

**CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY:  
AN ISRAELI CASE STUDY OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Educational Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

The University of British Columbia

July 2002

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Date August 6, 2002

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the processes of creating and maintaining a community of teachers in an Israeli high-school. Ten high-school teachers were self-selected to participate in a yearlong professional development focusing on learning and teaching. The participants directed their own professional development by collaboratively sharing and reflecting on their practice.

The methodology used for data gathering is rooted in the case study tradition within the philosophy of naturalistic inquiry. The weekly meetings throughout one academic year were recorded and transcribed. Teachers were interviewed three times: at the beginning and end of the year, and two years later, to learn about reasons for participating and evaluation of the community, and to allow further reflections on their experiences in the community. Two main concepts - community and caring relationships - emerged from group conversations and personal interviews, and were used as the study's analytical tools.

Three topics were revisited in our conversations throughout the year: teacher-students relationships, teaching strategies, and evaluation of learning for both teachers and students. The conversations revealed the processes of creating an atmosphere of care, trust and openness that enhanced the development of genuine dialogue that turned this group into a caring community. The caring relationships encouraged teachers to make changes in their teaching and suggest changes at the school level. These relationships enhanced teachers' ability to learn from their encounters and helped them develop awareness of the importance of such relations within the educational context.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of teachers' community. It suggests that communities (a) support teachers by enhancing dialogue among them; (b) contribute to social change within the limited context of the school; and (c) add to the construction of knowledge about teaching, learning, and schooling. If schools aim to teach recognition of diverse voices where people strive to care for and understand each other, then teachers should learn and exercise these behaviours. The most viable space for the occurrence of such learning is within teachers' communities. This study, then, gives strength to arguing for the pursuit of communities in school.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the end of this long voyage I have the pleasure of thanking those who have supported, inspired, challenged, and made it possible for me to get to this point. First, the participants of the teachers' community, the ten teachers without whom this study would not have come through, for opening the doors of their classrooms and for giving me the opportunity to try my ideas in the real world.

I wish to thank my committee members, particularly my supervisor and academic mentor, Professor Dan Pratt who was the source of unending encouragement both academically and emotionally, for leading me along this project in a gentle, friendly, and challenging way. I am also grateful to my teachers and advisors, Professor Gaalen Erickson, who taught me how to read critically and to be less naïve and more careful when claiming knowledge; Dr. Gabriella Minnes Brandes, for her substantive contributions throughout the stages of planning, researching and analysing the data collected, her thorough and challenging critique of my writing, and her friendship and hospitality; and Dr. Judith Ottoson, who was there for me right from the beginning of my studies, and her deep interest in my work helped me to believe in the value of this study. All of them inspired, encouraged, challenged and helped me clarify my thoughts. From each one I learned to be less naïve about research findings, alert to nuances, and listen to my own voice. My gratitude is for their academic guidance, caring attitude, and warm words, which were a source of strength in difficult times.

I am indebted to my editors, Adrienne Burk who taught me my first lessons in academic writings, and Dr. Janet Atkinson-Grosjean who did an excellent job on the last draft of the study. They both helped me frame my ideas into a shorter, more precise and appropriate format. Their fine work resulted in a document that did not change my voice or intentions, but rather clarified them. Many thanks are also directed to my friends Dr. Ann Darwin from Australia who kept sending me emails to help me overcome those moments when I didn't believe this project would ever end; Dr. Michal Regev from Vancouver, who was always ready to provide help, real food, and good spirit; and Dr. Garnet Grosjean, who was a source of support and help right from the beginning of my studies to the very last stages of the public defense.

Last but not least is my loving family – my mother, who is my model to life and the first in our family to earn a PhD, for never doubting my ability to do it; my husband and best friend, Nachumi, who keeps teasing me that the only “real” doctor in the family has M.D., for enduring the long months of my mental absence from his/our life, and for being there for me whenever needed; my daughter Noa, now studying for her PhD, for her deep involvement and interest in every stage of this work; my daughter Ofri, now working on her MBA, for encouraging me to keep up with my writing; my son Yonatan, now at the end of his military service, for his love and trust in me, and for never complaining about my work; and my mother-in-law, Rina, for her kindness and generosity. Without your love, support, good sense of humor, occasional complaints, and lots of patience, I probably wouldn’t have reached this stage. I thank you and hope that you are happy and proud.

July 29, 2002

Vancouver, Canada

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In an era of life-long learning, at a time of increasing pressures on teachers, educational systems, and students, as well as shifts in demographics and technology, it is of utmost importance to find and refine ways to keep teachers motivated, fresh, effective, rejuvenated and creative. Probably the most common way for achieving such complex targets is through teachers' professional development (TPD) programs.

This study investigates a specific TPD endeavour conducted in one high school in Israel. In the first part of this chapter I introduce some of the problems of TPD in Israel, and then review literature relevant to the collaborative endeavour I will describe. The second part of the chapter reveals the research questions, the rationale for the study, the study's significance, and the structure of the dissertation.

### **A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ISRAEL**

Teacher professional development became a "hot" issue in Israel in the early 1990s. The then-new government enlarged the national education budget and directed a significant portion to TPD or "Hishtalmoot" (Hebrew). Teachers were offered opportunities to increase their salaries up to 25% by attending courses, either in schools or externally. Throughout Israel, thousands of teachers embraced this offer with enthusiasm, and a whole "industry" of lectures and courses for teachers' development was established. The term "a learning staff-room" became a reality as teachers in many schools began to group together to study. Most TPD courses assume that in order to meet the variety of students' needs, teachers should learn new teaching techniques. Courses are usually taught by outside experts who dictate their content and process.

Despite the popularity of this initiative, to the best of my knowledge, no research has been done to evaluate its effects on either teachers' practices or students' learning. For the last decade, I have been teaching teachers in different settings e.g. in professional development centres, high schools, and three universities. As a teacher, I have also attended a variety of professional development courses covering issues such as science updates, pedagogical and educational issues, educational psychology, and group facilitation. These two different types of experience—participating in and leading professional development endeavours—have allowed me to develop an informal empirical understanding of teachers' evaluations of, and reasons for



participating in, these courses. I learned that teachers take courses to update their subject-based and pedagogical knowledge, to raise their salaries, and to rejuvenate their interest in the profession.

As a participant I found many of the courses enjoyable, but few made any noticeable impact on my practice. In the TPD courses I led, I inquired about the impact, if any, on participants' practices. I became interested in the necessary conditions for effective professional development courses, and started to engage teachers in trying to define what we mean when we say professional development is "effective". As we discussed these issues, two common characteristics emerged. First, effective courses tend to be long-term, usually extending throughout an academic year. Second, they encourage active participation; thus teachers have significant influence over their content and processes, even where courses are led by outside experts.

These experiences led me to propose a study that would inquire into the processes involved in teachers' professional development, particularly those conditions that enhance teachers' actual practice. While such questions are not new in the literature on learning, teaching, and teachers' professional development, this study seeks to extend current research into new applications and new interpretations. The group of teachers described in this study started as a TPD initiative. Although different from other TPDs, in ways that will be discussed, participants accepted this initiative as "another Hishtalmoot"; one of the many offered to teachers inside and outside schools. I now review and discuss the relevant literature on teacher professional development. Starting with a definition of TPD, I discuss its rationale and goals, provide criteria for grouping models, then discuss one specific model that is most related to this study.

## **TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Definition**

In this review, the term 'teacher professional development' is synonymous with 'staff development'; both have been given various definitions by different writers. In one such definition, TPD relates to the "processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills or attitudes of school employees" (Sparks and Loucks-Horsely, 1990: 234-5). In other words, TPD enables teachers to become better professionals and to accumulate "higher levels of knowledge, skills, commitment, and trustworthiness" (Doyle, 1990: 7). In other definitions,

TPD is “emerging and ongoing, individual and collective, professional and personal, development” (Cole and Knowles, 1993: 475), or “the sum total of formal and informal learning experienced throughout one’s career from pre-service teacher education to retirement” (Fullan, 1991: 326). Adapting existing definitions to accept a social aspect, I define TPD as *the emerging and ongoing individual and collective processes that develop teachers professionally, socially, and personally*.

This definition directs us to focus on the literature dealing with teachers’ professional, social, and personal development. The word “development” is preferred over “training” in order to emphasise the characteristics of the process. TPD is not a “one shot” exposure to training, nor is it a set of technical, ‘how to’ instructions. It is rather a phenomenon of change from relatively simple to complex forms. Thus, TPD is understood as a complex venture that deals with humans who are engaged in relationships, in learning, changing, and growing, and in trying to be better in their profession.

### **Rationale and Goals of TPD**

In order to understand the goals of teacher professional development, it is reasonable to start from understanding the goals or purposes for schooling. According to Fullan (1991) those goals are

To educate students in various academic or cognitive skills and knowledge, and  
to educate students in the development of the individual and social skills and  
knowledge necessary to function occupationally and socio-politically in society.  
(p. 14)

In order to accomplish their goals more effectively schools must constantly reflect the change that surrounds them within society. Change in educational programs may be mandated by ministries of education, by district educational boards, or by school principals, but the manner in which these programs are delivered is mediated by teachers. By participating in TPD, teachers can collaboratively examine various changes and find ways to implement them. While analysing educational change at the local school level, Fullan (1991) affirms that the power for change lies in teacher collaboration. Thus TPD serves as a means not only for examining and enhancing change, but also to promote teachers’ self-understanding and the development of collaborative culture, as will be discussed below.

However, there are other justifications for TPD besides change alone. TPD can be looked at from the perspective of ensuring a better "product". In the same way that physicians develop professionally so their patients can be healthier, and engineers develop professionally so they can build better structures, so teachers develop professionally so their students can learn better. It seems clear, therefore, that TPD should yield some kind of measurable effect on student performance. There is some consensus in the literature on the importance of understanding the relationship between TPD and learners. As Cervero (1988) maintains, "Learners are at the centre of every continuing professional education program" (p. 38), and Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) state that "how and whether or not students learn is directly related to how and if teachers learn to become better" (p. XI). However, not everyone agrees. Richardson (1991) although believes that TPD should "promote for adults with learning outcomes for students" still stresses that "this is not to say that staff development's *only* value is in its effect on students. Staff development can have benefits for adults as learners that do not immediately translate into improved education for children" (p. 108 emphasis in original). Wilson and Berne (1999) maintain that we know little about what teachers gain in TPD experiences. While they *believe* that certain forms of TPD are better than others, "there is not enough research to show that teachers actually learn about subject matter or students or teaching, as a result of participating in TPD" (p. 195).

The purpose of schooling is to educate and prepare new generations to live in a fast-changing world and to function occupationally and socio-politically in society. Teachers might help to fulfil this purpose by inquiring into their personal attitudes and beliefs, in order to construct their own professional world-view. Richardson and Anders (1994) claim that the goals of staff development are "to help teachers examine their beliefs in relation to classroom practices, and to consider alternative premises and experiment with different practices" (p. 159). In the introduction to their book, Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) note three goals for TPD. The first is to equip teachers with knowledge and skills that will increase their ability to provide better learning opportunities for their students. The second goal is to provide personal development that allows teachers to better understand themselves and, as a result, become more sensitive and flexible teachers. And the third is to create a work environment which is supportive of professional learning and improvement. Development is personal as well as collective. Stagnation and routinization in the teaching profession is a salient negative force for student achievement in the classroom according to Jacullo-Notto (1986), who suggests that TPD can serve as a tool to provide teachers with "genuine opportunity for intellectual, social and emotional growth" (p.176).

The need for viable professional environments is also stressed by Schwartz (1986), who maintains that “[t]he vitality, energy and growth of an educational institution makes teachers feel that what they are doing has meaning, not just for themselves and their students, but for the total school community” (p. 192). Schwartz argues that by achieving these goals, TPD can also help teachers gain institutional recognition of their worth.

