, I am confident that the data that I collected, albeit limited in scope and size, were relevant and representative of the purpose of the study.

Finally, I believe that the scope of this research project could be more streamlined. A narrower, but deeper focus, would have allowed the collection of data related to a particular participant group. If I was to do this project again, I would suggest collection of data from one participant group only, possibly teachers. This group in particular expressed eagerness in having a voice as well as offering a very unique, practical, and concrete perspective on how principal leadership practices influence their professional learning and ultimately, the learning of their students.

**Implications for Further Research**

The data from this research study reinforced many of my personal assumptions related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning, including the principal practice of making learning relevant, providing differentiated learning opportunities, building
teacher capacity, and establishing structures of collaboration. Notwithstanding, a number of unconsidered factors also arose within this study which require further exploration.

One such factor is the resistance of teachers to principal participation in collaborative inquiry professional learning. I believe it beneficial to better understand whether this is a phenomenon of only those interviewed or whether this phenomenon is pervasive across the board. Such data may further illuminate the influence of culture and the creation of a culture of risk-taking on professional learning and may provide evidence as to why principal participation in collaborative inquiries is viewed negatively. Additional research in this area may provide the board with a rationale to either continue to fund structures that allow for principal release time to participate in collaborative inquiry; provide principal professional learning around the establishment of safe, risk-free learning environments or; reconsider principal participation in favor of teacher only collaborative inquiries.

Another unconsidered factor for further research is the difficulty attributed by principal and teacher participants to principals maintaining focus on instruction. In this study, principals saw themselves as continually balancing competing interests and needs for their time and attention; often to the detriment of their preferred, important work of moving their teachers forward. It may therefore be advantageous to engage in further research which addresses the influence of competing agendas on instructional leadership and ultimately teacher professional learning. It may also be advantageous to conduct further research on how best to support principals in balancing excessive workloads and competing demands, so as not to detrimentally impact time spent on instructional leadership that influences teacher professional learning.

Finally, this study would be considered small in scope, involving only one school board and a small sample of teachers, principals, and supervisors. While the purpose of this research
was not to generalize but to determine the perceptions of a particular group of participants, it would be worthwhile to consider a larger sample in order to discover further perceptions of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. Further research would provide a larger repertoire of knowledge and skills that principal leaders could choose from in order to support teacher professional learning. This information may be used by researchers and practitioners to examine the distribution of specific principal leadership practices across different school contexts and provide policy makers and practitioners with research to create the conditions to achieve the desired effects.

Through a qualitative approach and triangulation of data (Stake, 2010), I trust that the results from this study are trustworthy and credible. This research fills a gap in current literature related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning by capturing the local voices of teachers, principals, and supervisors. Thus, results from this study will extend current research findings and contribute to further inquiry of the data presented in this study.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary principal leadership practices influence the professional learning of teachers. I discovered in this study that a variety of themes was identified by teachers, principals, and supervisors related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning. The most common themes I labeled as core leadership practices – making learning relevant, providing opportunities for differentiation, establishing structures of collaboration, and creating cultures of risk taking. Themes noted less frequently included: being a co-learner and instructional leader, using research, being persistent, providing release time, using data/student work, establishing and putting into action core beliefs, maintaining focus, being courageous, building teacher capacity, and providing feedback.
These data should not be interpreted as a definitive list of descriptors to be employed by all principals. Rather, these data must be interpreted within the constructs of the conceptual framework upon which my study is based. Within this construct, principals are viewed as learning leaders whose key role is to construct the learning of adults in the school to have an impact on student achievement. This model rests on the assumptions that: leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context; leadership is moderated by particular leaders’ characteristics; and that leadership does not directly impact student learning but is rather mediated by school level process. Keeping in mind that the conceptual framework is not static or unidirectional, these data collected in this study should be considered a reciprocal result of school context on principal leadership practices and principal leadership practices on school context. Hence, data from this study are contextually relevant and useful to the school board and schools which were used in the data collection. These data should not be considered a static list of ideal practices of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning conceived to be suitable for all schools, as this assumption would clearly fail to take into account the contextual differences in which leadership is enacted. Rather, these data contribute to a larger repertoire of principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning from which principals choose, based on school, classroom and teacher needs.

