

Educators Engaging in Philosophical Conversational Spaces: Participatory Action
Research as a Model for Initiating Change

by

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Abstract

This study examined the impact that the establishment of a philosophical conversational space would have on a group of participants and their school context. Specifically, the research questions focused on what effects this participation would have in terms of motivation and morale, sense of professional community, and also its effect upon teaching practice in the classroom. In addition, the study sought to determine in what ways educational institutions can be recreated to include meaningful spaces for philosophical inquiry and critique. This study is informed by critical theory and thus views research as an opportunity to critically analyze the ways in which educational institutions function. Using participatory action research as a methodological foundation for the study allowed participants to play an integral role within the research project. Several themes emerged from the research. The first theme highlighted the importance of the diversity of the group and the sense of community that developed through the study. The second theme identified the importance of using philosophical texts to initiate critical reflection and the interrogation of each participant's teaching experiences within the school while inspiring possibilities for change. The third important factor to emerge was the way in which participatory action research facilitated the creation of a space in which participants experienced a sense of agency while working together to develop an action plan within the context of their school community. The research suggests there is great value in the creation of conversational spaces that utilize the resources of educational philosophy. It also highlights how participatory action research can be a valuable vehicle in the development and initiation of such spaces in which participants

can experience a greater sense of agency as they pursue opportunities for personal growth and institutional transformation.

Preface

This thesis is the original work of the author, G. D. McDonald. It has not been previously published and has received approval from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Certificate of Approval- Minimal Risk

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In Search of Meaning, in Search of Community, in Search of Change

Teaching is a complex and challenging profession. Despite the challenges of becoming a classroom teacher, from the time I began teaching thirteen years ago I have had a strong sense of the great importance of what I was doing in the classroom each day. Where did I develop this foundation and passion for teaching that carried me through to where I am today?

During my time of “training” in the teacher education program at UBC I learned about the practical aspects of teaching, such as unit planning, classroom management and assessment, for example. However, the course that I found most inspiring was the Philosophy of Education course that explored the aims of education. The discussions in this course dealt with the grand ideas of what we were to be accomplishing as teachers; these were the philosophical ideas that undergird our practice and help guide and direct why we do what we do in the classroom. These discussions imbued meaning and purpose into the practical aspects of teaching, which were such a large component of that year of “training.” We were encouraged to explore a multiplicity of ideas that challenged our perhaps narrow, or naïve, sense of what it means to be a teacher. The richness of these discussions remains a vivid memory for me. Upon entering the classroom as a new teacher, facing the struggles of a complex and challenging job was made more manageable by having a well-developed philosophical foundation. This philosophical foundation, facilitated by my reflexive practice, enabled me to persevere through those difficult first years.

I was inspired by the ideas that allowed me to see the amazing role I could play in young people's lives as their teacher. I was faced with the realization that, as a teacher, I was not only responsible for my students' academic development but also for the building of democratic ideals in my students, the development of their character, as well as critical thinking skills and ecological awareness, to name just a few ideas.

Ironically, now that I was teaching in schools, I realized how little opportunity there seemed to be to discuss and enter into philosophical conversations about these inspiring and foundational ideas. Discussions about the ideas that seemed so important to my practice (the why of what I was doing) seemed to have very little place in the life of school. Of course, much coordination and communication occurred around the practical aspects of teaching, such as school activities, class organization, and even curriculum planning; however, discussions about the broader aims of what we were attempting to accomplish in our classrooms or as a school community were absent from my experiences.

Like many new teachers, I had the opportunity to teach in a new school each year as I worked towards a more permanent position. I was able to experience many school environments in a rather short period of time. Although I did have some very enriching professional development opportunities, often these took place outside the school environment and did not involve the group of colleagues with whom I worked on a daily basis. Professional development activities also seemed to focus on the practical aspects of teaching rather than the philosophical and rarely touched upon the aims or purposes of education.

Throughout my twelve years of teaching, I have only rarely had the opportunity to explore and deepen my understanding of the philosophical questions related to my role as a

teacher. Unfortunately, open discussions about the contradictions and differences that guide our practice and form the philosophical foundations of what we do in the classroom each day has not been a prominent part of my experience.

The choices we make as teachers, the ideas we emphasize or minimize, the words we use, the lessons we teach and how we respond to students: each is guided by a particular philosophy of education, and yet this remains a hidden, often unaddressed aspect of the curriculum. Varying ideas and beliefs influence the way teachers and students perform and interact in this world of words. “Each of us, because our biographies, our projects, and our locations differ, encounter the social reality of everyday from a somewhat distinctive perspective, a perspective of which we are far too often unaware...Clearly it takes critical reflection upon our own realities to capture such awareness. It requires a wide-awakeness too many people avoid” (Greene, 1978, p.17). All too often, the aims of education remain unaddressed and implicit in how schools function; there is much work to be done uncovering “the why” of what we do in schools every day.

What educators are doing in schools is on the one hand complex and varied, and yet on the other hand it may appear basic, or even common sense, and so it is often left to unexamined assumptions. For example, one could be led to assume that the purpose of education and schooling is solely to prepare students for their futures in the work force, to equip them with the skills and attitudes necessary to be successful in the world they will inhabit as adults. Yet beneath the surface of this assumption lie some important philosophical questions about the nature of education. These include questions such as, what values and attitudes will best prepare students for their futures and who decides what these are? Or what role does critical thinking play in preparing students to not only inhabit the

world they inherit but to also be able to question and deconstruct it while possibly re-envisioning an alternative reality?

Perhaps the paradox of this seeming simplicity, and yet underlying complexity, causes educators to leave aside the philosophical pursuit of questions related to the purpose of education. Or perhaps there are simply not enough opportunities to engage in philosophical inquiry in order to get beneath the surface of what we are doing as a school community. Although the curriculum, school growth plans, and professional development workshops do provide teachers with an avenue from which to build the foundation of their practice, very little opportunity seems to exist in which to examine or critique the philosophical underpinnings of educational practice itself.

With this absence I began to question what would happen if these philosophical conversations were happening more regularly: what effect on teachers and the school organization would such conversations have? When I think back to my experiences in my Philosophy of Education course, and then again during my graduate studies with its emphasis on looking beneath the surface of things to better understand our role as educators and leaders, I realized how motivating and enlightening these ideas were for me.

As I approached the research design of this project, I wanted to know how the creation of such conversational spaces would affect the following: teacher motivation and morale; teaching practice in the classroom; and a sense of professional community.

In light of the above, the purpose of this participatory action research (PAR) was to investigate the understandings that might be gained by providing educators with a conversational space to explore the aims of education through the discussion of philosophical texts. Through careful analysis of this philosophical conversational space, including its

formation, direction, and impact on the participants, the main research questions became: What impact (if any) will structured philosophical conversations have on teachers' morale and motivation, their teaching practice in the classroom, and their sense of community in the school? In addition, the research attempted to broaden the understanding of how educators can create meaningful spaces for philosophical inquiry specifically looking at how such spaces can be initiated and facilitated by educators themselves.

This study was inspired by the work of David Coulter and John Wiens (2008) who articulate the need for the development of spaces to explore the meaning and aims of education. Coulter and Wiens in their efforts to reinvigorate a public discussion around the aims of education, found that they were "sitting on educational gold mines and hadn't realized it" (p. 302). In other words, opportunities to discuss the meaning of education abounded in the regular life and routine of the school organization, and in the meetings that were already regularly structured into the timetable; for example. "We concluded that each meeting, including those that happened on the spur of the moment, provided an opportunity to discuss education" (p. 302). The decision to act merely needed to be made in order to take advantage of the moments already available.

Following this example, this research project aimed to put some of the above ideas into practice by inviting educators to participate as co-researchers in conversational groups to explore the aims of education through the use of particular texts that presented various philosophical themes, ideas and questions. This study hopes to address a gap in the empirical research in this area by demonstrating how such spaces can be created and what affects they can have on educators and school organizations. This research attempts to better understand the possible contributions of these philosophical conversations to teachers'

morale and motivation, teaching practice in the classroom, and sense of community in the school, while also examining how such spaces can be initiated in order to positively affect educational institutions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Many scholars argue that schools should be places where people have an opportunity to question and reflect upon what it is that they are doing and who they are as individuals (Cullingford, 1991; Greene, 1978; Ryan, 2003). The idea that schools should be places for questioning, for conversation, for dialogue and critical examination of our world is not a new idea: “There ought to be places where questions are provoked, where people can begin to speak together in their own authentic voices, to learn how to engage in conversation and, at once, how to think with clarity and precision” (Greene, 1978, p.79-80).

The need for such spaces within schools is clearly articulated by a range of scholars. Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014) explain that “People are not only hemmed in by material institutional conditions, they are frequently trapped in institutional discourses that channel, deter or muffle critique” (p. 12). Greene (1978) observes that, “I am convinced that, if teachers today are to initiate young people into an ethical existence, they themselves must attend more fully than they normally have to their own lives and its requirements; they have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual, even in what they conceive to be virtuous, and ask the “why” with which learning and moral reasoning begin” (p. 46). Asking why is fundamentally important to the task that we are engaged in as educators in terms of bringing ourselves and our students into greater awareness of how we are at once shaped by, and yet also, shaping the world around us.

Greene goes on to say:

“Therefore, I believe it important for teachers, no matter what their specialty, to be clear about how they ground their own values, their own conceptions of the good and of the possible... Teachers need to be aware of how they personally confront the unnerving questions present in the lives of every teacher, every parent: What shall we

teach them? How can we guide them? What hope can we offer them? How can we tell them what to do?” (p.47)

The deep thinking imbedded in these questions can be facilitated by bringing educators together in conversation around these important educational ideas.

Exploring such questions receives support from Gibson (1986) who points out that, “Through self-reflection and collaborative action, educational practice can be improved as practitioners overcome distortions of thought, processes and relationships” (p. 163). This approach is further supported by Kemmis et al. (2014) who explain how current thinking within critical participatory action research is focused on “the revitalization of the public sphere, and to promote decolonization of lifeworlds that have become saturated with bureaucratic discourses, routinised practices and institutionalised forms of social relationships, the characteristic of social systems that see the world only through the prism of organisation, not the human and humane living of social lives” (p. 12). This citation further highlights the importance of participatory action research projects that encourage and support the interrogation of social reality. And yet, in the hectic life of schools, finding time for self-reflection and critical examination does not happen naturally.

In fact there are great pressures that seem to lead us in completely different directions often preventing critical reflection, especially collective reflection. Cullingford (1991) notes:

Teachers are busily submerged in the day-to-day problems of the school. They are delivering a given curriculum with a huge apparatus of assessment procedures. They are therefore spending exhausting hours keeping up with marking and the classroom organization, making sure attainment targets are met... This leaves little time or energy for shared reflection. (pp. 159-160)

Some scholars have argued that instrumental rationality has dominated much of modern society including schools with “the desire for efficiency taking preference over human aims

of education” (Gibson, 1986, p. 148). Instrumental rationality has created a great tension in education with its constant push for greater efficiency, accountability and control. Stein (2001) argues that this obsession with efficiency “has come to dominate our conversation about public goods” (p. 45). Stein argues that a focus on efficiency alone is in fact deficient and misguided because “efficiency does not tell us where to go...only that we should arrive there with the least possible effort. Efficiency is about how we should allocate our resources to achieve our goals, not what our goals should be. What our goals are, and how much we value them, is properly outside the language of efficiency” (p. 68). Due to this emphasis on efficiency that seems to dominate the modernist world, a strong argument can be made that it is absolutely crucial we deal with the philosophical foundations of where we wish to go and what goals we wish to set: “Without a discussion about goals, and the values that inform these goals, we cannot even begin to talk about efficiency” (Stein, 2001, p. 70). This uniform focus on efficiency is problematic in terms of education. “For the cast of mind conditioned by instrumental rationality ...is only concerned with ‘how to do it’, with technical efficiency. It is not concerned with fundamental questions of ‘What is it for?’ and ‘Whose interests are being served?’” (Gibson, 1986, p.154). In contrast, the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to understand and promote an exploration of these fundamental questions of great importance. We should start and then maintain a conversation, remaining focused on addressing these questions of educational importance rather than solely focusing on fiscal concerns related to efficiency.

To further this point, Stein (2001) argues that as the state pursues efficiency and accountability it becomes important to determine standards for which public services will be accountable. He claims “that if we do not want to leave the determination of the terms and

meaning of accountability exclusively to the state, citizens must join with experts and professionals in public discussion about the shape and substance of the standards that will be at the heart of the exercise of accountability” (p. 81).

To that end, Coulter and Wiens (2008) more specifically call for the development of public spaces for conversation saying that they are necessary in order to ensure a wider and more democratic participation in a conversation about the meaning and aims of education (p. 298). Their attempts to create these spaces for dialogue around the aims of education provide several practical insights into the value and purpose of this research project.

Coulter and Wiens explain that “attempts to renew the conversation about education in a democratic society need to be grounded in an understanding of public and private spaces for dialogue” (p. 298). Before entering the public realm of discussion, where all stakeholders would be able to participate in a democratic way, Coulter and Wiens describe the importance of creating private spaces that would function as safe places of preparation for a more public appearance at some later time (p. 304).

Education is inherently a political realm where diverse and occasionally disparate ideas clamor for influence, at times with great conflict. Many stakeholders have an interest in how schools operate (students, parents, educators, politicians, and other community members). In this high stakes political realm, public participation may seem difficult and even dangerous. In light of this, Coulter and Wiens note that before such public and political engagement occurs, private spaces of safety can be developed in order to prepare for later participation in a more public way. This distinction between the public realm and the private is an important one to make because it shows that if a public democratic space is to be created in which the broad ideas of education are able to be discussed, debated, and then acted upon, then first a

diversity of private spaces should be developed. This would allow people an opportunity to prepare, as it were, to perhaps emerge in a more public forum. This research project represents this first step in creating a private space where educators can explore their ideas around the aims of education.

It seems clear from the literature that spaces for addressing the deeper meanings and aims of education are needed. But what effect would these spaces have on schools? And in what form and in what ways can such spaces be initiated? Ryan (2003) suggests several ways that administrators can help their school communities facilitate greater critical reflection, through the use of the arts, for example: "...artistic forms can also prompt educators, including administrators, to step back from the press of daily life and look at it in new and different ways. Literature and various representational forms of art can accomplish this in ways that social scientific studies cannot" (p.176). The use of philosophical texts for this research project represents an alternative, or rather additional, approach to that of using the arts, as described by Ryan (2003) to stimulate questioning and critique.

Furthermore, I argue that there is a need to articulate what these spaces could actually look like and how they could function in schools. This participatory action research represents an important step towards implementing such a space while also reflecting upon its impact, direction, and formation throughout the process. It is hoped that the findings generated by the study (including the story of the project itself) will add to the literature in terms of demonstrating how these spaces impact educators and their contexts, how these spaces function in schools, and how they may be initiated by educators. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by creating a self-reflective conversational space for educators to engage in collaborative and critical inquiry within a particular school

community.

As previously mentioned, this research was informed by the experiences and knowledge of Coulter and Wiens (2008) as they attempted to create such spaces for dialogue about education. As they moved forward with initiating these conversational spaces, often they were met with puzzlement as to the intentions and purposes of these conversations. Participants questioned whether there was a “grand design” or an underlying purpose or agenda, when in fact their intended goal had been conversation for the sake of conversation and dialogue itself. “We hoped to create a genuine dialogue in which all would share their understanding of education so that collectively we could better understand. Unanimity or even consensus was not only unlikely, but also undesirable...” (p. 303). This confusion was something that they had to address while working towards mutual understanding and trust.

As Coulter and Wiens persisted in the development of private spaces in order to discuss the aims of education and in which “the only agenda was dialogue in order to understand better”, they observed some remarkable consequences: “better decisions, better responses to school problems, increased confidence and a renewed sense of common purpose (“we’re all in this together”), less seeking of localized advantage or personal gain” (p. 305).

In terms of school leadership, Coulter and Wiens (2008) argue that, “while administrative power can be used to squelch democratic dialogue, under some conditions it can also be employed to promote public dialogue” (p. 306)... “where [educators] can develop their understanding together – and then support them as they go public with other people who may have different perspectives, different ways of seeing the world, different notions of a good and worthwhile life and how it might be fostered” (p. 311). In this way educational leaders including school administrators could use their power within the

organization to promote such spaces of public and private dialogue.