To summarise: the literature reveals several different rationales for TPD. These include to: (i) enhance educational changes for the improvement of schools (Fullan, 1991); (ii) increase student achievement (Bos and Anders, 1994); (iii) provide teachers with the opportunity for learning new content and techniques (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992; Richardson, 1991); (iv) provide the opportunity for teachers to grow intellectually, socially and emotionally (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992; Richardson and Anders, 1994); (v) fight stagnation, boredom and routinization (Jacullo-Notto, 1986); (vi) gain institutional recognition of teacher’s worth (Schwartz 1986); and (vii) develop a viable professional environment (Little, 2001).

These multiple goals yield different models of TPD, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. For the purpose of understanding the main themes, which prompted the evolution of the various models, I find it helpful to organise the models into groups according to some specific criteria. The following section discusses these criteria.

### **Criteria for Grouping Models of TPD**

Professional development endeavours exist in many forms. Each one carries different assumptions about “first, where knowledge about teaching practice comes from, and second, how teachers acquire or extend their knowledge” (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley 1990: 235). Criteria regarding the ways by which teachers construct knowledge can be useful for grouping models of TPD for the purpose of understanding what teachers and educational leaders think about teachers, teaching, and learning. Among the authors who suggest criteria for grouping models of TPD, two influenced my choice: Gilbert (1993) and Hoban (1996).

Jane Gilbert (1993) groups TPD models according to “the relationships between education and the wider society” (p. 19). She identifies two groups of models: ‘technics/functionalist’ and ‘critical’. The first stems from a philosophy that grounds the purpose of education in maintaining existing social structures. The same philosophy underpins the perception of TPD as a process of training teachers to perform specific tasks, by transferring knowledge from

experts to non-experts. The second, “critical” group is grounded in “communitarian politics and emancipatory approaches to education” (p. 20). It promotes the idea that teachers reflect on their practice, which changes as a result of this reflection. Within the critical approach, professional development is seen as a collaborative achievement by groups of teachers who can carry “genuine dialogue relationships” (ibid.).

Hoban (1996) categorises models of TPD based on the source(s) of knowledge used. He proposes three classifications. Outside-in development models “emphasise knowledge that has been generated by others for teachers to use in their practice” (p. 20). Inside-in models “emphasise the knowledge that teachers have already generated from their experiences and encourages them to reflect and explore their ideas based on these understandings”; while inside/outside models “emphasise both knowledge that teachers have generated from their experience and the knowledge of others”.

Although the criteria Gilbert and Hoban use for grouping TPD models seem to be quite different, there are some meaningful similarities between them. Gilbert’s ‘technics/functionalist’ group is understood to help teachers learn their traditional tasks by transferring knowledge from experts to non-experts, while Hoban’s ‘outside-in’ group sees TPD as a means for passing knowledge from “outside” – the experts – to the teachers who are the non-experts. Both Gilbert’s ‘critical’ group and Hoban’s ‘inside-in’ group see teachers as knowledgeable. Both encourage teachers to reflect on and change their practice as a result of this reflection. While influenced by Gilbert and Hoban, the criterion I chose for grouping models is different from theirs. Mine relates to the power relations within TPD and the source of knowledge used. For me, the fundamental question is: *who owns the initiative?* This question points to the power relationships within a particular TPD group, the person(s) in-charge, the kind of relationships that might be developed in each group, the source and ownership of knowledge used in this endeavour, and the philosophy that underlies that usage.

Using this question as a lens, we can identify two groups of models. The first is similar to Gilbert’s ‘technics/functionalist’ group and Hoban’s ‘outside-in’ group. Because it relies on outside expertise, I call it ‘the Expert group’. The second is similar to Gilbert’s ‘critical’ and Hoban’s ‘inside-in’ classifications. This group, which relies on collaborative relationships based on dialogue among professionals, is the one most relevant to this study. In what follows I present the Collaborative-Professional-Dialogue group and one of its exemplary models.

## **The Collaborative-Professional-Dialogue group**

In the Collaborative-Professional-Dialogue group of models teachers learn through collaboration and by reflecting on their own experience. The models in this group exemplify constructivist perspectives on learning that encourage teachers to construct knowledge by reflecting on their practice. They are consistent with socio-cultural theories which point to contexts and society as the most important factors affecting knowledge construction. The knowledge in question is a form of 'craft knowledge' (Grimmett and MacKinnon, 1992) or 'practical knowledge' (Fenstermacher, 1994), which develops "from participating in and reflecting on action and experience" (ibid. p. 9). Such knowledge is likely to be used by teachers, as it is close to and tightly connected with their experience and reality. Models in the collaborative group describe the way teachers generate practical knowledge and learn from each other's experience. In certain collaborations a professional dialogue acts as a key feature. But before elaborating on this model of collaborative staff development, it is first necessary to define collaboration and situate it within the context of schools. The next section reviews the concept of collaboration and identifies strengths and weaknesses in school-based collaborative endeavours.

### *Collaboration*

According to many studies, collaborations among teachers who share a vested interest in professional development may create new, authentic and meaningful knowledge and thereby bring about change (see, for example, Bell and Gilbert, 1994; Brandes, 1995a; Cole and Knowles, 1993, 2000; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001; Duckworth, 1997; Erickson, 1991; Lieberman, 1986 a, 1986 b, 1995; Little 1993; Richardson and Anders, 1994). But forming such collaborations is fraught with difficulties. Cole and Knowles (2000) for example, write that

The busyness of schools, crowded days and curriculum, pressures to evaluate, extracurricular demands, and a host of other chores keep teachers separate from their colleagues and tied to the exigencies of their teaching work. Conversations with peers remain mainly superficial: conversations about perplexing matters of

day-to-day teaching and the intellectual rigors of being better teachers seldom happen (p. 141).

To the above list of impediments one can add common “prevailing norms of survival” such as carrying out a solo act of ‘performing’, and guarding one’s unique practices from the use of other teachers. These norms and constraints keep teachers from sharing ideas, working together and helping each other to become better teachers.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) maintain that in effective schools (those with higher levels of student achievement), teachers continue to learn and learn collaboratively. But because types of collaborative learning vary, different approaches bring about different results. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) argue that the most effective kinds of collaboration are rooted in ‘strong interdependence, shared responsibility, collective commitment and improvement and greater readiness to participate in the difficult business of review and critique’ (p. 48). They maintain that collaboration should be an ongoing component of teachers’ professional culture. Ideally, success and failure are shared and discussed and there is broad agreement on educational values. Where disagreements exist teachers feel secure enough to discuss them in an open manner. In such a culture, the authors argue, teachers are valued as individuals.

For Smyth (1991), collaborative professional development is a conceptualisation of what it might mean for teachers to become actively involved in the collective and reflective process of analysing and theorising their own teaching, its social antecedents and possible conceptions (p. 2). He claims that by understanding their own personal and collective histories and by working collaboratively at “unravelling the culture of their own teaching” (p. 2), teachers will be empowered and, thus, be more willing to bring about changes in their schools.

Similarly, Lieberman (1986, a) maintains that

Regardless of the context, team deliberation has been shown to produce knowledge and self-learning for teachers, provide powerful professional development and encourage greater collegial interactions. (p. 28)

She argues that schools cannot improve without people working together (Lieberman 1986, b). By this, she means to include many different forms of collaborative activities, and maintains that all of them “encourage a much broader stake in the improvement of schools” (p. 6). While promoting collaboration, however, Lieberman maintains that for reaching genuine rather than

contrive collaborations, participants must adopt less protective and more reflective approaches, be more willing to take responsibility than to assign blame, and be open to alternative perspectives on the world. Further, these outcomes cannot occur unless time pressures are removed.

Richardson and Hamilton (1994) maintain that teachers' personal knowledge, beliefs and interests drive this type of collaborative staff development; teachers are engaged as partners in the process and in the selection of content (p. 125). Similarly, Richardson and Anders (1994) stress that "reflection and change are ongoing processes of assessing beliefs, goals and results" (p. 163). As such, one outcome of the collaborative process is that teachers become more aware of their ways of thinking and practicing.

Little (1986), however, holds a "healthy scepticism" towards 'seductive' concepts such as collaboration, cooperation and partnership. In order for visions of mutuality and collegial interaction to materialise, she believes that there is a need for long-term commitments from teachers, and for school principals to take direct, active leadership roles in their implementation. Jaculo-Noto (1986) makes a similar point, noting that some settings are more successful than others in applying collaborative professional development. The most successful are likely to be those schools where staff development is an explicit goal and school development is understood to be an ongoing process.

Erickson (1991) makes the point that collaborative relationships can only be understood in terms of the specific context within which they occur; no single set of principles applies to every collaborative project. However, a number of generalised principles characterise projects that share like purposes. Those principles suggest that collaborative relationships must: (1) view teaching as a form of reflective inquiry; (2) endeavour to promote a disposition for reflective thought and behaviour; (3) result in ways to validate learners' existing knowledge and provide opportunities for them to extend it; (4) foster an atmosphere of openness that allows sharing of intentions and concerns, and promotes critical comments; (5) acknowledge the nature of personal and professional risks; (6) attempt to establish reciprocity in risk-taking activities; and (7) be concerned with the giving of reasons for the participants' actions.

Hargreaves (1992) identifies two *undesirable* types of collaborations. The first 'weak' type, which he calls "bounded collaboration", is focused on immediate and practical needs, on specific initiatives, or on one-shot deals, instead of being embedded in long-term interpersonal



relationships between colleagues. It is “restricted in its depth, its scope, its frequency or persistence, or in a combination of these factors” (p. 228). Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) relate bounded collaboration to inefficiency and “softness”. They call it ‘comfortable’ collaboration, finding too much emphasis on sharing experience and not enough on inquiry. They assert that “collegiality shouldn’t stop at congeniality” (p. 57).

The second type of collaboration that Hargreaves (1992) cautions against —“contrived collegiality” (p. 229) — is characterised by a set of formal bureaucratic procedures designed to encourage greater association between teachers. Although potentially useful as a preliminary stage within the process of developing collaborative relationships, contrived collegiality is not a substitute for collaboration, nor can it legislate collaboration into existence. Hargreaves maintains that contrived collegiality might lead to unwanted interactions and thus discourage existing collegial relations.

### **Summary of the collaborative group of TPD models**

As demonstrated above, the merits of the collaborative model are many. Collaborative TPD empowers teachers and provides them with insights about their way(s) of thinking and practicing. It promotes stronger ties between teachers within the school, a factor identified as important for students’ understanding of the curriculum. Finally, it seems to be an efficient way of coping and being engaged with curriculum changes. Like any other model, however, collaborative TPD is not without flaws.

Although supportive of this model, the authors cited above all point to the need for specific commitments if true collaborative relationships are to develop. On the part of teachers, these include willingness to commit to long-term processes and to participate in and be open to possible changes. For school principals and administrators, commitment includes allocating adequate resources to the development of models that will evoke rather than impose collaboration amongst teachers. This last condition, if not met, is apt to create contrived collaborations that can destroy existing collegial relationships in the school. In summary, three key difficulties attend collaborative approaches: high expectations can lead to disappointment; collaborations can create tensions; and the meaning of collaboration is often misunderstood as a commitment for total agreement on teaching and learning values.

After this detour on collaboration, I return now to discuss one model within the collaborative-professional-dialogue group of TPD models. The self-understanding model (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992) has many features common to the community of teachers presented in this study.

### *Self-understanding Model*

The self-understanding model of TPD involves changing not only teacher's behaviour, but also who the teacher is (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992: 7). Thus before changing their behaviour, teachers must first reflect on their personal and practical knowledge of teaching in order to identify their perspectives and situate their actions, beliefs, and attitudes, some of which might change as a result of this reflection (Richardson, 1990: 16). Only then might a behavioural change be expected.

This model is based on the theory that behavioural skills are grounded in and impacted by attitudes and beliefs. It would be pointless, therefore, to focus on behavioural skills alone without probing into the beliefs and attitudes that precede them. Pratt (1998) expresses a similar interpretation of the centrality of interrelationships between beliefs, intentions, and actual actions in teachers' work. Using the construct "perspective on teaching" he asserts that in the context of adult education,

Teaching is guided by one's perspective on teaching, which is defined by actions, intentions, and beliefs regarding: (a) knowledge and learning, (b) the purpose of adult education or training, and (c) appropriate roles, responsibilities, and relationships for instructors of adults (p. 11).