This study is underpinned on the premise that principal leadership has a significant albeit indirect impact on student learning and school performance. Principals achieve this impact by shaping the conditions that build school capacity for effective teaching and learning. Although principal leadership is often seen as the catalyst for change, the research discussed throughout this paper suggests that the location of each school in its journey of school improvement creates the need for and shapes the behavior of principal leadership. Principal leadership, therefore, not
only shapes and impacts school improvement, but is also shaped and impacted by the context in which it is exercised. This research therefore enhances the repertoire of principal practices that influence teacher professional learning that principals may choose from in order to improve student achievement.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

To: [Elementary Teacher, Elementary Principal, Elementary Supervisor]

Subject: An Invitation to Participate

My name is Alison McDonnell and I am a Master’s of Education Candidate, at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. I am also a Supervising Principal in [the District School Board] with responsibilities for supervision of a Family of Schools as well as district wide responsibility for special education. As part of my role, I am interested in learning more about how principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning. Hence, I am writing to request your participation in research aimed at describing how elementary teachers, principals and supervisors perceive elementary principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers.

As part of this research, I am inviting you to participate in a focus group of [elementary teachers, elementary principals, elementary supervisors]. I have attached a Letter of Information that explains in greater detail this research and a copy of the Consent Form. A light dinner will be provided prior to the focus group.

If you would like to participate in this study, please reply to this [email address] or contact me at [telephone number] to discuss the details.

Sincerely,

Alison McDonnell
Masters of Education Candidate
Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE LETTER OF INFORMATION

“How Do Teachers, Principals and Supervisors Describe Elementary Principal Leadership Practices that Influence Teacher Professional Learning?”

Dear [Teacher Participant, Principal Participant, Supervisor Participant]:

This research is being conducted by Alison McDonnell, Masters of Education Candidate, Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to describe how elementary teachers, principals and supervisors perceive elementary principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers. I am hoping to determine a) what principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary principals, supervisors and elementary teachers to influence teacher professional learning opportunities, b) how elementary principals, supervisors and elementary teachers describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth, and c) whether from the perspectives of elementary principals, supervisors and elementary teachers there is a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning. The goal is to use these data to support the educational system in understanding and utilizing principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning and therefore improved student achievement.

What does this study involve? This study will require participation in one [teacher, principal, supervisor] focus group of approximately one and a half to two hours. Focus group interviews involve participants meeting as a group and are utilized in an effort to understand participant experiences and voices. Questions will provide the participants with an opportunity to recollect, recall and describe the ways in which elementary principal leadership practices support teacher professional learning opportunities. Focus groups will occur in a convenient geographic location for participants. Interviews will be audio recorded. There are no known physical, psychological, economic or social risks associated with this study.

Is my participation voluntary? Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without pressure or consequence of any kind. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable or that make you feel uncomfortable. If you do decide to withdraw from this study, you may request removal of all or part of your data. To withdraw from the research please contact the researcher Alison McDonnell [email address, phone number].

What will happen to my responses? Your responses will be kept confidential to the extent possible. Only the researchers will have access to your responses. The data may be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will maintain individual confidentiality to the extent possible. If the data is made available to other faculty or researchers for secondary analysis it will contain no identifying information. Data will be retained for five years after which time it will be destroyed. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.
Will I be compensated for my participation? You will not receive any monetary compensation for your time. You will be provided with dinner prior to the focus group.

What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Alison McDonnell, Masters of Education Candidate at [phone number] or [email address] or my supervisor, Dr. Ben Kutsyuruba at 613 533 3049 or ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613 533 6081.