James Ryan (2003), in his discussion of how leaders can develop critical awareness and a more inclusive leadership approach, argues that “if administrators want to ensure that they and their teaching staffs engage in the practice of reflection, then they must find ways to build opportunities for it into their daily routines” (p. 175). This idea can be linked to Ryan’s (2003) discussion of leadership and critical theory as being “concerned first and foremost with promoting social justice. In doing so, it [school leadership] looks to improve the welfare of the of marginalized and excluded people” (p. 15). He explains that one implication of a more inclusive approach to education is that educators “need to develop a commitment to power sharing in schools. In doing so, they will extend to students, teachers, parents and local communities, joint responsibilities over the process of education” (p.17). Ryan “conceives of leadership as a communal process – one in which all members of school communities are involved or represented in equitable ways” (p.18). In this view educational leaders and administrators would be promoting spaces for dialogue, critique, and power sharing.

However, one could argue that to hope for this kind of educational leadership and organizational change to take place within a rigid and centrally-controlled educational bureaucracy, is to wait in vain. So what then could be the response of educators who desire such change?

Perhaps another way is necessary in order for educators to come together in meaningful and powerful ways. Perhaps the best place for this to happen would be beyond the limitations of the organizational structure and beyond the purview and control of institutionally sanctioned leadership. As Parker Palmer (2007) states:

Constrained by organizational assumptions, people with visions for change expend their energies trying to persuade the authorities to see things another way. If it works, it is a fine strategy. But it often backfires: the authorities withhold their blessing, the visionaries feel betrayed, and an energy sink of resentment is all that remains...reformers are likely to jump ship and sink in a sea of despond if the organizational approach to change is all they know. (p.171)

Parker Palmer outlines how social movements can bring about change from outside the constraints of the organization itself. The first step in this process of change is when individuals take action refusing to be subjugated any longer by a system that they perceive as not meeting their needs or their need for change. “It happens when isolated individuals who suffer from a situation that needs changing decide to live ‘divided no more’ ” (p. 173). The first step is to refuse to remain as you were, divided from your passion and desire; instead an individual acts to resolve this division. In a second stage as described by Palmer, “people who have chosen the undivided life...come together in communities of congruence whose purpose is simply mutual reassurance” (p. 179). Palmer explains that upon coming together, individuals may discover that they need not be limited by the institutions that they inhabit; they take control of their lives while joining together with others of likeminded intention. In order to pursue a more meaningful life than the one experienced within the constraints of modern institutional life, individuals who are a part of a social movement find ways to come together to enact the change they desire regardless of systemic barriers.

I draw on Palmer’s (2007) approach to social movements and change in order to locate this research within the possibilities for action and change as captured by Coulter and Wiens (2008). The use of participatory action research as a methodology is an important aspect of this research as further explained in the research design chapter of this work. PAR supports a process that can happen within or outside the organizational structure. In this way, it fits

both with the work of Palmer (2007) and that of Coulter and Wiens (2008) by providing a method of research that facilitates the creation of conversational spaces in a way that honours dialogue, critique, and democratic principles of participation. Through their participation in this project, participants had the opportunity to “explore their work and lives as socially constructed formations that may need to be transformed if their work and its consequences are irrational, unsustainable or unjust” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 12). It is clear that there is a need for further understanding of how the integration of spaces for critical and philosophical inquiry can affect school organizations.

This research provides a model of action whereby educators initiated a process of critical engagement with their educational practice despite a lack of institutional incentives: participants engaged with the project outside the confines of the organization and of their own free will and motivation. In this way, the project provides a model for action for other educators while also addressing a gap in understanding within the literature in terms of what effect, if any, such conversational spaces could have on school organizations and the educators who choose to participate.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how this project was conceptualized, as well as how the findings were interpreted and analyzed, it is important to have an understanding of the theoretical framework that serves as the foundation for this work. Critical theory has had a major influence on how I understand the world, informing how I view the aims of education and the direction of this research.

The central theme of critical theory is one of emancipation: “enabling people to gain the knowledge and power to be in control of their own lives” (Gibson, 1986, p. 2). Gibson elaborates: “That [emancipation], after all, is surely the purpose of education itself” (p. 2). He argues that both education and critical theory have a common purpose:

Both have as central aims the concern to develop understanding of the world we inhabit. Both are concerned to pursue truth and to remove ignorance, to enable individuals and groups to have greater control over their own lives by participating effectively in decisions which affect them, to realize their potential and to achieve a more just society. (p. 41)

In the following quote Kincheloe & Steinberg (2002) describe critical awareness while similarly connecting it with the pursuit of social justice in terms of addressing inequality:

If we think in the most simple way what critical consciousness is, what we are talking about here is the ability, to understand the world, understand the structures that shape it, how the structures interact with everyday life, and shape the nature of how the world works... we can understand how the world works... [and then] we can come up with interventions within it where we can address issues of inequality. (p. 22)

An important assumption, therefore, within critical theory is that there are forces at work that oppress and limit human freedom and that this happens in complex and often hidden ways.

The concept of hegemony is an important aspect of critical theory’s attempt to expose and

interrogate social reality: “Hegemony refers to the ideal representation of the interests of the privileged groups as universal interests, which are then accepted by the masses as the natural political, and social order” (Orlowsky, 2011, p. 2). Critical theory attempts to raise awareness of these dynamics while addressing the inequalities created by hegemonic mystification in what can be called a counterhegemony and resistance to power.

“Counterhegemony refers to the illumination of so-called universal interests as partisan interests that help the elites garner even more social, political, and economic power” (Orlowsky, 2011, p. 2). A process of critique is therefore necessary to bring to light these hidden or obscured dynamics.

This view of the world, therefore, has a great impact on how education and educational leadership are conceived. Foster (1989) states that “leadership is fundamentally addressed to social change and human emancipation, that it is basically a display of social critique, that its ultimate goal is the achievement and refinement of human community” (p. 48). Ryan (1998) claims that critical approaches to leadership “unlike managerial perspectives, emphasize the importance of taking action that will eliminate the kind of inequitable social conditions that give rise to ... oppressive situations” (p.258). He expands these ideas further by stating that leaders should exert a significant amount of energy and time seeking out “forms of domination and subordination and the ways in which they work through individuals” (p. 275). Educational leadership should therefore act in ways that help illuminate these processes in an attempt to address issues of social injustice and inequality.

Similarly, Gibson (1986) notes that, “Critical theory is not merely explanatory, but is committed to enabling change towards better relationships, towards a more just and rational society” (p. 2). Just as participatory action research posits that people should have control

over the direction and focus of the action research, critical theory also asserts “that individuals and groups should be in control of their own lives, it has as its goal that people should be able to determine their own destinies” (p. 2). Greene (1978) also argues that it must be recognized that individuals have the capacity to affect change and to participate in ordering the world according to democratic principles “of freedom, justice, and regard for others” (p. 70).

My desire to engage in philosophical inquiry and exploration has been partly based on the idea that critical theory “radically questions taken-for-granted assumptions and familiar beliefs, and challenges many conventional practices, ideas and ideals” (Gibson, 1986, p. 2). In order to get beneath the surface of what we take for granted and to address those things that may have become part of hegemonic systems of belief, it is necessary to approach things with critical examination. Often the ideas we take for granted influence us without our conscious awareness. For example, one’s philosophical understanding of his or her role as a teacher will greatly affect the actions she takes, day in and day out. And yet often we carry on in our beliefs and actions without critical examination. Through the exploration of philosophical texts the co-participants of this study were able to explore ideas that perhaps we had only looked at in a commonsense way before, if at all.

Critical theory directs us to deal with “the taken-for-granted assumptions of family, classroom, workplace and friendship relationships” (Gibson, 1986, p. 11). As the co-participants and I encountered the variety of texts in this research project we were challenged to see things differently, to address the way that we perceived our role as educators in relation to each other, our students, and the aims of education. As we met to discuss these articles and in our efforts to understand each other while critiquing and exploring the various

themes throughout the project, we were thereby addressing commonsense notions that we may have held.

And yet, freeing oneself, and others, from the matrix of meaning (hegemony) that we are born into and influenced by on a daily basis is not an easy proposition. Hence the need for critical thinking, philosophical questioning, and a reluctance to ever stop this process of critique. This assumption undergirds this research project in its attempts to create space for philosophical inquiry and conversational spaces in schools.

The work of Maxine Greene as a critical theorist also emphasizes the critique of social reality and its importance for the educational endeavour. Her ideas provide a context for understanding several important aspects of critical theory and how it connects with this research project in terms of how this research was established and brought forth. Her work inspired much of my interest in critical theory and was instrumental in the development of the critical lens from which this research project was conceived; she clearly illuminates many of the important aspects undergirding a critical approach to education including the interrogation of social reality and the demystification and emancipation of the oppressed.

Greene (1978) explains how an understanding of education and pedagogy as a means of examining and exposing multiple interpretations, can thereby bring emancipation to a greater number of people living within our society's nexus of constructed meanings and constraints. She explains that "critique involves an interrogation of some surface reality... a de-mystification, the object of which is to liberate – for *praxis*, for self-fulfillment, for awareness, and a degree of happiness" (1978, p. 54). In her chapter entitled *The Matter of Mystification*, she refers to the ideas of R.S. Peters stating: "my concern is with the creation of the kinds of conditions that make possible a critique of what is to be taken to be "natural,"

of the “forms of illusion” in which persons feel “so completely at home,” no matter how alienated they are or how repressed” (p. 54). Through critique her purpose is to open up spaces for greater individual freedom so that people may pursue the kind of lives that they themselves deem meaningful. Her hope is that through education people will be able to envision and take hold of a greater degree of freedom and agency, despite the constraints of societal mechanisms of hegemonic control. Hegemonic constraints have the effect of limiting individual freedom and the possibility for alternative meaning making within our world. Therefore, Greene encourages and demands that the critique of social reality is something that happens in an ongoing dialogue and questioning conversation within education and society at large. “The crucial problem, I believe, is the problem of challenging what is taken for granted and transmitted as taken-for-granted: ideas of hierarchy, of deserved deficits, of delayed gratification, and of mechanical time schemes in tension with inner time” (p. 70).

Maxine Greene sees the established order of the world, and the mystification that it produces, as something worthy of critique on a number of levels, including the political, the economical, the social and the psychological. Therefore, schools should become more than institutions whereby “their traditional presumption of a “normal” world and an official meaning-structure, have not only emphasized the givenness of what is taught... (but also) customarily neglected distinctiveness of viewpoint” (p. 70). In light of this “interpreted” nature of reality, schools should become places where individuals can begin to see the possibility of a world other than what lies before them. She suggests that “(i)t may be possible to help students transform information into knowledge if teaching were to take place in a context of open questions, questions finding differing kinds of expression...” (2007c, p.

3). However, Greene notes that all too often schools reinforce positivist notions of reality (1978, p. 61). Therefore, educators are needed “whose main interest is in interpreting – and enabling others to interpret – the social, political, and economic factors that affect and influence the processes of education” (p. 59).

In Greene’s discussion of teacher education, she suggests that educators “must be enabled to look through the perspectives opened by history, sociology, anthropology, economics, and philosophy.... They must learn to understand the role of the disciplines, the role of organized subject matter in selecting out aspects of reality” (p. 59). This understanding of how knowledge is produced and transmitted in the context of the classroom and through the curriculum is crucial if educators are going to be able to critically reflect on the effects of their actions. Greene further elaborates on this point explaining that critique is a crucial component within education due to the fact that the bodies of knowledge, or “constructs of knowing” as defined by particular disciplines, often get passed on in schools in a way that makes them “reified...and given an objective life of their own” (Greene, 1978, p. 60). Without a concerted effort by educators to stimulate critique “the disciplines are likely to be used for domination, for *fixing* (ib.) the vision of young people on a reality others have defined” (p. 60).

In response to this concern, critical theory encourages educators to find ways to interrogate how knowledge is formed while understanding that our identities are constructed in a complex social, historical, and political matrix. This requires a commitment to philosophical inquiry and critique, recognizing the incompleteness, and, therefore, possibilities for change within our world:

There are always unanswerable questions, and because they are presently unanswerable, the need for new perspectives, freshly minted methods, the persisting

overhang of doubt, the unlikelihood of any final proof. And the ongoing questioning, the vibrancy of dialogue. (Greene, 2007c, p.3)

Educators and students must therefore develop a philosophical mindset where individual perspectives are valued, uncertainty is embraced, and a willingness to ask questions and critically examine ideas is the norm. It can be assumed that schools should become places where there is a recognition and exploration of the way that we come to know what we know in terms of persons with complex histories and backgrounds that affect the way we see and interpret the world:

It is important to hold in mind...that each of us achieved contact with the world from a particular vantage point, in terms of a particular biography. All of this underlies our current perspectives and affects the way we look at things and talk about things and structure our realities. (Greene, 1978, p. 2)

It is necessary, therefore, to interrogate our own perceptions while we endeavor to understand what influences and effects our way of seeing the world.

With its emphasis on critical awareness and transformation, critical theory was a key component of this participatory action research project. In Maxine Greene's words: "I am interested in trying to awaken educators to a realization that transformations are conceivable, that learning is stimulated by a sense of future possibility and by a sense of what might be" (1978, pp. 3-4). In addition Rexhepi & Torres (2011) note: "Critical Theory provides valuable research for use by policyholders and stakeholders in education that can help advance a clearer and more compelling agenda for social research by incorporating ethical concerns and projects for social transformation into educational research and practice" (p. 693). Kemmis et al. (2014) also explain the practical importance of ensuring that the interrogation of our perceived reality occurs. In the pursuit of social justice it becomes clear that such a critique is necessary:

The structures and practices of schooling, for example, sometimes include ways of thinking and saying that are irrational, ways of doing things that are unproductive or harmful, or ways of relating to others that cause or maintain suffering, exclusion or injustice. The student who suffers bullying in a school, the student whose life experience is not recognised by a sexist curriculum, the student who is indoctrinated into irrational beliefs, the student whose life opportunities are diminished by forms of teaching that serve the self-interests of one particular group at the expense of others—all endure untoward consequences wrought by conduct and conditions that are in need of reconstruction. In critical participatory action research, the aim is to explore social realities in order to discover whether social or educational practices have such untoward consequences. It does so by opening communicative space (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) in which people can reflect together on the character, conduct and consequences of their practices. (p. 16)

As this research project developed I contemplated if perhaps these kinds of transformative spaces and actions were possible. Could change be possible as educators made a commitment to philosophical inquiry and critique?

As the PAR began and the philosophical conversational space progressed, the educators involved began to engage in critique on a number of levels while beginning to address many of the issues articulated by Greene (1978) and other critical theorists (Foster, 1989; Gibson, 1986; Orlowsky, 2011; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011; Ryan, 1998; Watkins, 1998). Critical reflection, philosophical inquiry, and the importance of taking action in ways that can make a substantial or “real” world difference, are each important components of this research project and its theoretical and methodological foundations.

Building on the above, a key component of this research project has been to document the consequences of facilitating conversational spaces for educators within the organizational structure and hierarchy in which schools operate. This present study sought to determine how the lives of educators would be affected in terms of their sense of professional community, motivation, and teaching practice. Would exploring philosophical texts allow these educators the opportunity to engage critically with each other around

relevant educational themes and thereby initiate institutional change? In other words, would a heightened sense of critical awareness emerge from their engagement with philosophical texts and the weekly group conversations? And would this critical awareness lead to some sort of systemic change as a result of their involvement in a participatory action research project?

Chapter 4: Research Design

Participatory Action Research

This research project draws specifically on participatory action research (PAR) as well as the ideas from action research in general. The unique design of this project, including its innovative use of focus group methods is based on the structure and tenets of PAR. PAR's democratic approach to involving the participants in the research directly, and its focus on initiating and impacting change, made a PAR methodology a good fit for this project. PAR allows participants to play an active role in the research process, as well as its articulation and analysis. It seeks to resolve an issue or problem that teachers face in their school. "It is research into their schools and classrooms by teachers who are committed to their practice through the process of self-reflection and collaborative action" (Gibson, 1986, p.162). It is clear that with PAR it is important to acknowledge the contributions of participants and to involve them closely in the research process while also working to bring about some kind of change or plan of action.