Pratt (1998) maintains that the act of reflection is probably a prerequisite for significant growth in teaching. Reflection, however, "must go beyond actions, to include intentions and beliefs" (p. 12). When reflecting on their work, teachers ought to reflect on what they are trying to accomplish (intentions), how to go about it (actions), and why they think it is important (beliefs).

Because the model of self-understanding assumes that teachers construct knowledge when they are involved in a professional dialogue, it suggests that collaborative reflections on practice might be one way for teachers to examine and change (when necessary) their attitudes and beliefs. Beyond this, Jackson (1992) includes the culture of schools as part of what teachers ought to learn. He argues that teachers should develop a "deepened and intensified appreciation

of the social and cultural complexity of their work” (p. 72). Connelly and Clandinin (1988), who are interested in curriculum changes, suggest that “[T]here is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves” (p. 31).

Brandes and Erickson (1998) provide a practical example of this model. They describe a group of teachers who collaborated with university educators to form a community of inquiry. The teachers and the university educators met regularly (either weekly or bi-weekly) over a lengthy period extending for six years. Through sharing their practice they developed their knowledge and understanding of students’ learning and, with time, constructed teaching strategies that would fit their developing ideas. As their interest was to enhance students’ active learning, they searched for teaching strategies that would fit this aim. The teachers controlled and directed their conversations; decided what issues would reward further probing and inquiry; and were responsible for the time and length of the meetings. In other words, they directed their own professional development. The participants owned the whole initiative including the knowledge that was generated within it which they used in their classrooms when they chose, subsequently bringing their new learning back to the group.

The self-understanding approach, then, sees teachers as active, knowledgeable, involved and responsible persons who wish to take upon themselves the responsibility of directing and controlling their own learning and professional development. Because knowledge is being generated through conversations about practice, it is more likely that participants will make use of this knowledge in practice. An example of ‘humanistic’ approaches to TPD, the self-understanding model sees teachers as intelligent and sensitive professionals who have a voice in the school context, and as adults whose life-cycle development and outside interests influence their particular approaches to teaching. The humanistic approach emphasises that teachers have the right and the obligation to take responsibility for their own professional development.

In asserting the humanistic position, Clark (1992) stresses that TPD should be voluntarily chosen and controlled by the participants, and that it should meet the needs and desires of the individual teacher. Duckworth and the Experienced Teachers Group (1997) describe a group of fourteen experienced teachers who took charge of their professional development in this way. “They came together to learn from each other and to discuss matters that were important to them. This was the context in which they struggled to become a supportive and productive group” (p. 3). Teachers know about education as few others do. Many times they know what

they need to know in order to improve professionally. There is no reason for others to control their professional development.

The self-understanding model has its limitations, however; it can become self-indulgent, time-consuming and costly (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992). The outcome of humanistic approaches can be unpredictable in general and Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) caution us against harbouring too-high expectations of their benefits. Furthermore, humanistic approaches can conflate the processes of development and therapy, thereby depicting teachers as people in need of help who are dependent on experts' knowledge for their development. Another criticism is that the emphasis on personal responsibility for change in these approaches fails to account for the systemic responsibilities of the larger social, economic, and educational context. Some authors thus, maintain that it is the school's responsibility to create an atmosphere that would nurture teacher innovations and enhance the development of teachers' collegiality and collaborative culture (e.g. Hargreaves, 1992; Placier and Hamilton 1994).

But Hargreaves (1992) cautions that if schools are allowed to control and manage collaborative cultures, the latter might end up being compulsory, forced and formal. Another difficulty is that elite groups can form if collaborations are not open to all teachers. For example, some teachers might be considered too inexperienced to include in the professional dialogue. Others (typically young women with small children) might be single parents who have little extra time for participating in such projects. Such groups might end up excluded from the more "privileged elites" within the school. To conclude, in the "Collaborative-Professional-Dialogue" group of TPD models teachers are capable of creating their own professional development as long as certain conditions are met.

### **Trends in TPD in Recent Literature**

As one reads through the recent literature on TPD, it is possible to identify themes or directions within the programs designed to promote TPD. Three such directions are (a) movement from individualistic to collaborative professional development; (b) movement from short-term to long-term endeavours; and (c) movement from expert ownership of TPD to teachers' ownership. Each trend will be discussed in turn.

*(a) Movement from individualistic to collaborative professional development*

A growing number of articles that describe collaborative TPD provide evidence that teachers experience meaningful learning when they reflect collaboratively on their practice. While the literature on TPD examines different kinds of collaborative initiatives most are between teachers and university educators. (See, for example, Baird and Mitchell, 1987; Baird and Northfield, 1992; Bell and Gilbert, 1993; Brandes, 1994, 1995a; Brandes and Erickson, 1998; Cole and Knowles, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Duckworth and the Experienced Teachers Group, 1997; Erickson, 1991; Fullan with Stiegelbauer, 1991; Lieberman, 1986 a and b; Lieberman and Miller, 1991; and Richardson, 1994 a and b). But there are also collaborations in schools, some between teachers, and others between teachers and students. Also, one kind of collaboration sometimes develops into another kind. In the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL), for example, a teachers-university educator collaboration developed into a collaboration between teachers, in which university educators did not participate (see Mitchell and Northfield, 1992; and Baird, 1992).

It is not surprising that collaborations between teachers and university educators are more common in the literature than other types since university educators normally write-up their experiences for academic journals and teachers do not. Even if other collaborations are relatively common, therefore, they tend not to appear in the literature. A few collaborative TPD initiatives between teachers have been described by Cole and Knowles (2000), Clark (1992), Raymond, Smyth (1991), and Butt and Townsend (1992), while descriptions of collaborations between teachers and students are even more rare (but see Cole and Knowles, 2000 and Thiessen, 1992).

*(b) Movement from short-term to long-term professional development*

The second direction relates to the length of time needed for developing collaborative programs. Such programs are not seen as “one-shot remedies” but rather as long-term processes (e.g. Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992; Richardson, 1994 b). Time is needed to enable teachers to get to know each other, develop trust, share ideas, develop strategies, try the new learning in their own classroom, and then return to the group and reflect on their findings. This is seen as a complicated process that cannot be achieved over a few hours or days.

*(c) Movement from expert to teachers' ownership of their own professional development*

The third direction that can be identified in the literature is that teachers are offered opportunities to design and monitor their own professional development according to their own needs. Teachers identify their needs for further professional development, collaboratively design and develop programs that best suit these needs, and implement and modify the programs as needs change (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Duckenworth and the Experienced Teachers Group, 1997; Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992).

These three directions can also be interpreted as a tendency to move from positivistic to interpretivistic approaches to TPD. The former tends to be individualistic, product-oriented, formal, compulsory and directed towards administrative priorities. The latter tends to be more collaborative, process-oriented, informal, voluntary and directed towards teachers' needs (Apple and Jungck, 1992; Cole and Knowles, 2000; Hargreaves, 1992; Robertson, 1992). Other complementary tendencies are from external to internal, i.e. from "developing the teacher", to developing teachers' "knowing"; from "top-down" to "bottom-up" approaches; and from an all-consuming professional life to a more balanced approach which takes into account the teacher as a person (Huberman, 1992).

I do not mean to imply that "out there", in the field, where the actual programs are operated, there are no short-term workshops being planned and performed by experts outside of the teachers' community. In fact, the opposite is the case. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), this kind of TPD tends to get "undue emphasis". However, growing criticism is being directed towards these types of programs. As Fullan (1991) says quite bluntly:

Nothing has promised so much and has been so frustratingly wasteful as the thousands of workshops and conferences that led to no significant change in practice when teachers return to their classrooms (p. 315).

Thus, expectations for significant<sup>1</sup> changes in practice are directed toward those programs that are collaborative, long-term, and owned by participants. The community of teachers described in this study is an example of such endeavour.

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson (1990) defines "significant change" as "change that educationally makes a difference for the students in the classroom" (note 2, p. 16).

## **PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine, in an Israeli high school context, the process of development as a group of teachers became a community of teachers. The study aims to deepen our understanding of teachers' communities, and the centrality of caring relations in educational settings. Three key questions guide the inquiry.

### **Question 1: What is the process by which a small group of teachers became a community of teachers?**

In order to understand how teachers' communities might be created and sustained in secondary schools, it is important to learn more about the process by which a small group of teachers becomes a community. A detailed study of the process that enabled this change might shed light on the culture of teaching, and especially on the processes that allow the move into a collaborative mode. The first question aims to attract attention to these processes.

### **Question 2: What are the defining attributes that made this community of teachers more than a group of colleagues?**

The second question brings the construct "community" to the fore, and concentrates on the differences between "group" (or "association") and community. In order to answer this question we need to study what characterises a community and what differentiates it from a group.

### **Question 3: How does social context influence the process and substance of such a community?**

This is a study of a community of Israeli teachers. Much of this community's uniqueness depends on the cultural and social context within which it is embedded. The context is tightly connected to and exercises much influence on the nature, processes, and substance of this specific community. The third question attends to this connection.

Isolation and alienation characterise the culture of teaching not only in Israel but also in North America and many other parts of the Western world. Hargreaves (1992) uses the word "Balkanization" to describe a culture characterised by separate and sometimes competing

loyalties among groups of teachers. Kainan (1996 b), who describes the relationships among Israeli high school teachers, claims that competition occurs not only between but also within groups of teachers, and that it contributes to the status and priority of some teachers at the expense of others.

In such a culture teachers cannot afford to openly discuss their difficulties in teaching. Trusted colleagues are rare, and each teacher must “protect her back” from the unseen - though strongly felt – “evaluative knives” of peers. A climate like this constrains teachers. They feel unable to learn from each other, consult with more experienced and competent peers, or get help from, and provide help to, one another. Because all teachers are expected to be competent, there is no place for revealing one’s practice, nor ways of speaking about its difficulties or problems. Teachers thus lack the cultural tools to speak openly about their most essential issues, i. e. learning and teaching.

This study suggests that by participating in a community, teachers might overcome cultural norms of isolation, alienation, competition, and other restrictions. Initiation of teachers’ communities within schools is likely to increase mutual trust as teachers open their hearts as well as the closed doors of their classrooms, and eventually talk not only of success, but also about the difficulties and dilemmas of daily practice. Community conversations about teaching and learning could create new, authentic, and meaningful knowledge and thus bring about change. The study suggests that in an atmosphere of trust and open dialogue competitive relations might give way to the development of caring relations with both peers and students.

I suggest that the experience of caring relations within a community of peers is a *necessity* in the specific culture of Israel. Living in Israel means being continuously threatened by wars and terrorist attacks, enduring compulsory military service for several years, and managing the social stress of rapid population growth and overcrowding, as waves of immigrants flock to Israel from all over the world. No one is immune from these stresses and tensions. But, for teachers, the ability to participate in a community of caring colleagues who reject the cultural norms of silence and competition may be a positive and creative experience that encourage personal and professional growth

The study extends the body of empirical research on ‘teachers’ communities’. That term has been used quite frequently in the literature on teacher professional development of the last decade. However, much of this literature is theory-driven and provides little in the way of



empirical data. This study addresses that gap. It extends research on communities of teachers and sheds light on 'caring' as a feature at the heart of community. Few authors relate to caring as a meaningful construct. Even fewer provide data on what teachers think about caring, how caring can be learned, or on the place of caring in the school setting. This study could also contribute to research on international comparative interpretations of teacher professional development, which is an area of interest for a number of researchers and educators. A more detailed explanation on each of these areas follows.

In the 24<sup>th</sup> volume of Review of Research in Education, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) list 21 publications during the last decade on teachers' communities. However, only a few of these publications are similar to the study proposed here, in which actual secondary-school teachers work collaboratively within a model where teachers take control over the content and the process of their professional development. Some examples are Baird and Northfield, 1992; Bell and Gilbert, 1994; Brandes, 1995a; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Erickson, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1992; Lieberman, 1986 a, 1986 b, 1988; and Richardson, 1994 b. Consequently, this study will contribute to the literature on collaborative inquiry and on teachers' communities.