What do I do if I am interested in participating in this study? If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at the phone number or email listed above to arrange a time for the focus group. If you agree to participate, please sign the accompanying consent form and provide it at the focus group. There will be an additional consent form at the focus group if needed. Please retain a second copy for your records.

Sincerely,

Alison McDonnell

Masters of Education Candidate

Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP

“How Do Teachers, Principals and Supervisors Describe Elementary Principal Leadership Practices that Influence Teacher Professional Learning?”

I am willing to participate in this study that aims to examine how teachers, principals and supervisors perceive elementary principal leadership practices that influence the professional learning of teachers. I am willing to participate in the focus group for approximately one and half to two hours, as described in the Letter of Information that I received attached to the recruitment email.

I have read the description of the research study and interview on the Letter of Information and retained a copy of the letter for my records. My questions have been answered, and I understand that my participation in the interview is voluntary, that I may withdraw at any time, that the information I provide will be treated as confidential, and that my identity will be protected to the extent possible. I acknowledge that the focus group will be audio taped and that audiotaped recordings of me will be used during data analysis. I understand the interview transcription will be used as data analysis in the research study.

I understand that focus group interviews involve participants meeting as a group. I agree to respect the confidentiality of my fellow group members and I agree not to reveal the identities of my fellow participants or to reveal the content of the group discussions.

I understand that I will not be expected to answer any questions that might make me feel uncomfortable or that I find objectionable. I am aware that I may withdraw from the focus group at any time without pressure or consequence. I have been notified that I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I have also been told the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible of all information.

I grant permission for any of my raw data to be used in the future for secondary analysis.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>Initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Participant’s name:  _____________________________

Signature:                 ______________________________

Date:                         _______________________________

Please sign one copy of this consent form and return to Alison McDonnell. Retain the second copy for your records.
Any questions about study participation may be directed to Alison McDonnell, Masters of Education Candidate at [phone number or email address] or my supervisor, Dr. Ben Kutsyuruba at 613 533 3049 or ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613 533 6081.

Please write your email or postal address at the bottom of this sheet so I am able to contact you with the study results.
Email or postal address: __________________________

A light dinner will be provided at the focus group interview. Please also indicate any possible food restrictions that will need to be accommodated:
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
**APPENDIX D: SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS (TEACHER)**

**NOTE:** The following are draft focus group questions. These questions will be revised and further developed based on the pilot interviews. These questions are written generically and may be adapted for use with all three focus groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
<th>Purpose of Question</th>
<th>Purpose of Study/Enabling Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. As a teacher, you each have experiences with professional development/ learning.</td>
<td>Ice breaker question/activate prior knowledge.</td>
<td>What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be interested in hearing about these experiences. Give me one word that</td>
<td>To gather data on how participants have experienced and would describe professional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>describes your experience with professional learning/development and why you</td>
<td>learning/development. To compare perceptions through a one word description.</td>
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<tr>
<td>choose that word.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Professional learning can be defined as internal processes through which</td>
<td>To gather data to establish an understanding of participants’ definition of ‘meaningful’</td>
<td>What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individuals create professional knowledge through collaborative work that</td>
<td>professional learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>focuses on teaching and learning. How would you define <strong>meaningful</strong> professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using your own experiences and perspective, what would/ or what has <strong>meaningful</strong></td>
<td>To gather data to establish an understanding of participants’ perceptions of what</td>
<td>What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional learning looked like?</td>
<td>meaningful professional learning looks like.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question</td>
<td>Purpose of Question</td>
<td>Purpose of Study/Enabling Questions</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Keeping in the mind the questions above, in <strong>your experience</strong>, what does <strong>principal leadership</strong> look like that supports <strong>professional learning</strong>? (For example, what do principals do that support or influence teacher professional learning?) Be specific by providing examples.</td>
<td>To gather data on specific principal leadership practices.</td>
<td>What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning? From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors, is there a perceived set of core principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Please describe how these professional learning experiences led to your professional growth?</td>
<td>To gather data on how principal leadership practices influence teacher professional learning and professional growth.</td>
<td>How do elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>How do you determine personal, professional growth?</strong> What ‘measures’ do you use?</td>
<td>To gather data on how individuals measure the impact or effectiveness of professional learning on professional growth.</td>
<td>How do elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question</td>
<td>Purpose of Question</td>
<td>Purpose of Study/Enabling Questions</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. As you think back to your personal experiences, please describe those principal leadership practices that you feel least supported or positively influenced your professional learning? Please explain why?</td>
<td>To gather data on principal leadership practices that were less effective in supporting or positively influencing professional learning.</td>
<td>What principal leadership practices are perceived by elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors to influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors, is there a perceived set of core principal leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. In your opinion, what Board procedures or structures impact/support/influence teacher professional learning?</td>
<td>To gather data on how Board procedures and structures impact/support/influence principal leadership and teacher professional learning opportunities.</td>
<td>From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors, is there a perceived set of core leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Thank you for being so helpful. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add related to principal leadership practices that influence teacher professional learning?</td>
<td>To provide participants with an opportunity to add further information related to the purpose of the study.</td>
<td>From the perspectives of elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors, is there a perceived set of core principal leadership practices that support and influence teacher professional learning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do elementary teachers, elementary principals and supervisors describe the ways in which professional learning experiences have led to professional growth?