These important aspects of PAR demonstrate how it is "an essentially participative and democratic process that also contributes to the empowerment of people" (Snoeren, Neison & Abma, 2011). Glesne (2006) notes that: "Increased sensitivity to issues of power and authority has encouraged a rethinking of research design and implementation. In traditional inquiry, as practiced by both quantitative and qualitative researchers, authority for research decisions resides with the researcher. This position is challenged by critical, feminist, and action researchers who raise questions about research purposes, researchers' responsibilities, and researcher-researched relationships" (p.14). These principles helped shape the

democratic design of this project including helping to define the role I would play as researcher and co-participant while also shaping what role the participants would have as co-researchers.

Focus Groups

This participatory action research (PAR) study involved focus group methods. This was determined to be the best method of data collection because it allowed all the participants to come together weekly to engage in a collective conversation. The choice to use a focus group format was intended to facilitate thoughtful conversation, thus aiding in the critical goals of this participatory action research project. Glesne (2006) observes that, “Focus group research can also have emancipatory qualities if the topic is such that the discussion gives voice to silenced experiences or augments personal reflection, growth, and knowledge development” (p. 104). The intention of the focus group was to give voice to a diverse group of teachers as they engaged with thought-provoking philosophical writing. These meetings occurred without a preconceived agenda. In fact the participants played a key role in initiating and directing the conversation and analysis.

The focus group met for one-hour sessions five times (over a period of four weeks). Additional time was allotted for the first and the final session, since these sessions involved discussing the overall aims and effect of the research project, while also taking time to develop a plan of action. Below, I will first describe how the focus groups were employed in this project, with greater detail provided later as to the process each particular focus group session used.

The focus group meetings were held in the English department office of the school

usually during a lunch break. Longer sessions were possible when classes ended in June and teachers had more flexible schedules between invigilating exams. Each focus group session involved participants having read a particular philosophical text and then attempting to engage with the topic introduced by the author of the text; the focus group provided a space for participants to have a conversation in response to each particular scholarly text.

Participants sought to discover areas of relevance and meaning in terms of their own practice as educators. They also contemplated what action these ideas could be leading the group to take as part of the action component of the research.

Each text related to a particular theme or topic that was connected to the aims of education. The philosophical texts provided included: a focus on conceptions of ourselves as educators, our teaching methods, the teacher-student relationship, and how students experience and interpret the meaning of school. The specific texts that were used for the study are outlined below.¹ All texts for the project were distributed in a single package at the start of the research.

Each text was used to trigger conversation in a meaningful way while engaging the participants with the topic for that session. Participants felt that the short length of many of the articles that were used in the project was appropriate. With participants who were all practicing teachers with limited free time, the short texts allowed the group members to engage thoughtfully around a number of relevant educational issues while not demanding a

¹ The texts for this research project were chosen from articles that had had an impact on me personally in my own studies. It is important to note that these texts come from primarily Eurocentric literature. The use of different texts from other fields of literature would have its own unique and interesting affects on a conversational group and the actions that they choose to take especially with regard to issues of marginalization, oppression, and colonization. Determining what texts to use within a particular context is an important consideration for a group to undertake as they move forward in philosophical inquiry.

huge time commitment outside of the group meetings. The readings provided a touch point from which the conversation emerged; however, the conversation was not limited only to the content of the articles. The participants read the text before the meeting, and then engaged with the author's ideas, sharing thoughts and questions while letting the conversation develop without an agenda: conversation for the sake of conversation while also identifying areas of potential action.

Focus Group Discussion Topics and Activities

The following texts and activities were used at each of the focus group sessions:

Session 1 - Formation of Participatory Action Research Focus Group

Topic: "Wide-awakeness and critical thinking" – Focus on ourselves as educators

The first half of this session involved the participants exploring the aims and process of the research project. A brief overview of participatory action research and its associated terms had been discussed with individuals when they first signed up for the project and were given the information package. This first meeting was another opportunity for participants to seek clarification and to give input into the research project. They were each asked to explain their motivation and desire to participate in this project including what they hoped to gain from the experience. They were also asked to provide ideas that they may have had about how to make the research project more relevant to them in terms of content, process, or in terms of other ways they felt the project could be organized to meet their needs. In this way, their voices about what they hoped to get out the experience helped shape the research process. In addition, the results of an online Teacher Perspectives Inventory (Pratt and

Collins, 2001) were discussed in order to begin a conversation about our various and individual perspectives on teaching.

Questions for discussion included:

1. What is your motivation for joining this research project (what do you hope to gain from this experience)?
2. Do you have any ideas about how this research project could be made more meaningful to you and your educational practice? This could be in terms of content, process or any other ideas you may wish to contribute.
3. How often do you have opportunities to engage in meaningful connections with your colleagues around issues of educational importance to you? In what ways does this happen?
4. How do you interpret and explain the results of your TPI?

The second half of the focus group meeting involved a discussion of the following text by Maxine Greene.

Text:

Greene, M. (1978). Wide-Awakeness and the moral life. In *Landscapes of learning* (pp. 42-52). New York: Teachers College Press.

This chapter was chosen as a starting point for the focus group as it brings up interesting questions connected to the very purpose of the focus group as an attempt to become more critically aware: how do we wake ourselves up from the routine and regularity of our jobs or from the isolation and compartmentalization of how we are organized in schools? “It is far too easy for teachers, like other people, to play their roles and do their jobs without serious consideration of the good and the right” (p. 46). This article is a call for deep thinking and

critical awareness; it was a great catalyst for initiating philosophical conversation within the group leading into the subsequent sessions.

Session 2

Topic: Focus on our teaching methods and approach

Text:

Freire, P. (2007). Banking v. problem-solving models of education. In R. Curren (Ed.), *Philosophy of education: An anthology* (pp. 68-75). Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

This chapter was originally published in Freire's (1970) book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

In this text, which was the focus of our second session, Freire challenges common notions of teaching in terms of depositing knowledge into students rather than equipping them with and initiating them into a critical mindset. He poses an alternative focus for educators while conceptualizing the aims of education beyond merely the passing on of knowledge (an unfortunately all too pervasive metaphor for how teaching can be conceptualized). The text allowed participants to examine the ways in which they think about teaching and their aims as educators. It also brought up a certain amount of conflict as we grappled with whether Freire's critique of education applied to the Canadian context today and if education in the Canadian system is also "suffering from narration sickness" (Freire, 2007, p. 68).

Session 3

Topic: Focus on our teacher-student relationships

Texts:

Noddings, N. (2007). The one-caring as teacher. In R. Curren (Ed.), *Philosophy of education: An anthology* (pp. 372-376). Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools* (pp.174-175). New York: Teachers College Press.

The first of these texts was included in the third focus group as a way to focus on the special relationship that teachers have with their students. Noddings (2007) describes the way that the act of teaching above all else embodies a relationship in which the teacher treats the student as one “cared-for”. Therefore, “Everything we do, as teachers, has moral overtones” (p. 374). Our awareness of and focus on the moral nature of the student-teacher relationship is highlighted by this article.

This text was chosen to encourage the focus group to ponder the teacher-student relationship and to think about the ways a school organization, or other aspects of teaching, disrupt, distract, or inhibit (or enhance) this relationship. Noddings asks the reader to think about the ways that a school “can be deliberately designed to support caring” (p. 376). With so many pressures, each pushing us to focus on different aspects of teaching and education, this article provides a different focus upon which to conceptualize the aim of education in terms of caring for the other.

A short second article by Noddings (1992) was also included for discussion. In it she presents a concise list of practical ways schools could be restructured if caring was recognized as one of the primary aims of education. It provides thought-provoking questions that have the reader interrogate taken for granted assumptions about the way we organize schools and what we prioritize. For example, Noddings suggests keeping students and teachers together for several years and keeping students together where possible. These practical ideas suggest different ways that schools can be structured and conceptualized. This article allowed the group to explore many ideas both theoretical and practical while

looking specifically at the aims of education that shape our school's culture and organizational structure; this allowed us to look critically at our school organization in terms of what values and ideas shape our actions and processes.

Session 4

Topic: Focus on our students' experience of school: education as preparation for the economy and jobs.

Text :

Cullingford, C. (1991). The purpose of schools. *The inner world of school: Children's ideas about schools* (pp. 159-172). London: Cassell.

This text which was used to begin our fourth session, makes the point that “discussing the purpose of schools is not part of the curriculum” (p. 159). Despite the diverse aims that may guide teachers' practices, because these are often left implicit in what teachers do, students are left to internalize the more dominant view (and the one often maintained by parents) that school is about “preparation for profitable employment” (p.162). This article was chosen to prompt discussion around the idea that despite conversations about the aims of education that may occur between educators, unless we bring these conversations back to our classrooms, the dominant view for students will remain that school is primarily about achievement on tests and preparation for the economy. This article was chosen for the final focus group because it looks specifically at how schools do not explicitly address the aims of education, thus also exploring the consequences of this absence. The article encouraged participants to continue their examination of the aims of education while also taking this conversation into the classroom. The article suggests that the rich discussion about the aims of education will remain subordinate to the economic aims of education unless it emerges within classrooms

and classrooms.

Session 5 - Summative focus group assessment

Topic: Focus on our experience of this research project

In this final session, the focus group discussed the overall experience of the research project and shared observations they wished to make based on the results of the second Teaching Perspectives Inventory (Pratt and Collins, 2001). The use of this second TPI was originally intended to spark conversation about how our conceptions of ourselves as educators may have changed as a result of our participation in this research group. The TPI had also been incorporated into the research design in order to document changes in the participants and to provide a degree of quantitative data. In other words, the TPI was partly intended to measure what effect the group participation had had on the participants. The changes that were noted in the TPI lead to a rich discussion about how both our group conversations and the articles we had read may have affected the way the participants read the TPI survey questions in this second TPI. However, the TPI became less important to the group in terms of a quantitative measure. This was perhaps due to the fact that the second TPI results remained fairly consistent for each participant. Analysis of the TPI results became overshadowed by the group's desire to delve into the development of an action plan. The TPI became, therefore, primarily a means of entering into a self-reflective, conversational space rather than a means of quantifying the effects of our group participation. The quantitative contributions of the TPI were left aside as participants described qualitatively what their experience in the research had involved. In turn, the group focused on describing the experience of participating in the project in order to bring out

important themes and practical suggestions about what worked well in the project and what could have been changed.

This last session represented the culmination of the research project and an important part of the data collection and analysis as it was the last occasion that the focus group met together. It should be noted, however, that throughout each focus group session the participants also described what impact their overall experience of the participatory action research project had on them. The summative group assessment represents the culmination of the data collection and analysis process that had been ongoing since the first focus group meeting at the beginning of the research project's formation.

A discussion about the overall aims of the project and its personal impact on participants was an important focus of this session in an effort to address the research questions. However, a large component of this last session involved planning and discussing the future direction and action that the group would take. As a PAR project, participants went through the process of co-creating the outcome and analysis of the project at this final stage. A good part of this meeting was spent developing a plan of action in terms of how to proceed the following year with the idea of a teacher network.

Questions and topics addressed in this final meeting included:

1. What was the experience of participating in this focus group like for you?
2. Was the research process meaningful to you? What, if anything, would you change if you were to be involved in a future project of this nature?
3. How do you interpret and explain the results of your most recent TPI? How do the results compare to the first time you completed the survey? Do you see the

results having a connection in any way to the discussions we have had?

4. Which of the articles most resonated with you and what did you take away?

What language or framings did you connect with and how does this affect your thoughts about this group and its impact (if any) on you?

5. Is there anything else you wish to comment on as a participant in this research?

Focus Group Process

Upon receiving informed consent and as part of an introductory activity planned for the first meeting, participants were asked to take an online survey called the Teaching Perspectives Inventory or TPI (Pratt & Collins, 2001). This survey collects information about the participant's beliefs and ideas about teaching and then reports the data back in a variety of charts and visual mapping formats. "The *Teaching Perspectives Inventory* can help you collect your thoughts and summarize your ideas about teaching. It can be useful in examining your own teaching as well as helping clarify the teaching views of other people" (Pratt and Collins, 2001). This information was used by the participants during the first focus group discussion as a means of triggering conversation and analysis around the ideas that undergird each participant's teaching philosophy. Participants were also asked to retake the TPI just before the last focus group. During the last session participants shared their observations, having compared the information from the original TPI in order to assess if there had been a change due to their participation in the focus group discussions. Critical examination of the data from the TPI was a part of the analysis and again used to stimulate conversation and personal reflection in regards to each person's participation in the group. The use of the TPI on two occasions was a useful way to focus the conversation upon how

they had perceived changes to themselves as a result of participating in the conversation group. The first focus group meeting was a way to begin the conversation about the aims of education and the underlying ideas that form the foundation of our teaching practices. This first session was an important lead into the subsequent focus group meetings as we began a process of personal interrogation, meaning-making, and relationship development within the group.

At several points during the focus group discussions participants were given the opportunity to reflect upon and assess the overall experience of the research project and its affect upon them as individuals and as a group. In this way the group remained self-reflective and focused on our needs as co-participants in the study. As the facilitator and co-participant this was an important part of my role, to ensure that adequate time was spent not just discussing the ideas of the particular texts but also focusing our analysis of how the group was developing and where we saw it going next in terms of a possible plan of action.

Recruitment Process

This study took place at a secondary school of just more than 1100 students within the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. This school serves an urban population of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to protect the identities of the participants further description of the school site will not be included unless it directly relates to the discussion or issues later presented, and in which case the information is carefully represented in order to ensure confidentiality. Only limited description of the participants biographical information will be given in order to protect their identities and only as needed to support and explain important ideas relevant to this study.

The recruitment process involved inviting educators who had an interest in exploring educational philosophy and the aims of education; they were asked to participate in this focus group participatory action research. A letter of invitation was sent out to all teaching staff at the school in hopes of attracting a group of approximately 5-6 participants in order to keep the focus groups to a manageable size where all participants would have an opportunity to speak and be heard. An effort was made to access a variety of people including those not well known by the researcher. By opening the invitation to all the educators within the school, my hope was that the project would draw a group of people who had a personal interest in this work. This invitation letter provided potential participants with an explanation of the research project including its general focus and goals while outlining the research process. Respondents were asked to take part in five focus group discussions in which they would participate as co-researchers.

A group of five educators signed up to participate, although in the end only four were able to attend most of the meetings. The size of the group was appropriate for the goals of this qualitative study. It enabled a small group of people to share their ideas in conversation within an intimate setting in which all were able to have adequate time and opportunity to speak.

The final group included three women and two men (including myself).² Initially there was one other man who had signed up to participate but as the vice-principal (in his first year at the school), he was often unable to attend and only made it to the first meeting. The women included an experienced counselor who had taught for almost 20 years; another

² The details about the participants are somewhat limited due to my ethical obligation to protect their identity. When using quotes from participants a decision was made to not identify who is speaking, even with pseudonyms, as a means of further protecting anonymity.

was an English teacher with 13 years experience. Both of these women had taught at this school for a number of years. The third woman was a new science teacher on temporary contract at the school. She had had 2 years of teaching experience. The other man in the group was also a newer teacher in the Technology department. I as the last participant have just over 10 years of teaching experience in both the elementary and high school settings and was just finishing my second year in the English department at this school. This small group generated a rich source of information from which the research findings emerged. The diversity of the group in terms of teaching experience, faculty associations, and time within this particular school community was important to the learning experience of the group. Each person brought their own interests and reasons for getting involved in the project.

Those who were interested were asked to make contact by email confirming their interest in the project. Those who made contact were met with individually and presented with further information about the project as well as given the opportunity to ask questions and give input. At this meeting each person was given an information package including the topics and texts that had been chosen for the focus group meetings. At this time they were also given the appropriate informed consent forms which were signed and returned within one week of the first meeting. In what could be called “the inclusion phase” (Snoeren et al., 2011), participants were introduced to the project and asked to share their thoughts on how it would unfold. “The inclusion phase starts at the very first contact and concerns membership. The aim is to challenge and support people to contribute, and to clarify the inquiry task and the meaning of the inquiry” (p. 3). Using the first meeting with potential participants as an opportunity at the very beginning of the project for the participants to clarify the research purpose, and to offer suggestions about the direction of *our* research, was an important step

towards greater inclusion of participants as co-researchers and members of a participatory action research project.