This study enriches that part of the literature on the culture of teaching that emphasises the positive effect of caring relations between teachers and on teacher-student relations (see for example Hollingsworth and Sockett, 1994; and Lieberman 1986a, 1986 b, 1988). Nel Noddings (1999) claims that caring is not just a human and moral behaviour but is rather a necessity in the educational system and needs to be seen as a professional behaviour. Competent teachers, she says, *must* care for their students. This study not only strengthens Noddings' claims, but also suggests a way for helping teachers to become caring teachers by participating in a caring community. The study brings evidence that by participating in conversations that raise their awareness of the centrality of caring relations to the learning process, teachers can learn how to establish such relations with peers and students alike.

The study was conducted in Israel, a culture markedly different from those of North America, New Zealand and Australia where similar studies on teachers' communities have been carried out. A detailed description of Israeli practices will offer a unique contribution to the literature of international and comparative education, which examines some of the similarities and differences between secondary teachers in those cultures, and therefore enables researchers to enlarge their perspectives on teaching and learning.

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study is divided into three sections. The first part, which includes chapters one through three, provides the background. Chapter two situates community as a theoretical framework of this study. Chapter three considers the study's methodology-- naturalistic inquiry -- outlines my research methods, justifies the use of case study methods for this research, and includes a discussion of my methodological "stance".

The second group of chapters, four through seven, reveals the Israeli and the school contexts and discusses the tight connections between contexts and the teachers' community at the heart of this study. Chapter four describes the Israeli context. Chapter five describes the site and the participants of the study and their reasons for participating. Chapter six describes and analyses the impact of the context and culture of school on the progression of the group, while Chapter seven analyses their impact on group conversations.

The third part of the study consists of chapters eight through ten, which reveal, discuss and analyse the findings of the study and relate them to themes in the literature described in chapter one and two. Chapter eight discloses the features of the community and discusses the "how" and "what" of the community's conversations, emphasising the particular way in which knowledge was constructed in these dialogues. Chapter nine concentrates on caring--the main characteristic of the community in question. It examines the evidence and analyses the claim that we have created a caring community. The final chapter concludes the study by providing answers to the research questions, noting the contributions and limitations of the study's theoretical frameworks, and outlining recommendations for future research. Appendices follow this chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Searching for an explanatory theory/theories for this study was complicated and took a few turns along the way. The theory that guided this study is Social Constructivism which is not a single monolithic theory, but rather, a cluster of perspectives united by underlying similarities in world view (Candy 1987: 297). Social constructivism explains learning as a process of active constructions that occur while interacting with others, and stresses that individual activity is culturally situated. This perspective was useful for planning the study however, once the data were collected it was no longer useful in helping me making sense of data, in guiding my understanding of the processes that took place in the study, or in analysing them. In other words, there was something at the heart of my data that could not be explained within this framework.

As I searched for a theory that would explain the specific quality of our teachers' group I arrived at Tonnies' theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which pointed to and explained the nature of this specific quality, namely community. The theory of community thus became an explanatory framework for this study. However, my search for a meaning-making theoretical framework did not end with Tonnies' theory of community. I still struggled to find out what turned our group of teachers into a community of teachers. Nel Noddings' theory of caring provided a solution to this struggle. This theory sheds light on the relational aspect among humans and gives an exact word and meaning to the main attribute of our community – caring. Therefore, Tonnies' theory of community and Noddings' theory of caring became the explanatory theoretical framework for this study. It is important to stress that this explanatory theoretical framework was developed not as a framework that guided this study, but rather as a conceptual tool with which the data of this study can be analysed. These conceptual tools are described in two different chapters. This chapter is devoted to the first concept – community – while Noddings' theory of caring is only briefly mentioned here but is further explained in chapter nine.

The formation of a community is one of the most salient conditions for the development of genuine dialogue<sup>2</sup> and authentic rather than contrived collaborative relationships. This study

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<sup>2</sup> Genuine dialogue means here an unguarded dialogue where participants try to reveal their experiences and understandings rather than conceal them.

claims that the group of teachers it describes formed a community, rather than a simple association of people. But what do we mean by communities? What are their features and qualities and what do they offer their members? It is important to know what promises this construct of community holds, what its weaknesses may be, and how it relates to the larger social context. This chapter begins by reviewing (part of) the general literature on community and then centres on community in schools.

The first part of the review is based mainly on writings of Bellah, Masden, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipron (1985), Etzioni (1993, 1998), and Sergiovanni (1994).<sup>3</sup> The second part of the chapter reviews the body of literature that sees community as a vehicle for teacher learning and helping schools change, for example the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), Davis and Sumara (1997), Feiman-Nemser and Floden, (1986), Hargreaves (1993), Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), Hollingsworth, 1992; Jacullo-Notto (1986), Lieberman (1986, 1988), McLaughlin (1993), Richardson (1994 a and b), Richardson and Anders (1994) and Schwartz (1986). The third part of the chapter presents three arguments for creating teachers' communities in schools. The first is that these communities are essential for teachers' growth and development. The second is that they allow teachers to free themselves from the chains of isolation. The third argument relates to caring relations, learning, and growth that teachers might experience within communities. I suggest that such experiences may lead the way for teachers to bring a similar culture into the classroom. These arguments are based on the writings of Palincsar, Magnusson, Ford, and Brown (1998), Franke, Fennema, Carpenter, Ansell, and Behrend (1998, 2001), and Lave and Wenger (1991).

## **COMMUNITY IN SOCIETY**

### **What is community?**

Although community is a fundamental concept in sociology, there is no universally accepted definition. Raymond Williams (1976) explains that the complexity of the term relates to its two different levels of meaning: "on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialisation of various forms of common organisation which may or may not adequately express this" (p. 66). This to say that on the one hand the word community relates to the relational aspect (common concerns) while on the other hand it relates to the organizational

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<sup>3</sup> Although I cite from Buber (1958, 1965a, 1965b, 1966), I do not relate to his theory of community as part of the study's theoretical framework.

aspect. Community, he adds, can be a warmly persuasive word that describes an existing or alternative set of relationships. But what is probably most important, is that “unlike all other terms of social organisation (state, nation, society, etc.), it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (66).

Although there are many different definitions of community, I have found two, which seem to be useful for identifying those elements that do not exist in other forms of association (such as occasional meetings). The first, by Bellah, et al. (1985) defines community as “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain *practices* that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (p. 333, authors’ emphasis). The second, by Etzioni (1998), defines communities as “webs of social relations that encompass shared meanings and above all shared values” (p. xiii).

Both definitions stress certain elements that exist in communities but not in other associations. Shared meanings, values, and practices are most dominant but, as we will see later in this chapter, they do not exhaust the elements of community. Participant(s) in an association take no responsibility for its existence, values or aims. No specific relationships or time frames (e.g. a limited number of hours together) are required in order for an association to exist. Unlike a community, an association provides less of a sense of belonging: association members tend not to feel that the group is important for them and that they are important for the group (See Osterman, 2000).

The above definitions quite accurately describe the teachers’ community presented in this study. However, the first definition emphasises practices and neglects the major role of *relations* within community while the second definition works in reverse, pointing to communal relations as the element which gives the community its specific qualities, and neglecting the shared *practices* which bind community members together. Combining these definitions, while emphasising the professional element, would provide a better and more accurate definition that is more relevant to the community of teachers discussed in this study.<sup>4</sup> I

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<sup>4</sup> I should note that the words “community” “Hishtalmoot” and “group” are used interchangeably in this study. There are four reasons for this: The first is to ease the reading of the document by not using the same word too often. Second is that the study’s participants most often used the terms “group” or “Hishtalmoot”. The proper use of the Hebrew word “Hishtalmoot” is professional development. However, in everyday use of this word, it can be understood as “group”. Teachers often said “our Hishtalmoot” when they meant “our group”. Third is that the Hebrew word for community does not hold the kind of warmth and intimacy that is implicit in the English term. And fourth is that although community has lately been used in teachers’ discourse in Israel, it was never mentioned by the study’s participants. I felt that my descriptions would be closer to teachers’ reality if I used their own descriptions. However, the term community is so central to this study that I use it and the other two terms interchangeably throughout the study.

define community as *a group of teachers who are socially interdependent, who participate together in long-term conversations and decision-making, and who develop social relations and share meanings, values and practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it*. This definition adds an important feature that is lacking in the definitions of both Bellah et al. and Etzioni – the element of conversation.

### *Conversation*

Conversation is probably the most common of all verbal interactions. Davis and Sumara (1997) maintain that conversations differ from other modes of verbal interactions (such as interviews, debates, and certain types of discussions) in several meaningful ways. In conversations, the topic is not predetermined; it arises in the process of conversing (p. 111). Conversations usually wax and wane and— even when restricted to a specific subject or issue—tend to develop in different, unexpected, and unanticipated directions. Participants in a conversation have only limited influence on the direction the conversation takes, and people can find themselves participating in conversations, which take unintended and unanticipated directions.

In his essay “Distance and relation” Buber (1965 a) expresses the belief that people need to converse with each other, and that conversations are the means for fulfilling relationships: “genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfilment of relation between men [sic] means acceptance of otherness. [...] Human life and humanity come into being in genuine meetings” (p. 69). Some 32 years later, Davis and Sumara (1997) describe the power of conversation, and its specific characteristics using similar terminology. They describe the way that conversations meander and arrive at unpredictable places, and propose that

conversation might be thought of as a process of “opening” ourselves to others, at the same time opening the possibility of affecting our understandings of the world – and hence, our senses of our identities that are cast against the background of the world (p. 111).

According to Davis and Sumara, then, conversations are not only, as Buber suggested, a way to fulfil an inherent need for genuine meeting between people, but also are a means for learning. When we converse we give words to our beliefs and our conceptions of the world. Doing so, we “taste” them and test them against other ideas. This is our way of constructing our understandings of the world.

Following a community's conversations might help a researcher define its authority, membership, identity and legitimacy but it will not, by itself, explain why it is a community rather than an association or organisation. For that, we need to examine two foundational, sociological constructs: *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*. First presented by Tonnies (1887/1957) more than a century ago, these constructs permit a deeper and more complex sociological and psychological understanding of community.

### **Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft**

Tonnies (1887/1957) argued that the historical advance of modern society causes a drift from community values (*Gemeinschaft*) and creates a society based on contractual values (*Gesellschaft*). The trajectory from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* tracks that of the move from hunter-gatherer societies, to agricultural and, later, industrial societies. In his analysis, Sergiovanni (1994) draws on Tonnies to explain that communal relationships "are based on understanding about what is shared and on the emerging web of obligations to embody that which is shared" (p. 7). With contractual values, however, life becomes increasingly impersonal. "Connections among people and between them and their institutions become more contrived. Meaning and significance in life become more difficult to find" (p. 8).

*Gemeinschaft* is an "ideal type" in which community relationships are based on feelings of belonging, friendship, intimacy, co-operation and trust. We can identify three different forms of *Gemeinschaft*. It is found in the form of kinship, in the "we" identity in families and extended families. It is found in the form of place, in the feeling that emerges when people share a sense of physical belonging. And it is found in the form of mind, in the bonding together of people who share common goals, values, or conceptions of being. Sergiovanni maintains that although all three forms of *Gemeinschaft* are valuable, the form of mind is essential to building communities in schools. While *Gemeinschaft's* relationships are socially important, they can create problems. First, *Gemeinschaft* is inherently conservative. Because it is based on what is established, customary, familiar, and comfortable, too much can block progress. Second, an excess of *Gemeinschaft* threatens the basic, healthy, and legitimate sense of individual privacy.

*Gesellschaft*, in contrast, is an ideal type of contrived or contractual relationship in which "sentiments, material wants and needs, sweat and toil" are exchanged in pursuit of some goal or to gain some benefit, without which the relationship ends (Sergiovanni 1994: 9). Emotional, psychological, and cultural ramifications accompany these relationships, in the form of feelings

of alienation. The modern western corporation is an example of *Gesellschaft*. Relationships in corporations are usually formal and distant, and built on prescribed roles and responsibilities. Rules and protocols provide criteria for evaluation; acceptance into the 'community' is conditional and depends on how much the person co-operates with and achieves for the organisation.