Possible Probing Questions:

- Please explain further.
- Please give me an example of what you mean.
- Please feel free to add anything else.
- I would like to hear from anyone who has a different perspective.
APPENDIX E: SAMPLE CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I acknowledge that Queen’s University at Kingston (hereinafter called “Queen’s”) has in its possession, and with the authority to disclose, in confidence, certain information (“Confidential Information”) relating to specific research projects being conducted by Alison McDonnell (“Researcher”) in the field of Education. Confidential Information includes, without limitation, computer programs, discoveries, inventions, techniques, documents, data and information concerning the study or other research programs of Researcher or his/her affiliates.

The Confidential Information will be given to me in order to perform duties as a research assistant (the “Work”) related to the Researcher’s project(s). In consideration of working on such projects(s), I agree that I will keep in confidence and trust all Confidential Information and I will not directly or indirectly use the Confidential Information, nor disclose any Confidential Information to any person or entity, except in the course of performing duties assigned with respect to the studies. I agree that I shall be free to use information that:

a. Is known to me prior to the receipt of the said Confidential Information from Queen’s as evidenced by written documentation; or
b. Lawfully is or becomes public knowledge through no default of this Agreement; or
c. Is provided to me by any third party with a bona fide right to do so; or
d. Is approved for release by written permission of the Vice Principal (Research) of Queen’s University

Upon the termination of the Work, I undertake to return all Confidential Information pertaining thereto which has been provided by Queen’s and all copies thereof or to destroy the same at the option of Queen’s.

This agreement is to be effective upon the date of signing, and shall be interpreted and construed in accordance with laws of the Province of Ontario, Canada.

By: ______________________
Dated at ___________ this__________ day of ________________, 20__.

Witness: _______________________

Please retain a copy of this agreement for your records and provide one to Researcher.
APPENDIX F: ETHICS CLEARANCE LETTER

Queens

September 25, 2012

Ms. Alison McDonnell, Master’s Student
Faculty of Education, Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen’s University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-633-12; Romeo # 6007360
Title: “GEDUC-633-12 How Do Teachers, Principals and Supervisors Describe Elementary Principal Leadership Practices That Influence Teacher Professional Learning?”

Dear Ms. McDonnell:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “GEDUC-633-12 How Do Teachers, Principals and Supervisors Describe Elementary Principal Leadership Practices That Influence Teacher Professional Learning?” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or an unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty Supervisor
    Dr. Don Klinger, Chair, Unit REB
    Erin Wicklam, Dept. Admin.