The Role of Participants as Co-researchers

This research project was designed so that each participant played a significant role in knowledge generation and analysis throughout the research process as well as in determining the action that would be taken by the group at different stages of the research. The inclusion of the participants in the research design is an important aspect of this project as PAR. The researcher and the participants related to each other as co-researchers and co-participants in search of a deeper understanding of how we make sense of our practice and how these conversations affected us as educators. Participants played an active role in helping me generate the data through the series of focus group conversations. They also took part in identifying themes that emerged from the conversations while analyzing our discussions and verifying their thoughts with each other. This self-reflective analysis took place three particular times during the course of the project including an extensive discussion on the last day we met as a group.

McIntyre (2008) describes the PAR process in terms of a non-linear, recursive process “fluidly braided within...a spiral of reflection, investigation, and action” (p. 6). In this way, an important aspect of the focus group discussions was an analysis of the focus group itself. This metacognitive shift allowed the participants to analyze not only the personal and professional meanings of each particular text, but also what effect their individual participation in the focus group was having on them as individuals and as a group

throughout this process. In other words, an important aspect of the conversation was the time that we spent looking at how things were going with the group: what was working, what needed to be changed, and what was being experienced as a result of this conversational space.

As a PAR project, the data emerged from the interactions between the participants as they critically reflected upon the ideas within each particular text as well as those ideas presented by the other participants. In this way, participants were able to express their deeply held values and ideas about teaching, as they found similar or contrasting views in the texts under examination or in the words of the other participants.

The collective process of this research allowed the participants themselves to verify the data as it was generated through discussions. This kind of member check provided a unique form of triangulation in terms of the participants sharing their individual perspectives while then being challenged or confirmed in their view of things by the other participants. Triangulation occurred as each participant articulated their experience of the research, and their perspectives on the research questions, while then hearing responses from others in the group, to either confirm, and or, build upon their ideas, or to critique and challenge them. As the participants shared their analysis while receiving critique from the other participants, ideas were clarified and refined by all collectively in a dynamic conversational process. The participants played a significant role throughout the research in terms of analyzing what was happening in the group and what affect their participation was having in the group.

My further in-depth analysis of the resulting transcripts was an important part of the overall research process which added a secondary level to the triangulation of data and the

research findings. Triangulation was an important aspect of the research design: “The value of triangulation lies in providing evidence such that the researcher can construct explanations of the social phenomenon from which they arise” (Mathison, 1998, p. 15). Mathison (1998) notes that: “In practice, triangulation as a strategy provides a rich and complex picture of some social phenomenon being studied, but rarely does it provide a clear path to a singular view of what is the case” (p. 15). In other words, the purpose of triangulation is not necessarily to come up with a verifiably singular interpretation of the data. Triangulation provides a more thorough picture of the situation despite its complexity.

In terms of this project, detailing the emergence of significant themes from the data through thematic analysis was an important part of how the findings were generated. Despite the complexity of this process, the multi-layered triangulation built into the research design allowed for a valuable story to be told. Although, assuredly, the findings do not represent “a singular view of what is the case”. Hence this research like all research is only a partial picture.

Not only were the co-researchers and co-participants of this PAR involved in analyzing their participation in a philosophical conversation group in a self reflective way, but they also considered what actions they could take within the context of their own classrooms, the school organization, or within the wider educational community as the research came to an end. As a PAR project, the hope was that participants would decide to pursue some of the ideas from the shared philosophical discussions from this study and initiate more sustained actions within the school. In fact, a guiding principal of PAR is that it works towards some kind of substantive change or impact. McIntyre (2008) explains that: “Participant-generated actions can range from changing public policy, to making

recommendations to government agencies, to making informal changes in the community that benefit the people living there, to organizing a local event, to simply increasing awareness about an issue native to a particular locale” (p. 5). Glesne (2006) describes action research in terms of “the researcher work[ing] with others as agents of change” (p.17). In this way the project had a specific focus of change, seeking to alter the current reality of the school organization by providing a philosophical conversational space.

This aspect of PAR allowed the focus of this project to go beyond merely documenting the participants’ experiences and perceptions. PAR allowed the group to conceptualize themselves as action-takers in control of any future action that would be meaningfully taken by the group. The possibilities were endless. In the end a concrete plan of action was developed by the group. The participants determined a course of action for themselves based on many of the themes and ideas that emerged from our conversations.

Building on the above, a centrally important aspect of a participatory action research approach is its merging of theory and practice. Unlike other forms of research that see theory as something to be applied to practice, “both action research and critical theory challenge this approach as they urge the fundamental indivisibility of theory and practice. Theory is *in* all practice, is grounded in it” (Snoeren et al., 2011, p. 162). In this way, participatory action research brings together theories and practices while recognizing that educators have within themselves a great deal of knowledge and wisdom worthy of exploration. The dialectical relationship between theory and practice was an important aspect of analysis for this research. The theoretical and practical informed each other throughout the research process, culminating in the development of an action plan created by the group during the final stages of the project. This plan is outlined in more detail in the

following chapter.

Challenges and Considerations when Using PAR

Despite the richness offered by a PAR approach, there were also challenges and important considerations. For example it is noted that: “Ideally, stakeholders participate as actively as possible in the entire research process as co-researchers” (Snoeren et al., 2011).

However, McIntyre (2008) also notes:

Although the ‘ideal’ PAR project may include participants who participate in *every* aspect of the project... It is unlikely that each party, individually or collectively, can or will participate equally in a PAR process. Nonetheless, the process by which individuals participate in PAR holds the most promise and the most potential in a participatory process. It is there, in that dialectical process of investigation and consciousness-raising, that participants rethink positions, imagine new ways of being, acting, and doing, and grapple with the catalytic energy that infuses PAR projects. (p. 31)

Including the participants in the process of defining and shaping the research project involves complexity and challenge; it takes being open and flexible to new ideas and being willing to allow the project to go in new and unanticipated directions as participants make the project their own. “Building relationships and engaging with others is crucial within action research. The researcher is challenged to keep a balance between distance and proximity, to approach situations open-mindedly and to value and see clearly the beliefs and values of oneself and those of others” (Snoeren et al., 2011). This consideration guided my facilitation of the group as well as my representation of the data in the findings. It was important for me to keep in mind that although I was a co-participant, I had to ensure that my ideas and interpretations did not dominate those of the other participants; all voices needed to be represented.

My role as co-participant and researcher was one in which I carefully considered my influence and effect on the project and its results. I needed to consider how to attempt a degree of impartiality as I facilitated the focus group discussions while also participating in the generation of ideas and knowledge. This, however, was not problematic in that I was able to develop my role within the group as a co-participant on equal grounds with the others. And although I acted as a facilitator for the group discussions, once things got going the group took on a life of its own and I was able to maintain my role as both researcher and co-participant. With this complexity in mind, a qualitative approach allowed me to bring my role as a researcher into the overall research process without fear of compromising the findings. With a qualitative approach my own investment in and interpretation of the research becomes an important focus of the data analysis and findings.

However, my role in this research also represents an important limitation in terms of the degree to which this project truly represents participatory action research. Despite my best efforts to include the participants in every aspect of this project, in order for me to meet the institutional requirements of my graduate studies program, I was required to present the research in a format that seems to undermine the foundation of a PAR project. For example, institutionally, I was required to represent the research as the sole author. I was also required to present the information and findings and to defend the process within the formalized structure of a thesis defense. This limited the possibility of this project being “purely” PAR (if such ever exists), although important elements of PAR form the basis of this work. Although participants were invited to attend the thesis defense, a more active role in the final stages of this process was limited. Having the participants involved with the transcribing and analysis of the transcripts, as well as the writing of the final thesis report would also better

represent a PAR process. However, the time constraints and the commitment of the participants to undertake such a role was not possible given their already heavy work loads. It is consolation to know that upon completion of the research project, the participants maintained control over the actual workings of the group as it existed in real time and within the context of the research site, their school. In this way the project ownership was left in the hands of the participants, as it should be within PAR. The control of what happened next was entirely up to them; this is true despite the above mentioned limitations in terms of my representation of the research findings within a formalized institutional structure and despite the inability of the participants to be more fully involved in the final stages of the research. They were empowered to take the project wherever they wished, regardless of the representation of this work in the form of a single-authored thesis document.

It is clear that despite the challenges in facilitating a participatory action research project, the benefits of this approach provided significant depth and complexity to this study.

Process for Data Collection and Analysis

The focus group conversations were audio recorded for my further analysis after the last meeting of the focus group. These recordings documented the group discussions as related to each philosophical text as well as the analysis that occurred throughout the research process by the participants. The time consuming process of transcribing the focus group discussions verbatim was a valuable part of the research. After reading through the transcripts and making notes and outlines of the structure of the conversations, a more detailed coding of emergent themes was possible.

This process of data analysis reflects what Cresswell (1998) describes as the data

analysis spiral in which after gathering a mass of information a process ensues that “involves winnowing down the data, reducing them to a small, manageable set of themes” (p. 144).

Through a process of colour coding and grouping the ideas from the transcripts, identification of various themes became apparent. For example, red highlighting was used to identify those conversations that related to the theme of “change”, green for the theme of “fear and control”, whereas blue highlighting identified ideas relating to the final action plan.

In terms of a multi-layered spiral approach there were several important steps within the data analysis of this research. The first involved the very structure and design of the research project as participatory action research. Kidd and Krall (2005), referencing Reason (1994), explain that “PAR is, ideally, a process in which people (researchers and participants) develop goals and methods, participate in the gathering and analysis of data, and implement the results in a way that will raise critical consciousness and promote change in the lives of those involved—changes that are in the direction and control of the participating group or community” (p. 187). They also explain the functioning of a PAR approach using McTaggart’s (1997) work, stating that “PAR can be understood to be a self-reflective spiral composed of multiple sequences of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing” (p.189). However, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon (2014) point out that more current understandings of the PAR process demonstrate that it can be even less linear and sequential than what had been described in their previous literature:

Interrogating our practices through critical participatory action research doesn’t always follow a neat progression of steps. It certainly doesn’t follow the usual steps of research design familiar in conventional scientific research that appears to start with articulating a research question, forming an hypothesis, arranging experimental or observational conditions that allow us to test the hypothesis, collecting ‘data’, analyzing results, and arriving at an interpretation that links the new findings into a research literature. (p. 6)

In fact they go on to argue that what “we called ‘a spiral of cycles of self-reflection’ or ‘the self-reflective spiral’ over-simplified the process, and, we now think, gave too much significance to the individual steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning (and so on) and their reiteration” (p. 9). They argue that this construct of the research process gave too much authority and emphasis to the researcher’s role as expert guide in the process rather than understanding the PAR process as one that is complex and unpredictable because it remains in the hands of the participants themselves. In this way they argue that “the research should be the responsibility of participants alone, though participants also remain open to receiving assistance from outsiders where it is useful” (p. 9). With this in mind, the construct of spirals of reflection remains a helpful visual representation of what happened as the group moved forward through stages of discussion and self-reflection. It is equally true that as a new researcher myself, this role of co-researcher and co-participant was not difficult to take on; I had the belief from the beginning that this project was something that would be built together with the participants rather than on my “expertise” as a researcher.

The above references from the literature on PAR show that this kind of research need not be strictly structured, but should by necessity embody flexibility as participants maintain the opportunity to take control of the PAR process. This demonstrates the high degree of respect that PAR places on the participants’ perspectives and their power throughout the research process. It also highlights the need to be willing to embrace the complexity and ambiguity of a research process that gives power and authority to participants as the research unfolds. In light of this, it was important that participants played an active role throughout the process to analyze what affect their participation had in relation to the research questions.

In other words, time had to be given to closely examine what the participants were experiencing through the project while asking them to take control of where they wanted it to go next. This first level of analysis added not only to the conversations that we were already having but it allowed the transcripts to speak with even greater authority as to the perspectives of the participants.

A second spiral of analysis was facilitated by the focus group process in which the participants could share their views and then these could be built upon, refined or interrogated by others in the group. In a sense the group discussion added another level of analysis to this project. A third spiral of interpretation came with the transcribing of the whole text. Subsequent readings and note-making provided another opportunity to interpret the data as themes emerged. As in Cresswell's (1998) model of the data analysis spiral, the final spiral of analysis occurred through the representing of the research findings in this thesis report.

Throughout the interpretation process it was important for me to distinguish my own perspectives from those of the participants, thus, allowing me to see participants' responses in ways that went beyond my own thoughts. In other words as I was transcribing, I attempted to hear what the participants had to say with fresh ears, so to speak. The investigation attempted to understand, from the participants' comments and analysis, what impact the five focus group discussions had on the participants in relation to the research questions (motivation, teaching practice, and sense of community while also looking at how such spaces for philosophical inquiry could impact educational institutions).

In addition, my own experience of the research project as a participant in the group provides an important aspect of self-reflection that contributes to the research findings and

data analysis. My role as researcher and co-participant throughout this process provides a valuable opportunity to explore how this intersection of roles affects the research process while adding to the insight gained.

Limitations

The use of focus groups can have particular limitations. For example, certain individuals, perhaps depending on the social dynamics or as conversations develop, may feel less comfortable in a group situation than in a one-on-one interview. In this regard, Glesne (2006) observes that, “Although the discussion may generate new ideas as people explore their experiences and perspectives, it may also silence some people whose ideas are quite different from the majority of those speaking” (p. 104). One challenge of facilitating these groups was to ensure that all voices had an opportunity to be heard as much as possible. Awareness of this as facilitator of the group was something of which I had to be quite conscious. Some participants had much more of a tendency to speak freely, and sometimes at length, while others needed to be encouraged to participate or to be given space to do so. The extent to which participants felt shut down or silenced, ignored or misinterpreted, cannot be fully ascertained; however, there was a conscious effort to include each participant while encouraging active participation by all the group members. There were also regular discussions about how our differences of opinion actually added to the experience of the group. This was another way that people may have felt bolstered to share ideas that may not have been in line with what the majority was expressing. In fact there were many times when differences of opinion were expressed by each of the group members.

Another limitation with focus groups is noted by Glesne in that “you can not expect to get as in-depth information from any one person as with individual interviews” (p. 104). There is simply not the time in a group conversation to go into one person’s perspective as deeply as in a one-on-one interview. Although these are valid limitations when using a focus group approach, considering the methodology of a participatory action research project with its focus on creating collaborative change, and also considering the synergy of ideas that was generated by the group discussions, these limitations were not overly problematic for this project. In fact a rich source of information was generated by the complex interactions within the focus group. McIntyre (2008) explains how knowledge generated through co-construction by the participants, adds to the richness of a study:

It is by participating in critical dialogue, in discussions in which people agree, disagree, argue, debate, are affirmed for their views, and challenged for their views that participants truly experience the ‘aha’ moments that come with self- and collective scrutiny. It is that type of participation that provides space for people to reflect on what is being discussed in the group sessions and then, upon reflection, to take the necessary steps to improve their current situations. (pp. 31-32)

Another limitation could include the extent to which my role as co-participant and researcher affected my ability to participate in and lead the focus group discussions while also attempting to experience and interpret the data without significant bias. Glesne (2006) claims that: “The participant observer’s role entails a way of being present in everyday settings that enhances your awareness and curiosity about the interactions taking place around you. You become immersed in the setting, its people, and the research questions” (p. 70). I was challenged to maintain and capture this kind of focused research approach, maintaining an awareness of both my own experience in the group while also focusing on the participants. Glesne (2006) further elaborates that: “One way of testing if you are being

there appropriately is whether you find within yourself a growing determination to understand the issues at hand from the participant's perspective. This indicates that you have been able to suspend your personal judgments and concerns" (p. 70). Finding the balance between incorporating my own experience of the research project while also seeing and interpreting the experience of others remained an important aspect of the research design and data analysis process.