Although these relationships and the feelings of alienation they bring seem to be major social ills, *Gesellschaft* is not without value. We live in a society characterised by a technical rationality that has brought us much in the way of scientific progress, and by strong demands for individual autonomy. This notion of the liberal individual helped free us from narrow religious beliefs and prejudice. It allowed us freedom to express ourselves, search for meaning in our lives, and live in a democratic society that protects individual rights. When dealing with these terms, we must remember that *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are not only ideal types but also polar extremes on a continuum. They represent society's *tendencies* to develop toward individuality or community, rather than any specific reality. In a balanced society communal and individual needs will be held in fruitful tension. Sergioanni suggests that we need "to build *Gemeinschaft* within *Gesellschaft*" (p. 15). But instead of this outcome, he maintains *Gesellschaft* is increasingly taking over, and, as a result, many of us experience competitive and insulated lives.

#### *Contrasting individualism and commitment to society*

In "*Habits of the Heart*", Bellah and his associates (1985) examine the relations between individualism and commitment to society in American life, focusing "on the mores – 'the habits of the heart' – that include consciousness, culture, and the daily practices of life" (p. 275). Bellah et al. present a culture that is (partially) characterised by individuality and separation (*Gesellschaft*), but is also based on traditions that help people make sense of their lives. "The erosion of meaning and coherence in our lives is not something Americans desire" they claim. "Indeed, the profound yearning for the idealised small town that we found among most of the people we talked to is a yearning for such meaning and coherence" (p. 282). In a society where individualism and personal autonomy are almost sanctified, there is a deep yearning for recovery of a tradition of interpersonal connection (*Gemeinschaft*). "Few have found a life devoted to 'personal ambition and consumerism' satisfactory, and most are seeking in one way or another to transcend the limitations of a self-centered life" (p. 290). Although



some Americans subscribe to intense forms of individualism, others “find meaning in life not primarily through self-cultivation but through intense relations with others” (p. 291).

But where is it possible to experience these intense interpersonal relations? How does one learn to develop them and to make tradition a central element of life? What is the role of our major social and cultural institutions in fostering these relations? According to Bellah and his co-authors, institutional contributions are either nonexistent or negative (as with television.) They suggest that helping society towards more communal relationships should be the role of educational institutions, and endorse the call

for a reaffirmation of the classic role of education as a way to articulate private aspirations with common cultural meanings so that individuals simultaneously become more fully developed people and citizens of a free society” (p. 293).

Today’s educational institutions tend to choose technique over tradition; education thus becomes an instrument of individual careerism rather than personal meaning or civic culture. Even so, “somehow, the tradition does get transmitted, at least to students who seek it out” mainly because some teachers love it and “cannot help transmitting it” (293). Transmitting tradition does not mean educating for a return to the harmony of a “traditional” society, but rather for an openness ‘to learning from the wisdom of such societies’ (296). Openness to traditional wisdom

does not reject the modern criticism of all traditions, but it insists in turn on the criticism of criticism, that human life is lived in the balance between faith and doubt. [...]. Such a vision seeks the confirmation or correction of discussion and experiment with our friends, our fellow citizens (p. 296).

If they are to educate for communal values and a more balanced society, schools themselves must become more balanced and communal. Teachers and students alike need to *practice* community.

#### THE NEED FOR COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOL

Different kinds of communities have been described in the literature on schools: students-only; teachers-only; students-teachers-mixed; and communities that involve combinations of teachers, parents, administrators and academics. Discussion here will be limited to the teachers-

only type of community under study. In his book Among school teachers: Community, autonomy and ideology in teachers' work, Joel Westheimer (1998) explains what the two groups of teachers he studied gain from participating in their communities.

Teachers derive support, motivation, and direction from one another. [...] They work collaboratively on curricular projects toward goals that they and their students find meaningful. Teachers meet during lunch, after school, and during preparatory periods to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and individual students. These teachers are able to foster for their students and for themselves what John Dewey calls a "social" mode of learning. Rather than the isolation and professional alienation that seem so common in many of today schools, these teachers experience a sense of membership. They are part of a community of teachers. (p. 10)

Westheimer asserts that schools could nurture development of teachers' communities, so that teaching and learning would be more vital and collegial as well as more rewarding socially and personally. However, he provides little in the way of practical suggestions as to how communities of teachers might be generated or sustained. Rather, he describes two such communities and identifies the structures and processes that helped them grow professionally, overcome tensions, and learn about the problems and dilemmas that impede them.

Many educational reformers believe that by strengthening professional ties teachers will form inspirational communities that will enrich the connections among themselves and their students (see for example, Darling-Hammond 1988, Lieberman, 1988; Smylie and Tuermer, 1995). These expectations are based on three different assumptions. The first is that teachers share some kind of common understanding and agreement about the type of community they should seek. Second is that given the right conditions teachers would know how to turn organisational opportunities into communal relationships. The third assumption is that teachers truly seek such communities. Some studies indicate otherwise (see Westheimer, 1998), and some even point to the danger that communities might encourage rather than reduce teacher isolation (see Little, 1986, 1990 and Lieberman et al. 2001). Teachers' understanding of their professional roles varies greatly (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986; McLaughlin, 1993), as do their interpretations of, and their wish to participate in teachers' communities.

Sergiovanni (1994) maintains that for too long schools were perceived and treated as *Gesellschaft*, with unhappy results; it is time now to adopt a perspective more aligned with *Gemeinschaft* if we are to bring some balance to society, and give hope to students and teachers. Other scholars see the construction of communities within the school setting as a prerequisite for educational change. Palmer (1998), for example, writes that

Involvement in a community of pedagogical discourse is [...] a *professional obligation* that educational institutions should expect of those who teach [...] the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it (p. 144, my emphasis).

Although we grow by private trial and error, we need to be part of a community of *colleagues* that will encourage us to take risks (Palmer 1998). We take a risk when we expose our classes and our professionalism to colleagues, but by not doing so, we put at risk our further development as teachers. Palmer urges teachers to grow professionally by working collaboratively with other teachers. He urges us to abandon the 'silent consensus' that private, isolated, conservative behaviour "works". Sergiovanni (1994) adds that lack of community is the main reason for the slow pace of school improvement. "If we want [...] to enable good schools to flourish, we need to rebuild community. Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort" (p. xi). Shulman (1997) believes that schools are places where teachers and students can learn together in the same communities. He also calls for teachers to collaboratively reflect on their own practice in teachers-only communities, where they can learn from each other and thus generate a collective knowledge different from that generated by individual teachers:

Teachers must be in communities where they can actively and passionately investigate their own teaching, where they can consistently reflect on their own practice and its consequences, where they can engage collaboratively with one another, to investigate, discuss, explore and learn from one another about what happens when chance occurs in their teaching and thereby, where they can, as members of the community, generate a base of knowledge that goes beyond what any one of them could learn in the isolation which characterizes their classrooms (p. 32).

Teachers thus describe and reflect on what happens 'when chance occurs' until a deeper understanding emerges of what happens in the messiness of their classroom; how and why they

acted the way they did; and what alternatives were available to them. Such meaningful learning does not occur in isolation. This is not to say that teachers cannot individually examine and reflect on their practice, but communal conversations tend to suggest alternative ways of thinking and behaving thereby deepening understanding of complex situations. As later chapters of this study will illustrate, the knowledge and understanding generated in the group cannot be generated by the individual teacher in isolation.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) stress the importance of teachers' communities as a means for school change. While they use the terms "group" or "collaborative culture" rather than 'community'<sup>5</sup>, the sense remains the same: teachers are encouraged to group together in communities in order to develop effective schools, with higher levels of student achievements. In such schools teachers participate in continuous learning within groups characterised by "[s]trong interdependence, shared responsibility, collective commitment and improvement and greater readiness to participate in the difficult business of review and critique" (p. 48).

Collaborative culture is ideally an ongoing way of professional life, where success and failure are shared and discussed and where teachers have broad agreement on educational values but nevertheless feel secure enough to discuss disagreements in an open manner. In such a culture, argue Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), teachers are valued as individuals, "[t]he total person counts" (p. 50). Smyth (1991) adds his belief that by understanding "their own personal and collective histories and [by working] collaboratively at unravelling the culture of their own teaching" (p. 2), teachers will be empowered and, thus, be more willing to bring about changes into their schools.

Palmer's vision of teaching and education is that "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (1998: 90). A community of truth is one where there are no pristine objects of knowledge and no ultimate authorities. "Truth", says Palmer, "is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (1998: 104). In other words, in the context of teachers' communities in school, truth is a longitudinal ("eternal") conversation about learning and teaching and other issues connected to schooling and society that matter to those who participate in the community of truth. Palmer does not

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the change in the educational discourse, from "collaboration", which was used during the 1980's and early 1990's, and underlies the notion of aim - people collaborate for certain reason and for certain aims - to "community", which hints at a more holistic, humanistic notion that takes in account the needs of teachers as people rather than see them only as means for students' learning. Collaboration is seen in that literature as a precondition for community.

tell us what things teachers should converse about, nor where they should arrive at the end of these conversations, as this, he believes, is for the community's participants to decide.

Further, it is not only the content of the conversation that is important for the lives of communities of truth. The emotional part of such conversations—their 'passion and discipline'—gives them much of their power. Teachers are passionate when they talk about their profession. Passion is what drives them to continue their work in spite of all difficulties. The members of the community described in this study, for example, were passionate enough to attend every weekly meeting; to freely share their thoughts and feelings in these meetings, and to try out in their classes whatever strategies were suggested. Passion drove Palmer to write his book, and was probably the strongest emotional drive of my own writing. But to effect change, passion should be controlled by disciplined effort. In the group, for example, each participant disciplined themselves to sincerely listen to others with different views and perspectives. The combination of disciplined listening and passionate self-expression improves the likelihood of a truthful conversation.

The community of truth that Palmer describes represents an alternative to the positivistic 'transmission' model of truth-knowing and truth-telling (Bolt, 1998; Beach, 1999; Dyson, 1999) that still dominates our schools. The transmission perspective invokes a linear image of arrows pointing down from object, to expert, to amateur. In the community of truth, linearity gives way to circularity and object gives way to subject: a web of arrows connects all community members (experts as well as amateurs) to each other and to the subject. Subjects are 'available for relationship' (Palmer 1998: 102) and occupy the centre of a community's attention, while objects are detached and objective. In a learning community, the learning process is a function of shared observations and interpretations, the resolution of conflicts, and the achievement of consensus.

For Davis and Sumara (1997) the relational core of their "community of practice" extends beyond teachers and students to include interactions with others such as school administrators and parents. The concept of community thus grows far beyond the actual group of people that relates in a classroom setting. What binds a community together is the joint action of all those involved. According to Davis and Sumara, these continuous and evolving interactions constitute "the form and substance of the [community's] collective knowledge" (p. 115) which is constructed in the course of interaction rather than in relation to individual cognizing agents (p.116). Unexpected learning takes place in the course of interactions as participants'

conceptions grow, develop and intertwine. As a result, “collective knowledge and individual understanding are dynamically co-emergent phenomena” (p.119).

Buber (1965a, 1965b) also emphasises the significance of relationships, differentiating communities from groups and organisations by the way participants relate to each other. A community requires two factors if it is to be sustained: principled struggle and a commitment to relationships. Without principled struggle, narcissism and self-interest will prevail. Where principles are strong, but an equal commitment to relationships is lacking “then only association, not community is fostered” (Arnett, 1986: 16, interpreting Buber). The sense of belonging to a community is “a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (Mcmillan and Chavis 1986: 9). Belonging or relatedness is a basic psychological need which “involves the need to feel securely connected with others in the environment and to experience oneself as worthy of love and respect” (Osterman 2000: 325).