A significant limitation to the research findings was the fact that the research was being conducted at the very end of the school year. June is an unusually busy time of year in the life of schools, a time when many educators may feel tired, exhausted, and ready for their summer break. However, having the research occur in June affected the experience for the participants in some interesting ways that may not have been anticipated. In fact participants felt encouraged by the content of the discussions and the engagement they were having with their colleagues. So despite being at the end of a long school year, the project served to invigorate them with new ideas and an opportunity to dream about the upcoming year, perhaps in ways that would not have been possible in the middle of the year. On the other hand, the timing of the research made it difficult to examine how this conversational space would affect the teaching practice of the participants in the classroom. With classes ending shortly after the formation of the group, there was simply not the time needed to reflect on the content of our conversations while then initiating changes in the classroom; the timing made it impossible to explore how these conversations might have affected classroom practice. This became a significant limitation of the research in terms of being able to comment on how this project affected the teaching practice of the participants. It does highlight, however, the need for further long-term study on this aspect of the research.

Ethical Considerations

Special attention was given to issues of ethical concern such as how to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Participants were assured that every effort would be made to ensure their privacy. In order to provide limited confidentiality, participants were encouraged to neither discuss nor share the views of other participants that were expressed within the context of the focus group. Of course this could not be completely controlled by the researcher, however it was thoroughly and regularly discussed as part of the research process. Participants were assured that every effort would be made to protect their identity within the written documents of the research. For example, even pseudonyms are not used to identify particular participants and reference to biographical or identifying information has been limited in the presentation of this research.

An ongoing effort has been made to include the participants in the research process from start to finish and to value their contributions. Participants were directly involved in the analysis of data throughout the research process, and the research findings are primarily based on this analysis. In order to share the findings with the participants they were invited to the defense presentation, although they were unable to attend. A copy of the final research manuscript will also be shared with the participants. These aspects of the research design represent an effort to include the participants in the entire research process.

Chapter 5: Emergent Themes and Actions

Researching and documenting this conversational space in which educators voluntarily participated in a participatory action research project has been a remarkable journey. The story of how this group developed and progressed is a key component in the research findings. The findings demonstrate how a group of educators at a particular school experienced the project and how it changed their lived reality within the school community. It also tells a story of how this group of diverse people took upon themselves the ownership and control of the group in order to set future goals and an action plan that would see the group transform in its purpose in order to meet the needs of the group and the school community, and all in a way that could not have been predetermined from the start.

As described in the research design chapter of this work, participatory action research provides a collaborative approach to data collection and analysis that allows participants to take part in both generating and analyzing the data of the research. Participants were asked to stop and reflect on their participation in the group on three different occasions throughout the project. Upon completion of the focus groups and in my role as primary researcher, a variety of themes were coded by repeated readings and close analysis of the research transcripts. From the self-reflective discussions within the focus group, as well as those discussions directly related to the philosophical readings, three main themes emerged from the extensive data collected over the course of the focus group meetings.

The first theme to emerge was in regards to the strong sense of community that developed within the group and the importance of the relationships within this diverse group of people as a means of providing solidarity and a vehicle for change. This was especially

noted due to the marked contrast that this represented from what the participants had been experiencing before the formation of the group: compartmentalization and isolation had been the norm of our experiences with regard to philosophical conversations and critical engagement in the school.

The second theme to emerge was the importance of the philosophical texts in initiating and sparking our questioning, critique, and our dreaming of new possibilities for our lived reality within our school environment.

The third and related theme was how having taken part in participatory action research, we began to feel a sense of agency and possibility; we felt empowered to work together to initiate a plan of action that was self-determined. This PAR process was an important means through which the participants began to see themselves as meaningful actors and initiators of change.

A Community of Diversity and Depth Develops as the PAR Process Unfolds

From the very beginning, comments were made by participants about their ongoing desire for opportunities to gather and share their pedagogical and philosophical experiences and questions in meaningful ways. They were thankful to be a part of this group in which this need was being met. On numerous occasions the issue of not enough time being allocated for meaningful collaboration within the system was brought up. And yet, there was a very apparent desire for the kind of meaningful and engaging conversation that was experienced between colleagues as we discussed educational philosophy. “I think one of the things that did attract me to this group in general was just seeing who would show up and what they have to say. I am really curious about what other people think. And so that has

been huge for me.” This enthusiasm was rooted not only in a desire to share our passions for teaching, but also to learn (to be known and to know other people in greater depth).

There was a strong desire for a relational experience with colleagues that centered around important ideas related to our teaching practice. As we reflected on the experience of being in this group and the wish to get others involved in order to hear their perspectives on things, one participant noted:

I think really sitting down and figuring out your philosophy on education every once in a while, because I believe it changes, is good. And if you are able to explain what you do... we all get so caught up in our classrooms, and we have said this before, I don't know what you're doing and you don't know what I am doing, and we are in the same department so we kind of have an idea but you only get a bird's eye view of what is happening in someone's classroom. But if someone can come back and explain it to you, I almost think it will make you feel more comfortable with that person because you have that knowledge. And even just walking past their classroom, there is just a comfort that is created in how we are all teaching, and perhaps teaching really differently, and just the knowledge of that is really comfortable. And then you can go to one another because you have some knowledge and say I know that you do this sort of thing, I am trying to branch out a bit can you show me how to do this? Can you help me out? Or the kids were talking about this and I am really interested in hearing about it because they were talking about your class. I'd just like to know.

The desire for authentic relationships and for knowing one another beyond a merely superficial or even personal level became evident as participants shared their experiences and expectations for change. It was apparent that the participants desired an opportunity to explore the ideas and questions related to their practice as educators.

At the very first meeting of the focus group, a great deal of time was spent exploring the diverse reasons behind each person's decision to join the group. This exploration allowed the participants to start to envision the group as their own; each person's reasons for participation were validated and affirmed as important to the group and each an integral part of what would happen moving forward. There were a variety of reasons that participants had

shown an interest in the project. Some people had joined because they simply wanted to encounter philosophical ideas for the fun of it. One participant commented: “Schools are pretty amazing places. The people that come to the table, like this, that volunteer their time above and beyond the classroom, I think is what really drives the culture of a [school] building and the philosophy. So I am here to just to kind of ... play.” While another wished to contemplate what effect this would have on her practice: “I’m interested in getting to know more about my philosophy so that I can design even more effective teaching materials for my students.” Another participant linked her interest in the group to her evolving experience as a newer teacher and her desire to learn and grow personally:

For myself, I’m still a very new teacher. I feel like I’m just starting to come out of coping mode, as it were, and I’m just starting to get interested in, now that I have time to think about how and why I am doing things, how should I direct that. I think this [group] is actually coming at a very good time for myself just to think about how I want to shape the rest of my career and what I want to do with it. I always loved philosophy and stuff like that back when I was in my degree and I’d like to do a little more with that.

Others wanted to enjoy the opportunity of having meaningful conversations with colleagues about education while also attempting to better understand the school culture:

And the reason why I was attracted to this [the research project] is that I am always curious about people’s pedagogical stance but also their philosophical stance around schools. And not just what they teach, because I think what people teach is just one piece of the puzzle, but the more systemic nature of a school and the identity of a school, and how that’s wrapped up in our own personal philosophies because ultimately, we are the ones that drive an identity of a school.

Others had hopes that the group would undertake some kind of positive change within the school community. “...[O]ne of the things I would hope for is that maybe some of the learning that comes from here can spread to the greater staff population of people who are interested or curious.”

Each person came with their own motivations and ideas about why they were there. It was important to acknowledge this from the beginning in order to find a direction forward and a common understanding while also building relationships. Additionally, it was important to acknowledge that each person had different needs and desires for their involvement in the group and that this was okay. There was no obligation to have a forced direction to the group whereby a dominant idea took precedence over the whole group. By acknowledging and validating this diversity of purpose within the group, it allowed the needs of everyone involved to be heard and validated.

As the group developed we became further aware of each person's diversity of philosophy in terms of pedagogy as well as our similarities. Due to the diverse group of people from different teaching fields, each with different experiences as teachers, the opportunity to learn a great deal from each other became apparent. Participants included: a science teacher in her first five years of teaching; a computer science teacher also in his first 5 years of teaching; an English teacher having just over 12 years experience; a school counselor having almost taught 20 years; and myself, an English teacher with just over 10 years of teaching. As the group progressed, one of the main ideas expressed by the participants was the value of the group being made up of a diversity of educators from a variety of disciplines. This allowed participants to conceptualize ideas in new ways and to approach the content of the articles in perhaps a different way than they would have on their own. One participant noted in the middle of the discussion, "Well that's really neat, the different perspectives. It's funny that when you are in your own little corner of the school, your own department, how you don't really think about the other departments all that much." This was a major realization for the group. Having become so accustomed to

compartmentalization within the school, participants pleasantly encountered the value and enrichment they received by hearing different perspectives on things as varied as teaching styles, student interactions, and perceptions of the school.

The use of the Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI) (Pratt & Collins, 2001) was also an excellent way for the group to reflect on our diversity as educators and as contributors to the group. It was a valuable way to begin to form a better understanding of each other while exploring how we conceptualized our role as teachers in different and similar ways. We each had different scores on the TPI and areas of strength and or weakness that made up our perspectives on teaching. Some were surprised by the results and others were able to better understand themselves in terms of how they teach and what they value as teachers. This helped the group establish relationships of understanding while leading us into in-depth discussions around how we think about teaching and what we are most passionate about. The TPI also helped establish from the very first meeting that our diversity as teachers was an important aspect of who we are as educators and as contributors to the group.

Another participant brought up the point that the group was helping build relationships and that she thought that was very important: “But I just think that there is the coming together of people who would normally not see each other or talk together. It’s the building of those relationships in whatever way. For the two of us, it was for the Pro-d scavenger hunt that opened up the doors to communication and I think that this [this group] will work the same way.” And another participant then added:

Maybe the conversation becomes the guise for connectedness. Because you have something to connect about. Whereas, maybe you know in the past the connection was only, “Oh this kid is acting like a goof ball in my class. You know. Or he is so off the rail”. It takes it off the students and it becomes a more positive connection. It

also let's you to get back in touch with your... to flex your intellectual muscle a bit... you just become so entrenched in what has to be done, in the tasks of the day, and the curriculum and knowing it inside and out, that you feel disconnected from anything beyond that, you know.

The fact that we were meeting together as a group and not remaining as isolated individuals seemed to add an extra spark to the ideas we encountered in the various texts. Ideas were refined and narrowed, critiqued and challenged, as conversation explored the various topics, and as we made the ideas relevant to each of us. As we thought about how we were exercising our intellectual fitness through our group participation and engagement with educational philosophy, it was noted:

...what better way to do that [exercise intellectual muscle] than be challenged by articles on your own that are challenging and then to come to a group to hear different points of view, because I find just being in with you guys when I read the article and I have my certain response and that's just my response and then I get challenged by what other people say. And to see it in a different way, which again sharpens your perspective.

There seemed to be a synergy at work within the group; the sum of our togetherness was far more powerful than each of us could be on our own. Perhaps part of this was that we were able to spur each other on, affirming for each other what had previously just been a thought in our own heads, or building on our understanding together. As we journeyed through the session's themes and the related readings we were also confronted with the fact that others had markedly different perspectives than our own. This increased our own capacity to read things differently. We began to anticipate how another in the group may interpret or read a particular article and thus we were able to get beyond our own reading of the text to see it with more depth and breadth as we considered different perspectives.

The Importance of Interrupting Schooling with Philosophical Texts

The choice to use literature from the field of educational philosophy was very successful and proved to be an important aspect of this research project. It was based on the idea that philosophy of education has much to offer educators who desire critical engagement in their practice: “...its [educational philosophy’s] purposes are both to understand and guide education” (Curren, 2007, p. 1). Philosophical questions “get below the surface of things, often by struggling with puzzles that arise from common beliefs and practices, and they aim to produce a satisfyingly deep and general account that makes sense of what was initially puzzling, troubling, or simply taken for granted” (p. 2). The group found great value in reading philosophical texts as the articles raised many questions and issues related to the group members’ teaching practices and allowed the group to have interesting conversations and debate over relevant issues. In particular the group found the philosophical nature of the articles to be important to how the group was able to move into such valuable conversations which included the discussion of theoretical or idealistic concepts as well as the very practical day to day events we face as educators.

Analysis and critique of the school system, the school culture, and ourselves as educators occurred naturally as we encountered the ideas within the literature of educational philosophy and as we shared personal anecdotes and insights. Participants valued the challenging content and appreciated how it raised questions about why we do what we do in schools each day: “It allows you to flex your intellectual muscle... you must take care of yourself. Your intellectual fitness so to speak. And you must commit to that. You must commit to your professional self.” The philosophical content led the group to critically analyze the system of education and our part in it; but it also allowed us to dream of

possibilities, to envision what could be in the midst of what was. The group found the opportunity amongst themselves to dream about what kind of action or change they envisioned. One participant commented: “that with every article comes possibility. [pause] I can’t elaborate more than that because it is still brewing in my mind. I think with every article that I read, with every meeting, comes possibility.” And so, with the use of educational philosophy to spur on ideas, and with the gathering of a group of colleagues, and the opportunity to take some kind of action, great possibility was released: great synergy was experienced by the group as we contemplated possible next steps.

Co-participants’ Increased Sense of Agency through Participatory Action Research

The synergy experienced within the group was possible in part due to the open and flexible research process of participatory action research. This project was designed in such a way that the participants would have a voice throughout the process and our voices together would form the basis of the research as we self-reflexively analyzed the process of which we were each a part. In the early days of the project, I attempted to explain the open ended nature of the research to the group members stating that it was my desire “to leave my agenda at the beginning and just set it [the research] up and to see what would happen, what people wanted to do, and what those possibilities would be. Maybe the possibility that nothing would happen and it would just be conversation for the sake of conversation or maybe this would spin off into something else. What could it be? Those possibilities are all there. Maybe rooted in some of the articles or in just the conversations we are having.”

My role as researcher and co-participant involved bringing the group at several instances throughout the process to a place of discussing self-reflexively, where we were at,

how it was going, and where we wanted to go next. This involved asking the group what they were taking away from the experience and what changes, if any, they would like to see made to how the group was functioning and moving forward. This also meant trying to get participants to make their expectations explicit. For some, just being involved in the group for the conversation and stimulation was enough, and yet, they were also encouraged by the desire of others to initiate change:

I think the conversation is important. Before I joined this group I just kept an open mind. I didn't have any expectation for anything. But it's nice that one of the purposes of this group is to have meaningful conversation and how we have educational philosophical articles that we can discuss, because at least for me, this year has been so busy that I just never have time to discuss with colleagues about...I mean even just to have a meaningful educational conversation. At least for new teachers that is definitely lacking in our system. So it's even nice to just have these conversations here right now. It's also really nice that some people want to improve the school culture and I do agree with that. And hopefully we can bring some changes to this school culture but it's a big task.

Taking this time to be self-reflective in terms of the group process was an important part of the research process and it provided some of our richest discussions. This reflexivity was an important aspect of participatory action research: the need to continually revisit and analyze what was happening with the group in order to ascertain if adjustments needed to be made. This was a valued and important part of the group's process and the research methodology in which participants openly shared their views while discussing what was working for the participants. It also opened up a space in which we began to consider where the research could be going next; this infused a sense of purpose and legitimacy to what was happening in the group. This self-reflexive approach allowed the group to stay focused on its own learnings while carefully plotting the next steps. It also allowed for the possibility of change to emerge. It placed the idea clearly in front of us that we could do more than just remain as

we were: we could take the ideas from the texts that we read, those that inspired or challenged us to see the world of our school in a different light, and we could contemplate what action could be taken. The diversity and yet sense of community built within the group, along with our engagement with philosophical texts that were embedded with transformative notions, combined with a process of participatory action research that encouraged some sort of self-determined action from the group, all helped to create a space in which participants experienced a sense of greater agency and empowerment. From the beginning a great effort was made to communicate the “participatory” nature of this “action” research and that their role was not just to sit back and be observed by the researcher but they could take control of the very agenda and direction of the group in order to make it meaningful to them.

Another important contribution of a PAR approach included beginning the research without a clearly defined course of action; this turned out to be fundamentally important to the success of the project. Although perhaps an unusual proposition at first, after some time, as relationships were built, and as ideas percolated through our discussion of the philosophical articles that we had read, the group took this invitation for self-determination in stride. One participant reflected on this process during the final group session saying:

Initially I was a little bit hesitant because I thought, we are going to gather to read articles and not have a purpose. And I was like, I need a purpose; I am the kind of person who needs a purpose. But this was good practice for me because we didn't have a purpose until the end. And now we have a really good purpose I think. So I think we have to be clear in articulating that experience to people when we are talking about joining the network... you have to participate before you can know what the action is, and for me that seemed ass backwards but now I got it.

Not knowing the final destination turned out to be a very important part of the group's process.

As future groups may adopt aspects of this research for their own school communities, it is important to understand that the main themes that emerged each fit together in ways that support how this research was conducted and what made it successful and unique. The value of forming a diverse and self-determining group that experienced meaningful community in relationship with one another was paramount to this research. The use of philosophical texts that addressed important educational questions was also central to the success of establishing a meaningful sense of community while also encouraging critique and thoughtful engagement in our lived realities. And the use of participatory action research with its open-ended methodological approaches and encouragement to remain self-determining and democratic, also allowed for an important sense of agency to emerge. Each of these themes became important on its own but also in how they worked together to affect the resulting experience for the participants. These three themes also contributed greatly to the development of the action plan that emerged in the final sessions of the group.

The last two sessions that the group met involved looking at how participation in the group had affected each person and what they had taken away from the experience, but also, perhaps more importantly, what plan of action the group wished to take on within the school community. As ideas for change emerged, and excitement for what was possible for the next school year began to grow, the group transitioned from a theoretically grounded project to an action focused collective inspired to continue the work of the group while reaching out to meet the needs of the school in a new way.

As we reflected on what we had been experiencing as a group within the conversational space of this project, the group began to develop a plan of action. As we contemplated the possibilities for action and as we reflected upon our own experiences as a

group, it became apparent to us that we did not want to dissolve the group but rather wanted to continue along the journey that we had started while inviting more people to be a part of what had been occurring. Participants wanted to share the experience with others from the school community: to offer the opportunity to participate as a self-determining group of diverse educators who would gather together and decide how best to take action collectively.

And so as we reflected on what this would look like moving forward, we needed to address the question of what was it that had been important about what we had experienced in this short time frame as a group? What steps were significant in how the group progressed and developed? What were the important themes and ideas that emerged from our lengthy conversations as we engaged with the articles that we read for each meeting? If the future action of the group would involve carrying on from where the group left off, it would be important to document the process and answer these questions. This was a rich and contemplative discussion in which many ideas and possibilities were suggested and in which, as ideas began to crystalize, a heightened sense of excitement began to rise. The ideas that came from this discussion form an important part of the overall findings of this research project.

The Elusiveness of change: Collectively Developing an Action Plan for Institutional Transformation

When change is something that is desired by the people within an organization, the question becomes how best to achieve it. Throughout the focus group meetings, as new ideas were presented by the articles we encountered, the theme of change became increasingly apparent in our discussions. As the group sessions came to an end, ideas for a

plan of action were emerging based on many of the ideas that had been generated throughout the whole of the group experience.

The idea of how to enact change was an important aspect of our discussions as we planned how the group wished to proceed. We discussed whether having an official sanctioned position of authority within the organization was necessary to initiate change, such as a vice principal role or teacher-leader role, or if a grassroots response of willing participants was enough to enact change. There were some practical ideas suggested about what future action could be taken and what steps this would involve as the group finished the research project and prepared for the following school year.

During the final session of the focus group meetings, as we worked towards developing a plan of action, our ideas began to crystalize into the concept of a Network: a group of educators formed by voluntary association, meeting together regularly while determining for themselves what action and focus they wished to take on and explore. According to this plan, our story as a group would become a model for the Network in terms of how to take action through a self-determining group.

The process we went through in articulating these ideas was greatly affected by the ownership that was offered to the participants at the very beginning of this research project. The methods involved in participatory action research allowed participants to make this project their own, to meet their own needs in light of their very individual experiences of a particular school context, and to set a new course that could not have been determined from the start. The indeterminate nature of the group's purpose turned out to be of fundamental importance to what happened in the group. This was something that was established from the very beginning when the group first met: that the purpose and direction of the group had

not been predetermined, but would be set as the group moved forward. The importance of this is shown as several participants contemplated this new idea for a Network: “I know that this is all just an idea right now but I cannot contain my excitement.” “I would never have thought at the beginning that we actually could have come up with something like this.” The importance of allowing a space for possibilities, for dreaming, for envisioning change and action without limitations is shown by what happened with the group. Through the sharing and refining of ideas the group was able to come up with a fairly concrete plan of action to initiate the Network.

In my analysis of the transcript data, as I compared where the discussion had gone to what my plan and scripted questions had been in my research proposal, I noticed just how important it had been to allow the conversation to flow freely without taking unnecessary control. For example, as the main researcher, if I had attempted to ensure that the discussion more closely addressed a fixed set of questions and that we did not stray from the agenda, perhaps our final idea of the teacher network would never have occurred. Part of the process of developing our plan of action came in the way that it happened symbiotically, as it were. It came out of an organic process of conversation that may never have ended up at the conclusions we arrived at, had I limited the conversation: the concept of the teacher network, as well as many of the other wonderful ideas and actions that we explored happened within the context of free flowing conversation. Of course at times we were off on a tangent; yet, at other times these tangential diversions led us to meaningfully explore ideas relevant to the research questions. It is important to recognize that providing a clear structure and research plan with specific research questions had to be balanced with a willingness to not know where the conversations would go and what would come out of it.

It also became important that the future direction of the Network should not be predetermined at this early stage of its development. It must keep with the spirit of participatory action research so that those involved would determine the course of action for themselves. It was possible to conceive, therefore, that within the Network, sub-groups could develop a particular focus of the group's own choosing according to their needs and or desires. This initial idea also extended into a broader plan (for some later time in the future) to offer this opportunity to students, to parents, and to other combinations of people who already had relationships in the context of the school. Intentionally building on those connections that already existed in some way within the life of the school community would be an important aspect of the Network. It was about bringing people together in conversation while contemplating what action if any the groups would like to take. In other words, one primary purpose of the group would be to determine what action could be taken, if any, as the group moved forward.

The group carefully considered how to inform the staff about the Network concept in order to invite a broad range of participants. This thoughtfulness was necessary in order to respect and work within the structures already in operation within the school. This would include providing information to the Staff Committee (the body that represents teachers and advises administration on particular issues at the school level). It was thought that meeting with department heads to explain what we had been through and what we wanted to do next would also be a beneficial step in building understanding and support for this new initiative. We also thought it would be important to give information about the group and our experience at a general staff meeting where all staff would be in attendance in case some had not yet heard about the group and our plans for the development of a teacher network.

Careful consideration was given to how the purpose of the group would be communicated to the school community in order to have the highest rate of voluntary participation.

The group continued to discuss how best to bring the Network forward, how to initiate this kind of change in our school in the most meaningful and effective way. Of course the discussion linked back to our previous conversations about how to bring about change. In order to initiate change it was mentioned that perhaps one of the best ways to do this would be to start with those people who desire to participate in the change process. That way we would have the benefit of their motivation and desire to participate. The other group of people to focus on would be the inclusion of new members to the community. By offering a mentoring component to the Network, we could provide something of value to the new members of the school community by offering to “show them the ropes”, so to speak, while answering their questions and supporting them through the trials of adjusting to a new school and perhaps as a new teacher to the profession.

This aspect of mentorship became an important topic of discussion for the group as we grappled with how to initiate change and how to deal with feelings of fear, especially as new teachers, while navigating the system. Having people come together has the effect of reducing a sense of fear because they do not feel isolated and alone. Another important aspect of the Network would be the cross-generational support that could be established as relationships develop between new teachers and those with more experience. As relationships develop, fear recedes and the possibility for creative and energetic endeavors increases. In this way those with experience and confidence within the system encourage and support new teachers in their role as potential teacher-leaders. This concept of the

Network would bring educators together while allowing them to determine for themselves how the group would function and for what purpose.

After much discussion of ideas both broad and detailed we left the final meeting together feeling exhausted by all the possibilities and yet at the same time invigorated by all that could be, as we fixed ourselves on this idea of a Network. With many ideas of where this could take us the following year, we headed off into summer with much time to relax and contemplate how things would unfold in the coming months. With much anticipation of what could be, we went our separate ways.

And in doing so as time passed, things changed. People moved away or received new positions at different schools. The original participants who had come up with the ideas for the Network were now only three in number. Just as our ideas had grown, developed, and changed in our efforts to come up with a plan of action, so also did they change as the new school year began. Things did not turn out exactly as we originally planned them to be, and yet, rooted in our experiences as a group, we were left changed and affected by what we had experienced together. And the actions that occurred the following year maintained some important aspects of our original action plan.

Two participants from the research project went on to enroll in graduate studies in education, their desire for further learning, perhaps partly influenced by their engagement with the philosophical texts and group discussions in this PAR. Two of the participants who remained at the school went on to start an educational philosophy club in which educators were invited to participate in contemplating important areas of change within the school while exploring philosophical issues related to the ideas that had come up in our discussions. Although not entirely the same idea as the teacher network, this group retained aspects of the

original action plan: they continued to discuss philosophical ideas and they continued in their pursuit of systemic change as issues arose through their philosophical inquiry. In other words, they continued to pursue their efforts to engage with and to transform their school context through philosophical inquiry and critique. After a year of meetings they were able to present their findings at a staff meeting and a half-day professional development session where they shared what had occurred in their group. They also garnered staff support to implement some of their ideas. These important systemic changes involved creating new initiatives at the school. These programs helped the educators feel that their school practices more adequately aligned with the philosophical discussions that had occurred within the philosophy group. For example, tutorials were established to help teachers and students build supportive relationships. And a mentorship program for students in grade 8-12 was also established.

In any case, although the action plan the following school year varied from what was originally discussed by the group, what did not change was the engagement of the participants in some form of further action related to what had occurred in the group. The impact of this research group, despite its short and focused period of time, can be seen in the possibilities for change that are embodied in each participants' efforts to continue pursuing philosophical inquiry in their own way. The learning that we experienced together helped shape and change us, as we conceived of ourselves as action oriented, passionate educators with a plan and a purpose, and with a commitment to continuing our philosophical engagement and pursuit of educational change.

Chapter 6: Discussion Chapter

This research attempted to address the question of what would happen if a group of educators took part in a philosophical conversational space: what impact would their participation have on them as individuals and on the wider school community. The research question sought to examine how educator morale and motivation, teaching practice in the classroom, and an overall sense of community would be affected by participation in such a space. It also sought to determine how such spaces could be inhabited within the current organizational structure of schools. The following discussion weaves through a number of themes that connect to these research questions while highlighting and complicating many of the issues educators face in schools today.

Disrupting Systemic Isolation

As each discussion group progressed we began to know each other with much greater understanding than we had before. We were able to get beneath the surface of ourselves as we connected with the ideas within the philosophical texts as well as those shared by our colleagues. What an encouragement it was to know that others held similar feelings of dissatisfaction with the status quo in a number of areas. Our feelings of being isolated from our colleagues was one of the most common concerns that we shared. And yet as a result of the time we spent together and the meaningful conversations that we had, including on occasion the sharing of passionate and personal stories, the participants became more connected relationally. The desire for greater connection with colleagues had been expressed

by many of the participants and the group served as a place where individuals could get to know others at their school that they rarely had contact with previously.

These regular meetings also allowed a passion for the materials and concepts we encountered to be shared by the group members. There was a new energy and enthusiasm that was established. It was refreshing to be able to share what we were doing each day in our classrooms, with others who felt just as passionately about what they were doing. We may have had a different focus or approach, but what we soon realized was that we all cared for our students and had a desire to be good teachers. In a world that can wear you down, and a job that has endless opportunities to feel less than adequate, this group became a place where we could build each other up, accepted on professional grounds as equals and co-contributors in something that felt important. This 45 minutes of our lunch break allowed us to get away from the tasks that never seem to end, while connecting in a meaningful way with our colleagues.

Working within the limitations of our lunchtime meetings was challenging. In order to attend each session, participants hurried to finish up with their classes, gathered their lunches, and arrived at the meeting. While eating and sharing snacks and goodies we engaged in the process of this research. Although 45 minutes may seem like an insufficient amount of time in which to accomplish all that we wanted, it should be noted that to find even this much time within the busy, hectic life of a school is in fact quite significant in terms of the amount of time educators have available. Their willingness to participate despite these time constraints demonstrates the personal commitment that each person had for what was happening in the group. In fact when time became more flexible, after classes ended during the exam period, the final group sessions went far beyond the allotted 1-hour

time frames. The final session went for almost two hours indicating that this conversational space was of value to the participants.

An important aspect of this experience was that we were not just hanging out together in the lunchroom. Not that there is anything wrong with just enjoying the company of others over lunch. But somehow what we were doing seemed to be more soul sustaining. We were integrating a focus on our teaching practice into our conversations. Rather than avoiding “shop talk”, we embraced it and in doing so found a rich avenue of conversation. It became apparent that we were not alone in wanting to discuss the bigger questions of why we do what we do as educators, to look at our philosophies, our practice, and to critically reflect upon them.

This experience was markedly different than the norm of compartmentalization that dominates how schools are organized. Although efforts have been made to bring greater collaboration and community to schools there persists a hegemony of isolation and compartmentalization within schools. It was very apparent that educators have a hunger to break down these dividing walls in order to participate in meaningful relationships that sustain, support, and enrich their professional lives. And yet there are barriers both in perception and reality that limit this from happening. This research demonstrates, however, that when the opportunity is given, even outside the constraints of the school timetable on their own free time at lunch, some educators will take the opportunity to get involved. Perhaps as this story is told and further experienced by others in terms of the benefits of participation in such spaces, more and more educators will get involved in similar projects thus building a swell of experiential change that will further erode the domination of a compartmentalized organizational structure. More room for philosophical conversational

spaces and participatory action research groups should be made within the structure of the system in order to further realize the benefits outlined in this research. However, even if this has to initially occur outside the bounds of the school organizational structure, as positive results are experienced, more room could be made within the system itself. In any case, what is clear is that meaningful relationships and a coming together of colleagues in purposeful community is possible.

Genuinely Engaging Praxis

The philosophical articles inspired a diverse range of reactions from strong disagreement, to enthusiastic approval of the ideas within them. The conversations that resulted were rich and varied, often becoming personal and often relating back to a practical aspect of school life. In this way, the philosophical ideas within the articles came to life for the participants in the context of the group discussions, becoming so much more than merely ideas on a page; they were breathed to life by our own experiences as educators (both the struggles and the joys) as we shared our thoughts with each other.

The group meetings provided an opportunity for current and relevant issues to emerge. The articles brought up ideas and concepts which we were able to connect to our own lived experiences in the current context of our school. In this way the theoretical articles were brought back, through personal connection, into the realm of practice thereby, conflating the false dichotomy between theory and practice (Gibson, 1986; McIntyre, 2008; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). Theory and practice really cannot be separated and this was very apparent from the comments expressed by the participants. When presented with theoretical information, naturally participants found a way to connect it to their practice and found ways

to extend the theory to speak further to their practice. This flow between theory and practice occurred seamlessly as we encountered philosophical ideas often of a theoretical nature. And yet, we found that these theoretical ideas had a great bearing on how we perceived our individual teaching and school contexts and our praxis as a whole.

In discussing the concept of care from Nel Noddings's (2007) article "The one-caring as teacher", a discussion ensued about how students need to be perceived as more than just students but as individuals. In this discussion the recent school occurrence of teachers submitting fail lists to counselors was brought up as an example of how teachers may not have the whole picture as to why a student is struggling to pass. There was a lot of discussion about the nature of the teacher / student relationship and how we need to look beyond the curriculum in order to more fully address the needs of our students as human beings. There was much discussion about how the system operates and what changes could and should be made in light of these ideas.