#### **TYPES AND FEATURES OF COMMUNITY**

To become purposeful, says Sergiovanni (1994), a community needs to value an ‘image’ in the centre of itself, and develop norms that will guide it toward this image. Sergiovanni lists many different forms of communities in schools. Each one has a normative structure composed of *values, sentiments and beliefs*. So, for example, learning communities put learning at the centre of their value system; professional, collegial, inclusive, and inquiring communities are similarly normatively centred.

In Shulman’s (1997) proposed example of a learning community, teachers are called to learn from one another, to collaborate in the process of learning, and to engage in the subject matter (which in this case is their practice). Knowledge is generated from this process of reflecting on and exploring practice. Shulman believes that “the very principles that explain why students learn in communities of learners, explain how teachers can learn in communities of teachers” (p. 32). He refers to social-constructivist principles according to which learning occurs when people (students, teachers, or mixed groups) converse, relate to each other’s ideas, and gradually construct their understanding. In other words, learning in the course of social interaction is the value at the heart of this proposed community.

In the following section I argue that when a community's two most valued concepts are practice and inquiry, it might be characterised as a "community of practical inquiry". For a deeper understanding of this concept I first present features of communities of practice and inquiry, and then suggest how the concepts might be combined in a community of practical inquiry.

### **Community of practice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain that the question of knowledge and its location in the world is governed by the concept of communities of practice. A community of practice is "a set of relations among persons, activity, and the world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). Learners improve their practice—develop the 'skills of the trade'—through direct participation, i.e. by engaging in the practice of an expert (p.14) and in the discourse of the community (p.105) rather than by studying a body of abstract knowledge for later application.

In the community I studied, however, the learning that took place was more about developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning than about new techniques and new ways of teaching. Moreover, although the focus of our conversation was on improving teaching, participants stated that the most meaningful learning was about the place and power of caring in the process of teaching and learning in the community we created.

It is important to note that all participants in our study belonged to two different communities: the larger "community of the trade" (Lave and Wenger) representing all the teachers in the school and the smaller, more intimate community of teachers participating in the study. In the "community of the trade" some were experts and some newcomers but all were engaged in the same practice—i.e. teaching. In the smaller community, all participants became members at the same time so there were no old-timers or newcomers. Instead, the knowledge of what it meant to be a member was built as the community itself developed. In this respect it was a community of practice, where the practice was *participation in conversations* during the meetings. Improving the practice (or becoming an expert in this practice) meant moving from peripheral participation (not talking in the meeting, or being reserved), to full participation (being deeply involved, sharing experience, creating caring relations with and providing support to other community members).

What is the impact of belonging to one community on participation in the other? Is there any connection between the "level" of participation in each of these communities? Does full participation in the larger community make it easier for a teacher to become a full participant in the smaller, and vice versa? Although these are relevant questions, they are beyond the scope of this study, as the larger community is not my focus. I thus leave these questions unanswered.

### **Community of inquiry**

Participants of a community of practice do not have to be engaged in any kind of inquiry. For example, an ensemble of musicians that meets weekly to play together might be called a community of practice but would be a community of inquiry only if they investigated their music or their practice. One might argue that there is an element of inquiry in any group of practitioners who share experiences and that exchange about music is part of an inquiry process. However, practice rather than inquiry is the central element that characterises the group of musicians described here. In contrast, a group of basketball players that meets weekly to practice the game might well be a community of inquiry if they dedicate time (with or without a coach) to analysing previous games and learning from their mistakes and successes. Questioning what turned a particular game into a success or what caused a good move to fail constitutes a form of inquiry: data must be observed, collected, and analysed to arrive at a satisfactory answer. Our community of teachers was engaged in similar questions: what made a particular lesson successful? Why do students react negatively to a certain type of lesson? In this respect, our community can be regarded as a community of inquiry.

Engaging in conversations about teaching clearly constitutes a form of learning for teachers, who begin to theorise about teaching by reflecting on and reasoning about their actions in class. In a community of inquiry, teachers are encouraged to seek multiple points of view and look at issues from many perspectives. Sharp (1990) maintains that the purpose of a community of inquiry is "to bring participants into deeper and more significant relationships, to shake them free of their complacency, their false convictions and to make them available for more comprehensive understanding" (p.87). Participants in a community of enquiry are encouraged to discover, invent, interpret, and critically evaluate their own and each other's ideas or practice.

However, though necessary and important, intellectual inquiry alone is not sufficient for learning how to teach or how current ways of teaching might be improved. For this,



participants of a community of inquiry are likely to be engaged in the actual practice of teaching. We thus arrive at the need to combine inquiry and practice in a “community of practical inquiry”.

### **Community of practical inquiry**

Virginia Richardson (1994) introduces the idea of “practical inquiry” which teachers, responding to a personal sense of validity, undertake in their everyday work lives in order to understand and improve their contexts, practices, and students (p. 7). Richardson’s example was a collaborative staff development process that focused on teachers’ beliefs and practical reasoning, and current research on reading comprehension. Describing the researchers’ concerns and difficulties, she states:

We didn’t walk into this process with a set of neat prescriptions for practice, but worked from the teachers’ own understandings and rationale [...]. We were concerned with individual teacher responses and interactions: did we interpret responses validly? How could we have missed what teacher A was trying to say? There is some underlying anger, here; how should we deal with it in the next session? Are we talking too much? Too little? In this inquiry, we were not looking for propositional, law-like statements. We wanted to understand *that* context and *those* participants so that we could meet our goals (p. 8, author’s emphases).

Practical inquiry armed the participants of this professional development program with immediate information that could be used by individual teachers in their next class. It helped the researchers to understand and describe the process of professional development to themselves and to other participants.

According to Franke et al. (1998) practical inquiry is way for teachers to focus their questions and reflections on practice: “The focus of a teacher’s practical inquiry determines what a teacher sees as critical, and what constitutes an opportunity for reflection” (p. 68). Some teachers involved in practical inquiry might search for ways to improve their teaching and thus be engaged with experimenting with new practices, while others might be more interested in examining their practices in relation to their own thinking and the thinking of their students.

### *Features of Communities of Practical Inquiry*

Researchers suggest different characteristics for identifying communities of teachers within schools, variously called “knowledge building communities” (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993), “communities of inquiry” (Brandes and Erickson, 1998; Sharp, 1996) or “communities of teachers” (Shulman, 1997). Many of these characteristics are found in the community presented in this study.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) propose five criteria for their “knowledge building community”. Participants in such communities share their knowledge, support one another in knowledge construction, develop a kind of collective expertise that is distinguishable from that of the individual group member, develop and engage in progressive discourse, and demonstrate respect and recognition for peers. These criteria will be further discussed in Chapter 8 where I provide evidence to show that they were met with in our teachers’ community.

Shulman (1997) envisions communities of either students or teachers or of both together. All are learning communities, since the value of learning is central to each. In these communities teachers are called to learn from one another, to collaborate in the process of learning, to engage in the subject matter, to reflect on and explore it and to generate knowledge from this learning process. Shulman defines six principles that characterise communities of learners: generative content; active learning; reflective thinking and practice; collaboration; passion; and community culture. Learning, says Shulman (1997) occurs when the content to be learned generates new understanding and /or serves as a basis for future learning. He asserts that in a learning community the learner is an active agent in the process, and the learning becomes more active through experimentation, inquiry, dialogue and questioning.

Constructing knowledge is not only connected to the cognitive or the social aspects of learning; it is also tightly connected to the relationships that are developed among the people who construct this knowledge (Goldstein 1999). Goldstein maintains that caring relationships play an important role in the teaching-learning process, and that the roles played by affect, volition, and relationships in cognitive development are yet to be further researched. There is a need, stresses Goldstein, “to highlight aspects of the process of co-constructing knowledge that have been underexplored in the literature thus far” (p. 669). Caring relations within communities of teachers is one of those aspects that needs further exploration.

To conclude this review, I now briefly present three arguments for creating teachers' communities, i.e. that: communities of teachers are essential for teachers' growth and development; participating in teachers' communities allows teachers to free themselves from the chains of isolation; and, experiencing caring relations, learning and growth within a community might lead the way for teachers to bring this experience into the classroom.

## **ARGUMENTS FOR CREATING TEACHERS' COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOL**

### **(1) Communities are essential for teachers' growth and development.**

Socio-cultural theories of education argue that the process of learning and development takes place within societal interactions rather than in isolation. Lave and Wenger (1991) claim that learning is situated in socio-cultural contexts, and Palincsar et al. (1998) believe that "thought, learning, and the construction of knowledge are not just influenced by social factors but are, in fact, social phenomena" (p. 6). Agreeing with those writers may lead to two conclusions. First, the promotion of teachers' growth and development seems to be closely connected with the development of teachers' communities. Although these are not the only socio-cultural contexts in schools, they promote teachers' learning by providing the opportunity to converse with peers rather than with students. Second, to understand teachers' construction of knowledge, it is important to understand their context. Chapter 6 of this study addresses the empirical question of cultural context.

Franke et al. (1998) maintain that teachers' professional development should bring about "a change in teachers' epistemological perspectives, their knowledge of what it means to learn, as well as their conceptions of classroom practice" (p. 67). These writers envision a continuous process of professional growth and problem solving, which conceptualise teachers as ongoing learners and professional development as a vehicle for "self sustaining, generative change" (p. 67). To support such change, they say, teachers must engage in practices that serve as a basis for continued learning.

Such practices are likely to include some kind of understanding of the nature and effects of the students' learning process (Franke et al., 1998: 68). Teachers generate new ideas not only when they try new activities in class, but also when they struggle to understand *why* students succeed in these activities, and how students' thinking develops. This approach to professional development shifts the focus from initiating change to principles of continuous learning and

growth. The teachers Franke and colleagues studied maintained the importance of belonging to a community where “[t]he teachers operated as sounding boards for each other as they thought about how to use knowledge of children’s thinking in classroom practice” (p. 71). I suggest, then, that teachers build their own communities where they can question (and thus change or deepen) their epistemological perspectives, their knowledge of what it means to learn, as well as their conceptions of classroom practices. All this is to be done while interacting, jointly deliberating, and collectively pursuing shared goals.

## **(2) Communities allow teachers to free themselves from the chains of isolation.**

Communities of practice provide teachers with trust, care, and a sense of belonging that allows them to openly converse with and learn from each other. Such communities are essential not only because teachers learn better within them but also because they provide support and care within the educational system. Teachers traditionally work in isolated and stressful environments that lack the intellectual support and emotional care that they themselves are expected to provide their students. The nature of teaching is private, personal and individualistic (Cole and Knowles, 2000; Little, 1992).

Palincsar and her associates (1998) believe that teachers are unlikely to form ‘natural’ communities of practice in a typical school culture, where isolation prevails and there is no consensus on the goals and means of education. (This contrasts with some other workplace cultures, see Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001: 947). Teachers, then, are deprived of the collegial and intellectual support that a community of practice can offer, and thus their own learning and development is weakened. However, schools are not “natural” phenomena. Cultural and societal change can bring about different understandings of what schools can and ought to be for both students and teachers. Osterman (2000) maintains that teachers and schools have the responsibility to encourage the development of a sense of community. But how can this be achieved if teachers lack personal experience of what this means? The formation of teachers’ communities is one way to overcome isolation and the absence of intellectual and emotional support within schools.

Palincsar et al. (1998) base their reasoning for the need to germinate and sustain communities of teachers on socio-cultural theories of learning. Because learning and the construction of knowledge are social phenomena, “it makes enormous sense to provide occasion for interaction, joint deliberation, and the collective pursuit of shared goals – that is, to nurture

communities of practice” (p. 6). When teachers construct their own communities, they break their traditional isolation and get to talk and think with peers. This is true of the communities described by Baird and Mitchell (1987) and Brandes and Erickson (1998) which were shown to be safe places where trust and care fostered dialogue and, therefore, promoted individual learning and development.