An understanding of the concept of the "other" as presented in Noddings's article allowed the group to contemplate how our practices were perhaps incongruent with how we thought we should treat our students. We were led to connect to a very current situation in which the common practice at our school may have not been aligning with the ideals we had uncovered through our discussions.

At the end of the school year it had for some time been the procedure to send fail lists to the counselors that included the names of students who had not passed the course that year. As we contemplated the meaning of care and how this gets translated in our teaching and our schools, one participant brought up how we might reconsider those students on the

list. She challenged us to think about those students who had failed, while also contemplating what kind of relationship we had managed to develop with those students.

At one point two participants explained how after our first discussion of this topic, they had made the time to revisit a decision that had been made regarding a student on the fail list. As a result of a conversation it became clear that one particular student, considering the background of what he had gone through that year, should have been given further consideration rather than being added to the fail list. After further discussion and contemplation, an alternative to failing the student was agreed upon, parents were notified and a substantive change occurred based on a discussion that was started within the group. Because the two people involved in the decision were a part of the research group, following the group discussion, they were able to meet and discuss what the best solution would be for this student. In other words, the research group brought these two people together, allowing for the creation of a brief moment of reflection, provoked by a philosophical text, to reconsider an action that would have had potentially serious ramifications for this particular student. The outcome for this student and the teacher and the counselor was markedly a positive one. This participant noted: “I have felt like I had a voice to exact some change, like just discussing our example of our student. That was huge to me because I didn’t think I could... Bringing up the example created an opportunity for us to have a discussion and I really valued that...”. The resulting decision to not fail this student had been based directly on ideas stimulated by the group conversation. The decision had been affected by Noddings’s (2007) article in which she challenges us to think about how a school “can be deliberately designed to support caring and caring individuals...” (p. 376). This example made us realize how valuable such moments of reflective conversation can be. This example

allowed the group to further build a sense of agency, solidarity and activism while bolstering our strength and courage to continue exploring ways to make meaningful changes to our practice in order to more adequately align our practices with our beliefs. It also demonstrates how change and transformation was occurring within the very context and timeline of the research project and not just in its culmination.

This example allowed the participants to see the benefits of making the time to converse in order to see things from a variety of perspectives and to get a more full picture of a situation. It also showed that the group could have a very real effect on what was happening in the school as the conversations shaped and changed how decisions were made. Through engaging with Noddings's article the group had encountered an important educational, and philosophical idea that in turn had had a very important practical outcome. This could even be a step towards an important systemic change in terms of how students are assessed and evaluated on an individualized basis with more emphasis placed on the need for increased communication between counselors, teachers and students.

This also led us into a critique of an educational system that needs a greater investment in human resources in order to facilitate the time necessary to make the best decisions for individual students. The issue of time constraints and large caseloads emerged as reasons why this does not happen more often. The group felt that it would be great for counselors to meet with every teacher over their fail lists to discuss individual concerns; however, it was noted that this would be challenging considering the caseloads of high school counselors. Hence it became apparent that larger school-wide systemic changes would require greater time and resources beyond the means of our immediate group.

The importance of relationships and the time needed to develop them emerged as an important area to make improvements in how schools are organized and how resources are allocated. In order to meet the needs of students, participants felt that there would need to be more time made available to allow teachers and counselors the opportunity to meet. In discussing whether to fail a specific student one participant noted:

...each case is specific to that kid's context and maybe having more of an opportunity with the counselor and the teacher to really figure out what would be the best move, rather than just looking at your report, your BCESIS or whatever [your final mark], and sending in your form. Maybe there should be a meeting where you actually discuss, is this the best move? Here is what was happening, here is the background story to this, maybe we should just put him through.

In response to this another participant stated that “you would need more manpower to do that.” Participants felt that in order to better meet the needs of students as individuals, time constraints and limited human resources need to be addressed. The participants had many ideas about how to improve services to students, as well as how to improve the quality of their own lived experience within the school organization; however, the amount of available staffing and support services to facilitate more time for students by creating a smaller ratio of staff to students was a very important point that participants made on several occasions. Noddings's article pushed us to consider how in such cases the existing system may be falling short of our ideals in terms of meeting the needs of individual students in a context of care. We were challenged to see this as problematic while contemplating solutions. Perhaps more human resources is not a fiscal possibility and yet perhaps it could be, or perhaps there are other ways to bridge this gap in terms of creative solutions or the reallocation of resources.

As in this example, regardless of the current constraints, an opportunity was taken to engage in a meaningful conversational space. This space, along with the inspiration of a

philosophical text, allowed for a transformative moment to occur. Without discounting the participants feelings that more resources and time to create these spaces would be hugely beneficial, perhaps the important point here is that despite these systemic limitations that may remain largely out of our control, educators can take opportunities to reprioritize how decisions are made. And perhaps philosophical conversational spaces can play a greater role in this transformation. In any case, this example brought to the forefront how an idea can become action. And these actions can have dramatic outcomes, if not on a grand scale, on a case-by-case basis. Noddings challenged us to look beyond the constraints of the system to find a way to truly care for students as individual human beings.

Curriculum delivery was also connected to what several participants claimed was an impediment to teaching the students as individuals. With pressure to cover a complex curriculum educators felt that the time required to get to know students and make learning more personalized suffered in an attempt to cover curriculum demands:

I do feel like a lot of these things could be dealt with if we just had more time to address other issues. It feels like we are very curriculum bound. And there just isn't time to do anything. I feel like if we had 5 minutes at the beginning and end of each class to just sort of address other things, that would be great. But there isn't that time.

This was more apparent for educators from particular disciplines like science where the specific need to cover course content was higher than in an English class, for example, where curriculum outcomes tend to be much broader and therefore more flexible. Participants agreed that by paring down the curriculum it would allow teachers to deal with other important and relevant issues in order to teach the “whole” student. This might include taking time at the beginning of each class to hear how students were coping with their lives or the course content in order to better meet their needs. Another idea was the development of a tutorial time when students could check in with teachers who they had a connection with

in order to receive help, guidance and support for any number of needs that they may have. These practical ideas could help meet the need for increased personalized learning and increased support for students.

These practical ideas demonstrate how an opportunity to stop and reflect was created by our willingness to be a part of this group. It became an opportunity to reflect on how the system is meeting the needs of students and in what ways that it is not. Asking ourselves, “What can be changed? Or improved?” was an invaluable process of critique. As the group engaged thoughtfully with the philosophical texts, there were many instances where ideas emerged related to possible changes to how things are done at the school or in individual teaching practices. In other words, as theory and praxis demonstrated their inseparability, the possible outcomes for systemic transformation and change were varied, diverse, and numerous as the group encountered the philosophical texts.

Encountering Philosophical Texts

At times, as we shared our responses to the readings, we were able to share a common language with the author and with each other. At other times it was vehement disagreement with how an author had phrased a particular issue that then allowed us to see just how differently we would react to things. For example, after reading Freire’s “Banking vs. problem-solving models of education” (In Curren, 2007), several people in the group took strong offence to the critique he was leveling at education. “Education is suffering from narration sickness... Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 68). Feeling that this did not match what was happening in education today in Canada, some felt that the language and the way

he framed the problem was not appropriate. Several participants personalized his critique and found it offensive. “When I was reading this I was really angry because it’s not at all how I teach. And I just kept thinking that this is not me you are talking about.” Another person said, “I don’t know for you but I do not work on banking education. That’s just not me. At the very end of the article I was so angry ... I was, I really was. It made be very mad.”

This was an interesting point in the group for me. I had had the responsibility of choosing the texts that the group would encounter throughout the research project. This particular text was one of my favourite articles. I strongly agreed with what Freire was saying about education. I felt that what he had to say about receptacle education (transference) was relevant and an important distinction that should be made clear to educators. Considering that this “banking model” of education has been such a dominant metaphor for teaching for so long, I felt that it was important to discuss. And yet, I had not anticipated such a strong reaction against what he was saying and the tone that he was using. I had perhaps approached the article from a philosophical standpoint whereby I saw him criticizing a form of education that I did not want to practice. I had contemplated how common this transmission model of education would be here in Canada. I saw the idea of filling students with facts as a common conception that may be held by some. I also thought about how I personally needed to strive to avoid such a method for what I do in the classroom.

Like the others in the group, I did not feel that the banking method was my primary approach to teaching. However, when I heard the strong reaction against this article I realized criticism of education may feel like a very personal attack, especially by those who

passionately practice their profession. I had not thought that someone would interpret Freire's words in this way. I was put into a position within the group of having to listen in order to gain an understanding of where they were coming from. But I also felt obligated to explain how I interpreted the article as having relevant criticism of how the act of educating can be conceived.

Having to find the words to frame my perspective, in response to a different point of view, allowed me to think about both sides. To what extent was Freire's discourse relevant to us in Canada today and to what extent did his views not apply? It was a great moment of understanding not just in terms of this topic, but also just how differently we can approach ideas and how differently we can react to the language used in an article. The group meeting allowed us to confront the diversity of understanding that surrounds us all the time, even when it is not brought to the surface. Through the use of the text, the group had once again provided a context for both affirming and challenging our beliefs.

As we discussed the issue we soon saw that despite our different reactions, we actually had similar feelings about the topic. We agreed with Freire that such an education would not be desirable, but we also discussed that perhaps things had changed, at least in part, and that the context in which he was writing for Brazilian peasants was markedly different than the context of Canada's current education system in which critical thinking is promoted, at least at a surface level. We appreciated that much of the way we now teach, and the way that teachers are taught to teach, has changed and advanced beyond the banking methods that Freire describes. However, it is interesting to note that the group discussion did not connect Freire's ideas to other aspects of education in which his concerns are still relevant: in terms of what is taught or deposited (e.g. mainstream curriculum) and who gets to choose it, for

example, and how marginalized groups have little influence over the dominant perspectives that get transmitted through the curriculum. These things are still quite problematic and echo Freire's concerns. Of course further depth of analysis and further understanding of a philosophical text and concept is always possible, despite the direction that the group may have taken in that moment of conversation.

In any case, discussion and analysis of the various texts, and this one in particular, allowed us to see how each of us interpreted the ideas from our own particular vantage point. As we ended our discussion of Freire one participant exclaimed:

I came off really strong and then I read my notes for the latter half of the article and really he said it best towards the end when he was talking about education is about freedom not oppression. "Education is the practice of freedom as opposed to education as practice of domination..." (Freire, 2007, p. 72). And he really is speaking of giving students an opportunity to speak freely in a classroom and not to be filled with information but to question to engage...by engaging new learners is essentially what he is saying. It's the first half, how he had framed it.

The strong reaction participants had to Freire's language and how he framed his critique of certain forms of education, the banking method in particular, demonstrated the intensity that the participants felt about what they do in their classrooms each day.

As we encountered words that resonated with us or at times words that caused a strong negative reaction, the result was a rich array of conversation and the opportunity to better understand each other and ourselves. We were refined and challenged in our thinking as we responded to alternative points of view while learning to understand why people responded the way that they did. At times discussion became very passionate and emotional, as personal stories were shared connecting to things that we cared most about, including our very motivations for teaching. This critical engagement with the texts, and with each other more personally allowed us to forge deeper relationships. By placing ourselves within a

group context as co-researchers and co-participants, we were ensuring that we would hear different perspectives while having to find the words to explain our own. This process of refining our thoughts and articulating our beliefs and values was a valuable experience.

Conversation can bring about disagreement and thereby a greater awareness of our differences. But then as you work through these differences, you also gain a deeper insight into commonalities or into the ways in which differences are affected by systemic or institutional structures. These opportunities to converse became something very worthwhile. Despite the many demands already a part of a teacher's life, the hours we spent together over lunch were not regretted. Although the research involved quite a time commitment, participants felt that much was gained from it and they appreciated the experience. In fact by the last session participants were planning new opportunities to develop the group while inviting greater participation from those who would like to join.

Acknowledgment and Critique of a System of Fear and Control: The Emergence of Agency

Fear, power, and change were other important themes that developed from our group conversations over the course of the research project. There was an awareness that teaching occurs within a particular organizational structure and that this system has the tendency to produce and or instill feelings of fear rather than empowering individuals to feel that they can initiate change. Participants felt themselves detached and removed from initiatives of change that had occurred within the system over time. Often these processes of change or particular initiatives seemed to arrive on the doorsteps of teachers without them having been involved in their development. Therefore, the change lacked a particular context that they

understood. On the other hand, one participant explained how it was disheartening to hear that the way that change is brought about causes people to be fearful and resistant of what could be a very positive change:

But I wonder how things would be different if teachers felt like they were more of a stakeholder in some of these decisions. And I don't know how that comes to be. And I don't know how people get appointed or chosen or do they apply to these... I don't know but it's very interesting to me because I think that sometimes change is good. But I think it's how change is delivered and how change is, you know, how the information is brought to teachers, affects how you hear it. I know we talk about critical theory, and all that, well the lens in which you look at things, and I think that people have a lot of fear around change because you don't know where it is coming from and you don't know how it is going to affect you and you assume that change is going to be about taking something away and not actually gaining something. And I find that really disheartening because it is not always all bad.

Participants felt that they had lacked a voice and yet it was their desire to be involved and to participate in the processes of change that affect educational practice. A conversation is desired where real dialogue occurs rather than the feeling that you are being forced to make a change based on a directive or plan from above.

Perhaps a different process of change is possible rather than the top down approach to organizational change that seems to occur so often in education and other fields. Although it was acknowledged that teachers are often consulted or even directly involved with curriculum changes for example, often only a small group is consulted and the local school community has not engaged or worked with the initiative enough until it arrives at the door of the teacher or is enacted by the school leadership and administrative team.

Through this participatory action research group a different process of change emerged as a concept as an alternative to the commonly seen top down approach. The group became a grass roots, locally identified group of people taking action together and developing initiatives of change that were relevant to them and their context. The research

group began to experience this empowerment as we took the opportunity to discuss what changes were possible within our local context. The issues that were brought up were relevant to the personal lived experiences of the group members. The fact that ideas were emerging from the group itself provided motivation and excitement about possible initiatives and areas of change. Instead of feeling powerless, participants as a group began to see themselves as capable change-makers, even within the confines and constraints of the system.

There was an understanding that change can happen from both within and outside the organizational structure. Several participants explained that it was important to understand how the system works in order to affect change and that one should go through the appropriate channels and structures that are already in place, such as Staff Committee meetings for example. But it also became apparent that it was equally important to understand the power of working from the outside, especially in terms of just making change happen despite perceived or tangible barriers within the system. The group on several occasions pondered how to initiate and sustain meaningful change: “That’s what I keep coming back to is okay, different ways to get change: through power implementation, even your role, or if you just say, let’s do it. Yes, we are a part of this constraining system, but what happens if we just do it?” This idea of working at multiple levels through both internal structures and external structures became an important realization for the group. It became possible to envision change despite systemic barriers or other challenges that had inhibited an active response.

This sense of empowerment through working together in solidarity was a major contrast to the discussion that initially came up around change, especially in terms of the

feelings of fear and control that several of the participants had described. There had been a sense that teachers were not in an authorized position to initiate change and if they went ahead with making changes to even their teaching practice that there could be some kind of punitive measures brought against them, even the fear of losing their jobs came up. It was as if the hierarchy of the system with its management style operation and the role of administrators as surveyors and supervisors of teachers, naturally instilled a sense of fear which in turn disempowered teachers.

There was some disagreement about the reality of these punitive measures and discussion followed as to whether these fears were based on false perceptions or reality. One participant argued that people assume that they will be reprimanded for initiating change but that this is not true in the way that people may expect. This participant made the point that educators are not powerless to initiate change. The opportunities that exist just need to be taken and the perception of powerlessness needs to be addressed.

Deinstitutionalizing processes of change and focusing instead on individual and group agency could further aid change within the education system. That is to say that whether barriers to change within the system are real or perceived if individuals conceive of themselves as powerful actors capable of initiating change, obviously with this perception of themselves, they are more likely to engage in actions that bring about some kind of change either from within or outside the organizations that they inhabit. This realization through participation in conversational spaces had a huge impact especially in contrast to the perception of themselves as powerless and impotent to affect change.

There are possibilities for change that are available if educators can free themselves from a culture of fear that can paralyze creative initiatives, keeping individuals from enacting

positive change. It would be necessary for individuals to have a conception of themselves as able change makers (and for the system to trust them as such) who will not be reprimanded severely for taking initiative and making efforts to bring about change. In fact one can assume that administrative leadership would quite possibly support and encourage grass roots efforts to improve schools for students and teachers. I am sure there are countless examples of this happening in schools. Blase and Anderson (1995) describe a conception of educational leadership that would perhaps support such initiatives: “Democratic/empowering leadership represents a shift from an emphasis on leadership as management – eg. managing the school culture or managing diversity – to an emphasis on leadership as a form of empowerment” (p. 21). Watkins (1989) also describes school leadership in ways that involve “the consideration of all human agents, pupils, parents, teachers, support staff as well as the principal...” in an ongoing process of negotiation and change in which “...leaders become followers and followers become leaders in the ebb and flow of organizational interaction” (p. 28). These notions of school leadership are opening up possibilities that could see greater support for teacher leadership and empowerment by school administrators. There has been a growing scholarship that supports less hierarchical and more socially just approaches to school leadership (Foster, 1989; Leithwood, 1992; Ryan, 1998, 2003).

This being said, perhaps there are other times when grassroots initiatives would go against the grain of what administrators are trying to bring forward, thus not finding support but even active resistance. As teachers are authorized to take on more of a leadership role, and given more real power over what the possibilities can be, perhaps conflict would result. One positive outcome of conflict, however, can be that it mobilizes people by stirring up a passion and energy that could be very healthy for schools as agendas for change and school

improvement move forward. Conflict can lead to greater dialogue and understanding of the diversity of perspectives that underlie educational and organizational change. The conflict that may result could represent a positive change in contrast to the disempowerment and apathy that can result when educators are not encouraged to take leadership.

A step towards involving educators in such a process would be the initiation of participatory action research groups where groups of willing participants are encouraged to take ownership and given the opportunity to come up with ideas that could bring about substantive changes in their schools and wider school community. Bringing together groups of people who voluntarily agree to participate could be a powerful step in encouraging opportunities for systemic transformation.

Chapter 7: Concluding Reflections

The aim of this research was to establish a participatory action research group in which individuals would read articles of educational philosophy and at the end of the project determine the impact their participation had on them in terms of the following: their morale and motivation, their teaching practice, and their sense of community. Along with observations on each of these points, other important ideas were revealed by the project. For example, there was much learned about the nature of participatory action research and the value of allowing the group to make its own decisions along the way while developing a plan of action that suited their needs. This approach could be used in a wide range of educational settings while perhaps replicating some of the benefits that were experienced in this project. Educational leaders may also wish to promote this kind of philosophical conversational space in their schools in order to see some of the benefits outlined by this research.

The response of the project by the participants was overwhelmingly positive. Despite the investment of time in the group, participants felt that it was worthwhile.

I think on a very personal level what I have taken away from [this group] is the importance of honouring myself as a professional and making sure I stay up to date, finding relevant things to do and that comes at a sacrifice of time where I could be doing other things but I get way more out of it then I would if I was just working away in my office. You gotta give a little to get a little.

From the point of view of the participants, including myself as a co-participant, there was great value in this experience in a number of ways. Firstly, we encountered our colleagues with respect and interest. We were engaged with thought-provoking philosophical articles. And we were given the opportunity to dream about what this group could become - what

action was possible. Finally we were able to make (directly as a result of our coming together) some small systemic changes during our time together.

While engaging with thought-provoking articles, a strong sense of community and relationship developed within the group. This sense of community and the rich discussions and learning that we were experiencing together, greatly affected our sense of motivation and morale, as well as our sense of personal growth and agency. One participant described her personal growth with the following statement:

...I think that is what we've experienced at this table. I've had lots of growth over the last few weeks because I've read current interesting articles; I've been able to have relevant discussions with my colleagues. And that is fodder for growth and for change in me as a counselor, as a teacher, as a person, as a parent, in so many different ways.

Not only was a strong sense of community formed within the group there was also a renewed sense of enthusiasm and energy released in response to the inspiring, and at times challenging philosophical content. "I think really sitting down and figuring out your philosophy on education every once in a while, because I believe it changes, is good."

Another participant noted: "It is good to be reminded of your passions and your reasons for doing things too." Participants commented that they felt alive and reawakened. They felt they had exercised their intellectual muscle, and been challenged to see things differently than they had before.

For me what worked was the different perspectives. Because it is easy to sit down with people who you will agree with... I want to hear what they are thinking. Because I think that it is really easy to judge how someone does something or doesn't do something until you hear their reasoning behind it. Because a lot of times they could have a very good reason for it. And it is something I didn't think of so maybe I can grow from that.

The diversity and heterogeneous nature of the group allowed for this sharing of perspectives

which was an important aspect in allowing others to see things differently. The increase in morale and enthusiasm was also related to the fact that the group had come up with some exciting plans for the future direction and development of the Network. By engaging in this group, people felt empowered to act and to work together to plan a course of action. People, ideas, and an opportunity to act, were brought together through the structure of participatory action research.

Educators desire greater community and the opportunity to discuss the things that are most important to them. Unfortunately there are far too few opportunities to do this. There is something within the hearts of many educators that desires greater connection with colleagues and the opportunity to engage critically with the aims and ideas of education. As the project came to a close and as we reflected upon our experiences it became clear that each person greatly valued the time they had invested. Some were happy to have had the chance to ruminate on educational ideas and to share their ideas with colleagues; others were refreshed to hear the perspectives of others who were from backgrounds different than themselves; many were excited about the possibilities for the group as it moved into the future. Participation in the group met many of the intrinsic needs of the participants (social, emotional, and intellectual). It also encouraged the notion that each participant is an actor capable of affecting change.

As we engaged with philosophical texts in a meaningful way, our own experiences and knowledge of the world, our beliefs about ourselves and our students, had the opportunity to emerge within the context of the group. We were able to share this with others from the group: to hear one another and to hear ourselves. Through this process of conversation we were able to truly converse, sharing our ideas and our sense of the world,

while conceiving of ourselves as actors capable of understanding and creating, of reconstituting our world according to our working it out together (it became in a sense a form of personal and professional development). This conversational space allowed for a process of communal co-habitation whereby the creation of self-knowledge, collective knowledge, and personal empowerment occurred simultaneously. It also created a necessary private and safe space for this to happen, while encouraging the potential to move beyond a private space in perhaps a more political and public way.

In fact, the effect of this encounter within the group would not remain a private matter but began to percolate back to the wider school community. This was evident in the natural way that our analysis and critique flowed back and forth from the articles to our local context and the organizational structure we were a part of on a daily basis. As a result there were many ideas that came out of our discussions that focused on issues of change and how to improve the functioning of the system we inhabited. As we moved to see the development of the Network with its possibilities for much wider participation, what we were beginning to see, in fact reflects what Coulter and Wiens (2008) describe in terms of the emergence of a public space for democratic participation and dialogue around the aims of education.

Participatory action research groups have the potential of providing a safe place for people to engage with personal ideas while developing them before taking them into a more public realm. By building relationships and having the opportunity to share, to disagree and to debate, each person becomes stronger and perhaps more willing to enter the more public realms that Coulter and Wiens (2008) discuss. The group naturally seemed to transition from what had been discussed privately in the group towards an agenda of a more public appearance within the wider school community. The possibility for political and more public

action seems like a natural consequence of a group's maturity and strength as it develops relationships and a plan of action over time. As ideas are explored and later solidified, they become more tangible possibilities to initiate as a plan of action.

This research project represents an important personal realization that we as educators can take opportunities that are available to us within our current reality to enact change. We can create³ meaningful spaces within the institutions we inhabit in order to transform them to more adequately meet our need for meaningful conversation and a sense of empowerment and solidarity, while fulfilling our desire for positive organizational change. Instead of seeing barriers, and looking at a lack, we need to envision possibilities and take hold of the opportunities we have in order to take action.

However, the institutions and organizations that we work within could take greater steps to empower people to take action. Rather than making people feel as if they are powerless cogs in a system so much larger than themselves, individuals could be encouraged to see the capacity within themselves for creativity and ultimately, organizational change.

An alternative approach to hierarchical models of leadership would be the formal sanctioning

³ Choosing the correct term to describe how to initiate these conversational spaces required a great degree of consideration. The term "create" captures the idea that there are possibilities for creation in a number of unique and underdetermined ways and that the power resides within all of who decide to take action as creators. This term captures the notion of an artist creating something out of nothing or out of the materials they have available. I had also considered the term "recolonize" as a way to highlight the way in which hierarchical structures have dominated institutional life. This term brings to light power relations and the history of institutional colonization while emphasizing the need to take action and fight back against such processes. The final decision to use the term "create" is based on the idea that to "recolonize" would be to reenact the same injustices and power imbalance in the process of attempting to remediate the lack of such spaces. Whereas, the term "create" denotes the possibility of a new form of creation not based on the imposition of will. Rather "creation" is based on the working out of such spaces by those who inhabit these institutions; thus, individuals find ways to converse with others in order to establish meaningful spaces for themselves in "co-creation".

of teacher initiated projects and the empowering of teachers to know their role as not one of merely subservience within the organization. This would release much more human ingenuity and the capacity for a more democratic and empowering school environment. It would also honour educators as professionals who are worthy of trust and power to make meaningful decisions. Fear limits our capacity to be fully human and to reach our potential as educators. Therefore, the role of educational leaders should become one of empowerment rather than control.

The question remains how can we find these opportunities within or outside the structure of our organizations? Perhaps we can take steps to just do it. To find ways that work within our particular contexts, to take action in a number of ways that make sense to us as we move forward. This research project represents an example of a group of educators doing just that. And so what can be learned from this story? A dissatisfied graduate student takes the principles of participatory action research to invite other educators to take part in philosophical conversations and to form a group that would be encouraged to take ownership of the direction and purpose of the group together.

As a result, we found that there is great value in both the formation of participatory action research groups and the use of educational philosophy to inspire conversational spaces.

These spaces have the possibility of transcending the limitations of a hierarchical system that emphasizes control and power. Participatory action research by definition is a democratic and empowering process as participants are encouraged to see themselves as fully in control of the outcomes of the group. Educational philosophy through its questioning and critical analysis of taken for granted realities, thereby opens up a world of possibilities. As educators encounter each other as philosophical thinkers, the possibilities for action and

change are limitless. These changes have the potential to greatly affect the educational experience of our students as well. As we share our learning with, and alongside our students, they may develop the capacity to “become sophisticated researchers who produce their own knowledge and when facilitated by an adept teacher construct their own curriculum. With the teacher as co-researcher students can achieve as many unprecedented goals as creative learners can imagine” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 14). And so we must continue learning how to develop, enhance, and inhabit philosophical conversational spaces. Perhaps then we may become educators who walk together with each other and with our students into a world we have the power to understand and to change. In the words of one of the participants, “I like that we are coming out of these meetings a little more awake than when we started.”

As educators we owe it to ourselves and our students to never capitulate to the powers of mystification and hegemony that operate in and through the institutions we inhabit. We must continue to pursue a wide-awakeness that will not endure apathy, ignorance and complacency. If we are to truly educate, we must continually sharpen our minds by educating ourselves and working together to overcome systemic problems and injustices. By initiating and participating in philosophical conversational spaces, educators can encounter each other and the ideas within important philosophical texts while pursuing greater awareness and the capacity for personal and systemic transformation.

Epilogue: Reflections on My Experience with Participatory Action Research

As I reflect on this research and its impact on me personally I realize that for years I focused on what was lacking in my experience as an educator feeling powerless to change

my circumstances. The years that I spent focusing on my frustration at the seeming lack of opportunities for critical reflection and philosophical engagement with my colleagues did not move me forward. As I waited for a leader to initiate the change that I was looking for, nothing changed. I remember discussing this with a friend who had just become a vice principal, and he replied that it was very difficult to know what each person's expectations were of him as a leader. This conversation helped me to begin to see the difficulty with assuming someone in an official leadership role would be able to fulfill the desires for change that I held within myself. Thankfully my dissatisfaction and desire for change eventually led me to discover participatory action research.

It is an illusion that things must stay the same and that we cannot become actors initiating change in creative ways to transform the organizations that we inhabit. However, we must resist aspects of organizational control and hierarchy which attempt to control and limit the capacity for educators to enact meaningful change collaboratively. Joe Kincheloe (1991) in his seminal work *Teachers as Researchers*, describes the need for such educators within the context of modern societal processes which serve to deskill and undermine the power of teachers as part of a technocratic, neo-liberal agenda. Kincheloe explains:

When educational purpose is defined as the process of training the types of individuals business and industry say they need, educational quality declines. In this situation reformers attempt to transform schools into venues for ideological indoctrination and social regulation while reducing teachers to deliverers of pre-packaged and homogenized information. (p. 3)

He goes on to argue that the concept of educators as researchers is required in order to counteract these forces:

In the contemporary conversation about knowledge workers and their education, understanding the reductionistic view and developing the scholarly and political skills to move beyond it becomes even more vital to the future of democracy and the

pedagogical strategies that support it. Teachers becoming researchers is a necessary component of this struggle. (p. 4)

The findings of this research project serve as another example of the power of involving educators in the research process. This was evident in terms of increasing our critical awareness, our sense of solidarity, and our ability to conceive of ourselves as actors capable of enacting change. Using participatory action research in creative and innovative ways can further empower educators to be a part of creating positive systemic changes while resisting technocratic processes that would undermine this capacity to act.

In addition to the all the learning that I experienced through this PAR process, an important realization has been that when you take action, undeterred by barriers and challenges, you can find meaningful ways to transform your reality and meet your own and your community's needs. This was the powerful result of the participatory action research approach. It had an indeterminate end, and yet it brought people together in a particular structure allowing them to determine the goals and direction of what would happen next for themselves.

When researchers allow participants to take control and ownership of a project it has the added benefit of allowing the participants the opportunity to carry on when the research ends, unlike other forms of research. For example: despite my being the primary researcher, I ended up having to move away from the school to a new city and a new job and so I was unable to be a part of implementing the action plan. Despite these circumstances, participants continued the action that was initiated by the project and carried on with those who remained.

This is a strength of participatory action research: it encourages in the imaginations of the participants the notion that they *themselves* are important actors and researchers who can affect change within their lived realities as they engage in critical analysis. This empowerment of the participants in the research process was an invaluable lesson: through the empowerment of individuals there can be lasting effects on a school and its inhabitants. With these foundational ideas (the democratic empowerment of participants and the pursuit of actions that sustain social justice) researchers and educational leaders can use participatory action research to initiate meaningful actions within their school contexts.

As I reflect on this project I realize how my conceptions of leadership have been altered: rather than relying on others I will begin to work towards the change I hope to see, by taking even small steps towards its realization. As this research draws to an end, in my role as an educator and educational leader I will continue to participate in and initiate such projects for critical inquiry and educational transformation.

This research has the potential to impact systemic change; we, as both educators and researchers, can be empowered to dream of possibilities as we pursue critical and philosophical inquiry. Being a part of this research and watching it unfold from the initial planning stage, to the recruitment of participants and the focus group discussions, and then to the final reflections and action plan development has been an enlightening process. As this group of educators met to discuss the philosophical texts within the small group, we soon developed a sense of community and safety that allowed us to experience a degree of solidarity. Rather than remaining fragmented by systemic compartmentalization, we had chosen to come together to meet purposefully and to engage in critical collaborative thought.

As our sense of community deepened so did our desire to reach out to others who could share in this critical philosophical space.

In this way, our movement beyond a solely private space into a more open and public space seemed a natural progression of what occurred in the group. It seems clear that such private spaces are necessary to support and work towards an increase in the creation of public spaces. Public spaces that are vibrant and dynamic, where individuals can come together to reconstitute themselves and their world so that their lives better reflect the kind of world they desire. To this end, such private spaces become the building blocks upon which public life can flourish. In the case of this project, as we gathered together sharing our individual and personal reflections, we began to experience a synergy of enthusiasm leading to an increased desire to participate in further action, as we dreamed of possibilities for change. In the same way, as educators create a variety of unique and context specific spaces for collaborative critical inquiry through participatory action research, perhaps the transformation of individual school communities and wider systemic change is possible.

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