### **(3) Communities can influence teachers’ classroom practices**

Educational leaders are increasingly demanding that teachers should encourage more class discussions and collaborative work, and evaluate students in unconventional ways. To do this effectively, teachers will benefit from deep understanding of what it means to work with peers, and how it feels to provide and receive support and care. Yet, as we have seen, teachers generally lack these experiences and knowledge can be deeply constructed only if it is experienced. In order to understand the difficulties and the advantages of the new demands, teachers require first-hand experience, which can influence their understanding of the importance of establishing caring relations with students.

Cultural norms of isolation prevent teachers from engaging in the kinds of dialogue that allow them to think about and question their practice. They rarely share their professional successes or failures with other teachers, and seldom engage in self-questioning about the reasons behind particular outcomes. In a community, however, teachers can experience the advantages and disadvantages of working with others to develop teaching materials, plan curricula and analyse students’ responses. Engaging in peer analysis of teaching practice provides teachers with an opportunity to grow professionally.

Once they experience the benefits of participating in a community, they are more likely to bring the critical analysis of practice to bear in their own classrooms. They are also more likely to appreciate new approaches to teaching that incorporate the social dimensions of learning, such as group discussions. Students’ conversations during class might then be understood as a sign of interest and of knowledge construction rather than of boredom and distraction.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Tonnies’ theory of community serves as a conceptual tool to claiming that there is a need for more balance between the values of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* in schools. The table below

organises the discussion of these constructs into a few, easy-to-follow categories, which are meaningful in the school context: the relationships that are expected to develop; strengths; weaknesses; ideals on which the construct is based; the construct's values in today's schools; and possible implications for high-school teachers.

It is important to re-emphasise that these terms do not aim to describe the complexity of reality but are rather mental presentation of *ideal forms* of society. These terms are to be understood as two extremes on a continuum, where each presents a *tendency* for society to develop towards individuality or community.

Table 1: Main characteristics of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*

|  | <b><i>Gesellschaft</i> – Association</b>   | <b><i>Gemeinschaft</i> – Community</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Relationships</b>                             | Contractual, formal, distant, built on roles and prescribed responsibilities. Rules and protocols provide criteria for evaluation. Acceptance of members is conditional and depends on how much the person co-operates and achieves for the organisation.  | Based on understanding about what is shared and on the emerging web of obligations that embody what is shared.  |
| <b>Strengths</b>                                 | Development of independent, autonomous individuals. Freedom from narrow religious beliefs and prejudice. Freedom of self-expression and to search for individual meaning. A democratic society with laws to guard individual rights. Enhanced development of scientific and technical rationality. | Collaboration, reflective conversations, and caring relations encourage participants to introduce change into their practice. Mutual support, motivation, and direction.  |
| <b>Weaknesses<br/>(If too much,<br/>then...)</b> | a) Feelings of rejection, alienation, isolation, distrust, and loneliness.<br>b) contrived exchange of sentiments, material wants and needs.<br>c) instrumental relationships undertaken to reach some goal or benefit, without which the relationship ends.                                       | a) Can inhibit innovation because of reliance on what is established, customary, familiar and comfortable.<br>b) can result in loss of the basic, healthy need for privacy.<br>c) can lead to contrived collaboration.  |
| <b>Foundational<br/>Ideals</b>                   | Individualism, individual rights and freedoms.   | Traditions that place relationships at the centre of meaning.   |
| <b>In today's<br/>schools</b>                    | Dominates all social structures within the educational system.   | Occurs in few schools; little overall impact on the educational system.   |
| <b>Implications for<br/>teachers</b>             | Continuation of teacher's isolation; learning is limited to individual experience; educational change in teachers' practice less likely to occur (except for involvement in specific inquiry such as individual action research).  | Teachers derive support, motivation, and direction from one another; participating in communities encourages teachers to introduce changes in practice; the experience of communal relationships encourages teachers to experiment with these relationships in the classroom. |

A society dominated by the values of *Gesellschaft* needs to build *Gemeinschaft* within it (Sergiovanni, 1994: 15). This is the case whether we refer to society as a whole or one of its central structures – our schools. In schools today the outcomes of *Gesellschaft*'s dominance are alarming; we need to build communities that will balance this dominance. Schools might also serve as the social structure that will take the role of helping society to move towards more communal relationships. To achieve this, teachers and students might find it beneficial to first *experience* communal relationships. This study centres on the way one community of teachers was built and sustained, bringing communal values into the individualistic social world of school.

## SUMMARY

This chapter provides the conceptual tools for the study, which concentrates on the processes of creating and maintaining a community of high-school teachers. The community in this study is defined as a socially interdependent group of teachers, who participate together in long-term conversations and decision-making, and who develop social relations and share meanings, values and practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. When teachers participate in communities, they support one another, share successes and failures, and discuss educational values in an open manner. While teachers are valued as individuals in such a culture, they construct knowledge in communities, which they could not have constructed without participation. As a result, they develop professionally, become empowered, and are thus, more willing to bring about changes in their classroom practices. The following chapters will provide the evidence that participating in a community of teachers is, indeed, essential for teachers' growth and development and allows them to free themselves from the chains of isolation.

The methodology used for gathering this evidence is rooted in the case study tradition within the philosophy of naturalistic inquiry. In the next chapter I elaborate on these terms, provide the framework for the study's methodology and explore the tradition of case study.



## CHAPTER 3: CONSIDERATIONS OF METHODOLOGY

The first part of this chapter anchors the study in the methodology of naturalistic inquiry and presents the problems associated with studying researcher-researched relationships 'in one's own backyard'. The section ends with an exploration of the challenges of conducting a study in one language (Hebrew) and presenting it in another (English). The second part of the chapter reviews case study methods. Part three describes my research design and strategies of inquiry. It provides an overview of the study site and participants and describes the methods used for data collection and analysis. This section ends with considerations of ethical issues.

### PART 1: CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES AND NATURALISTIC INQUIRY

This study adopts a constructivist approach to ontology and epistemology—the knowable and the knowledge or truth—and the methodologies through which we acquire knowledge about the world. My interpretative stance relies on a *realist-constructivist ontology* which asserts multiple, socially constructed realities. *Realist-constructivists* believe that while an objective world exists 'out there', each individual constructs their interpretations of this reality somewhat differently, relative to their particular experiences of the world (see Glasersfeld 1990).

Constructivist ontology deals with viability rather than 'Truth'. The goal is a description of reality that provides "the most informed and sophisticated construction on which there is consensus among individuals most competent (not necessarily most powerful) to form such a construction" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 86). This definition allows many different 'truths' and points-of-view to exist side by side, open to scrutiny and challenge. Consequently, constructivist principles "cannot be adopted as an absolute truth but rather only as a working hypothesis that may or may not turn out to be viable" (Glasersfeld, 1990: 23).

When reality is approached as a largely mental construction, the concept of 'objectivity' loses meaning, because different people construe (interpret) the same 'objective' set of facts in different ways. Each person's history, and hence world is unlike anyone else's. Each person thus, sees the situation, understands and responds to it in a different way which bears her or his own signature (Eisner, 1998: 34). Knowledge, thus, is seen by constructivists as a "set of workable hypotheses or 'templates', constantly being put to the test in interactions with other people's constructions of the same situation" (Candy 1987: 312).

As a researcher within a realist-constructivist framework I give attention to the ways the study's participants understand their reality and to their attitudes towards it, as well as recognising the structural context of the world in which they act. The information I report includes the views of the participants as well as of the researcher. Such a study cannot separate the knower from what is known, or even what is knowable. Furthermore, it must acknowledge that the inquiry is influenced by different sets of values: those of the inquirer and the people involved in the inquiry; those reflected in the particular theories through which the inquiry is understood; and those related to the paradigm in which these theories belong, whether positivistic or naturalistic.

Accepting the relativist tensions inherent in a realist-constructivist ontology, and adopting an interactive epistemology, my wish is not to find out "the way things really are", but rather, to "expose the constructions of the variety of concerned parties, open each to critique in the terms of other constructions, and provide the opportunity for revised or entirely new constructions to emerge" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 89).

### **Conducting a Naturalistic Inquiry**

In the last twenty years there has been a growing interest in naturalistic methodology within the realm of social sciences as a whole and in education in particular. This interest is influenced by post-modernist theories which question (and oppose) the universality of *any* phenomenon or idea. Post-modernist perspectives legitimate (and stress) 'otherness', and point to the disappearance of borders between subject and object. The term "subject" has migrated from psychology into socio-linguistics, where it takes on a close relation with subjection (Gurevitz, 1997). Such theories question the neutrality, objectivity, and value-free status of the researcher, as well as natural ways of collecting and interpreting data. It is no longer possible to ignore issues of power, language and voice when we study behaviour and perspectives. The naturalistic methodology allows such questions to surface and requires researchers to face and deal with these issues.

### *Research for Understanding*

Rather than looking for cause and effect relationships, naturalistic researchers seek to *understand* complex interrelations. Stake (1995) elaborates on this distinction: "explanations are intended to promote understanding and understanding is sometimes expressed in terms of

explanation – but the two aims are epistemologically quite different” (p. 38). Understanding has a characteristic of *empathy* that explanation lacks, and while understanding is connected with *intentionality*, explanation is not. Naturalistic or qualitative inquiry “tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, some *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey” (Stake 1995: 39, author’s emphasis).

In this study, I follow Stake’s distinction: my description of the Hishtalmoot does not seek to explain *why* things were the way they were, but rather allows readers to understand *how* things were at a particular place and time. Thick description is “an effort aimed at interpretation, at getting below the surface to that most enigmatic aspect of the human condition: the construction of meaning” (Eisner, 1998: 15). By providing “thick description” of the processes by which a small group of teachers became a community, I hope to communicate our actual experience and establish the kind of empathetic understanding Stake identifies. Thus, this study is inlaid with episodes, stories intended to “optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 40).

#### *The Role of the Researcher: Making Choices*

Awareness of one’s own subjectivity is an important responsibility of a qualitative researcher. At all stages of the study I was faced with difficult choices about interpretations of events and situations. At the site itself, whenever I took part in the dialogue, my input could (and probably did) cause a turn in the conversation. My responsibility was to be aware of the power relations associated with my place in this delicate web of interactions. I needed to understand the power I had within this group of teachers; the ways I was different from other group members; my impact on the group in comparison to the impact of other participants; and the consequences of acknowledging my power in terms of the study’s validity and reliability.

I made other choices later, while working on, interpreting, and analysing my data. These choices related to what was important and meaningful enough to be included in the dissertation and what did not belong there; what could safely be considered “background noise” or simply be ignored; and what knowledge about the participants I was willing to include and what I would leave out. These decisions are never neutral; they are based on the researcher’s educational and cultural background as well as on our needs and beliefs. My choices, for example, were influenced by several factors. First, postgraduate students who want to develop

as academics must make sure they meet the requirements of committee members and earn their appreciation and approval. Second, an Israeli who studies in a university outside Israel is likely to face the difficulties of describing, interpreting and explaining the context of her country and culture. Third, I was both a teacher in the school where the study took place and a member of the group that was the subject of the study. These factors left little room for 'objectivity'.

### *'Strong objectivity'*

Sandra Harding (1991) rejects the idea of value-free, impartial, dispassionate objectivity without which, according to conventional thought, "one cannot separate justified belief from mere opinion" (p. 138). She argues that this notion of objectivity is "excessively weak" (p.142) and offers, in contrast, a new term: 'strong objectivity'. Emerging from a feminist epistemology, this term acknowledges that all human beliefs are socially situated; as such, all scientific research must include systematic examination of those beliefs. "Researchers must examine critically not only the beliefs of the researched, but also their own beliefs, and researchers should investigate the relations between themselves and those they research, rather than deny the existence of, or seek unilateral control over, this relation" (p. 152). In other words, strong objectivity incorporates critical perspectives and self-reflexivity, as well as examination of the dual stance (the stance of both the researched and the researcher) that is at the heart of ethnographic inquiry.

In a study like this, the best way to deal with the problem of "objectivity" is to expose and present the researcher's values as clearly as possible. By embracing the notion of "strong objectivity", I hope to acknowledge the influence of my values on this study. By disclosing them, I invite the reader to judge their impact on my interpretations.

### *The Role of the Reader*

This case study is an in-depth examination of one group of Israeli teachers, in one particular setting. As such, it cannot be generalised to any other group of teachers, in either Israel or any other country. There is a question of the utility of undertaking an inquiry that is relevant to only one situation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is the role of the reader, not the researcher, to decide the question of transferability. The reader's responsibility is to decide what works, what appears right for particular settings. The researcher's responsibility is to provide enough information to allow the reader to make such a decision. Eisner (1998)

maintains that given the needed information human beings have “the spectacular capacity to go beyond the information given, to fill in gaps, to construe meanings” (p. 211). In this study, thick description emerges from the rich narrations of multiple voices, through which different perspectives surface.

### **Researching One’s Own Backyard**

Doing research in one’s “own backyard” (Glesen and Peshkin, 1992: 21) enables researchers to draw on an intimate local knowledge of the setting. Local knowledge of the school’s political, social and cultural milieu, and the location of a particular group of teachers within it, can be a great advantage. Such knowledge provides an easy entry to the field of study, the communal discourse, and the language and culture of teachers. But some disadvantages should also be noted. Studying such sites, says Creswell (1998), may compromise the value of the data; “individuals might withhold information, slant information toward what they want the researcher to hear, or provide ‘dangerous knowledge’ that is political and risky for an ‘inside’ investigator” (p. 114). As will be shown subsequently, conversations on “sensitive” issues failed to disclose any such manipulations in my study. As far as I can judge, teachers in our group considered my opinion no more valuable than anyone else’s. This is not to say that I am unaware of my power within the group. I will return to this important topic later.

Although I did not directly experience the above mentioned difficulties, I consider researching one’s own backyard to be problematic for a number of reasons. A fish does not understand it lives in water; it is too familiar with its habitat. Similarly, researching one’s own culture can suffer from an excess of familiarity. In every culture, members know certain things intuitively and inquiring about them seems out of place. I found it difficult to ask questions that other teachers assumed I knew the answers to. However, by not asking, I deprived some participants of a voice, and the interpretation I drew from their behaviour was mine, not theirs. To overcome this difficulty (once I realised its existence), I had to go back and ask people if they agreed with my descriptions of their reality. Some teachers agreed with my interpretations while others provided alternative explanations that I used in this study.

Creswell (1998) maintains that an investigator’s familiarity with the culture might result in the loss of information about norms and values. My experience reinforces this insight. I found it difficult to know what needed to be described and explained. My blindness to my own cultural norms became apparent to me only when I received feedback on early drafts of this study.

Readers noted gaps and requested information that I had left out because I found it 'self-evident'. Like the fish that does not know it swims in water, I failed to realise how much context I took for granted and, therefore, how much I needed to explain.

The complexity of doing research in the school where I had taught for 19 years became clear only when I was deep in the "swamps" of this qualitative study. Although a number of authors caution against researching one's own terrain (see Glesen and Peshkin, 1992: 21; Wolcott, 1994; and Creswell 1998: 114-115), I took a long time to understand why this might be the case. For example, initially I anticipated no problems in reporting the group's conversations as long as identities were protected<sup>6</sup>. Nor did I expect problems in remaining loyal<sup>7</sup> to my peers, since I did not intend to disclose anything potentially harmful, even at the cost of making my data incomplete. However, in the process of writing and re-writing, probing and questioning, reflecting and analysing I realised that there was more than one way to interpret loyalty.

For some teachers, certain descriptions of relationships within the group were too revealing; they suggested I might be betraying the trust built up during our work together. For others, these same descriptions were a way of gaining power; any disclosure of power relations within the group could be interpreted as disloyalty. What then was my role in this complex setting? How could I reconcile competing loyalties towards friendship and research? But the dilemmas of such choices were easy compared to the choices I was *not* aware of making; for example, by unintentionally neglecting or concealing information from my readers. Dealing with dilemmas like these was part of my reflective journey; the whole process of analysis was influenced by questions of loyalty and power relations.

As the researcher, in writing about this community and its teachers I had the power to choose whose voices would be heard. I needed to be aware of what influenced which quotes were chosen: whether or not the choice was shaped by my perceptions of the person(s) quoted and if so, in what way? Unless all contributing voices were to be heard, I had to accept the researcher's responsibility to make appropriate selections. The choices I made are clearly

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6 For an interesting discussion on the problematics of keeping anonymity of participants, see Judith Shulman's (1990) sensitive article.

7 One of my committee members pointed to the word "loyal" and noted that my choice of words is "interesting". When thinking about other alternatives to this word I can easily see how the Hebrew language impressed my choices. There is no Hebrew word for the English word "collegiality"; thus we use the word "loyalty" when we mean collegiality. Loyalty has a stronger sense of obligation compared to collegiality, therefore I choose to use it here. The problematics of writing a dissertation in ESL will be discussed in more detail shortly.

power-related. Questions of power influence not only the life of the group, but also the “life” of the written word.

Another problem in naturalistic research is the risk of misunderstanding what people mean. In this specific study, the risk was even greater because I was translating my colleagues’ words from Hebrew to English. I struggled to understand exactly what they were saying (in Hebrew), and to write what they *actually said* rather than what I *thought* they were saying. To ensure precision, I asked participants to review my transcripts of meetings and interviews. This is a common method of triangulation (Stake, 1995). Most chose not to do so, however, while the few who did make the effort offered no useful comments. To compensate, I modified my conversational responses, using phrases such as, “let me see if I understand what you just said” or: “I hear you saying that...” This technique soon became awkward and I had to find alternative methods of triangulation more acceptable to my peers.

To conclude, although doing the research in the context of my own school had its advantages, these tended to be offset by the negative impacts of over- familiarity.

### **Writing a Dissertation in a Second Language**

In this section I offer some thoughts about language, translation and meanings. Richardson, L. (1994) defines language as a “constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality...” (p. 518). In other words, rather than reflecting social reality language creates it through the assignment of meaning. Nuthall (1997) claims that “meaning is referred to by words, not contained in words” (p.33). He argues that the reason people can communicate through language is because they share specific experiences and can therefore attribute specific understandings to each other. Thus, words create or relate to meaning, not just reflect it. This factor foregrounds some questions that arise when research crosses language barriers. This study was conducted in Hebrew and presented in English. A sense of the resulting interpretative complexity was apparent even in the early stages of the research.

When I first presented my research interest in teacher professional development, I was asked to define the constituent terms. But my understanding of professional development related to the Hebrew construct rather than the English definition. In Hebrew, “professional development” is called Hishtalmoot and is most commonly related to workshops or courses designed for teachers. However, this word is larger than it appears. The noun Hishtalmoot originates from a

verb that means to become more whole, more perfect, or with fewer flaws. The grammatical structure implies direction: from the self to the self. Hishtalmoot is self-directed. It is an action of becoming better: one that can be experienced only by the acting person.

This understanding of Hishtalmoot guided me to the assumptions that underlie the study's design. The first assumption suggests that *teachers are to work towards professional and individual growth and development in order to become better practitioners*. This means that teachers, like any practitioners, can always improve their practice and thus, in their case, promote students' learning, which is the purpose of all professional development in teaching (Cole and Knowles, 1993; Doyle, 1990; and Sparks and Loucks-Horsely, 1990). The second assumption is that *the process of professional development should be managed by the participants (the teachers) and not by outside expert(s)*. The participants are to be responsible for the content and processes of their own Hishtalmoot, as it is an action directed from the self toward the self. The third assumption is that this process is *long-term*; 'perfection' cannot be achieved in a one-shot exposure to training. In fact, because perfection can never be attained, the process is never-ending. This third understanding connects the meaning of Hishtalmoot to the concept of 'lifelong' professional development.

Another complexity arises from language issues. As this study was conducted in Israel, all interviews and field recordings took place in Hebrew. In order to present my findings in English, I needed to translate (at least part of) the collected data. Thus, in addition to the familiar problems of interpreting the observed, my data were exposed to the further layer of interpretation inherent within any translation. No matter how good, accurate and close to the original, translation always involves some missing meanings that are culture-bound. It is not possible to consistently transmit the exact meaning of expressions and words from one culture to another, and it is especially difficult to do so from a 'high context' to a 'low context' culture (Hall, 1977). High context cultures are those in which people use fewer words to express the rich shared meanings of their common history. In low context cultures, more words are needed to explain meanings. Although no culture exist exclusively at one end of the scale or the other (Hall 1977: 91), the people of Israel share relatively common experiences and a common history. Thus, a large amount of context can be expressed with very few words. By contrast, English-speaking cultures are physically vast, extremely diverse, and lack a central history or pool of common experience. In English, therefore, much attention is given to explanation and specific details. These linguistic and cultural differences encouraged me to explore and



elaborate deeper layers of meaning in translating specific terms and words, as in the case of the word Hishtalmoot.

In her book Lost in transition: A life in a new language Eva Hoffman writes about being caught between two languages. Throughout the book, which is written in rich, beautiful English, she uses Polish words that more accurately present the essence of what she means to say. While writing this study in English, I have often found myself reaching for a word that does not come quickly enough. At these times, I turn to Hebrew, find a word, and translate it to English. Then I try to translate it back to Hebrew, to know if it “tastes” right. Sometimes it is no longer the right word. This is a frustrating and tiring process. At one point, for instance, I translated part of the group’s conversation into English and showed it to a committee member who understood Hebrew. She said that my language was too “high”, meaning I had used literary rather than conversational English. She was right. When I tried to translate the text back into Hebrew, I was unable to find the right words. The exact meaning had been ‘lost in translation.’

To contain these losses of meaning, I asked two teachers (who were not only fluent in both languages, but also deeply understood the context) to check my translations against the spirit of the transcripts. While they suggested a few changes both confirmed my translations were essentially correct. I thus left my translations largely as I wrote them, displaying the “nakedness” of my intent through less-than-expert use of expressions. Rather than acting as a barrier to understanding, I hope these linguistic anomalies will remind readers to look behind particular words for the underlying meaning.

Writing in English as a second language brought me to interesting if frustrating places. I was frustrated every time my inability to find the exact word(s) prevented me from performing to the best of my ability. Despite my fluency in English, I felt I lacked the vocabulary to write and to express myself intelligently at the doctoral level. My mastery of usage and sentence construction seemed inadequate for the task of conveying sophisticated intellectual reasoning.

I will never be able to perform as powerfully in English as I do in Hebrew, my own language. The power I speak of here flows from a class-based ability to manipulate language according to one’s needs. When I speak Hebrew, the level of language I use reveals the social class to which I belong: that of a white, educated, higher-middle-class woman, Israeli-born (‘sabra’) of European (Ashkenazy) origin. The way I use the language is modified by, and modifies, this class location. But when I speak English, my ability to signal class is lost. I did not understand

the social power attached to the proper use of language until I experienced the frustration and powerlessness of its absence. In a way, I perceived writing in a foreign language as a privilege rather than a disadvantage. The difficulties I encountered helped me to be more sensitive to words and their meanings as well as to cultural norms and behaviours. Living in a foreign culture, as well as studying and writing a dissertation in a second language, allowed me to learn more about my own culture (see Pratt 1991). I was able to step aside and write about my experience 'from a distance'. The more troubles I encountered with translation, the more I realised that my own language is complicated and beautiful. I engaged in long conversations about the roots, origins, and different meanings of Hebrew words. I learned much about Hebrew grammar and the differences in sentence construction between Hebrew and English. I now pay more attention to my students' mistakes in written Hebrew. In short, writing a dissertation in a foreign language raised my awareness of, and delight in, my own language.

One of the most intriguing illustrations of the role of language in this dissertation is the fact that no Hebrew words convey *exactly* the same meaning and atmosphere as either "community" or "caring"<sup>8</sup>—the two central constructs of this study. In order to write about community and caring, I first had to express my experience in English. Had this study been written in Hebrew, these constructs would probably not have been developed.

### Section Summary

In this part of the chapter I discussed problems associated with the naturalistic/constructivistic methodology by pointing to the nature of researcher-researched relationships. A key discussion centred on writing a dissertation in English as a Second Language. Although translational difficulties are not new in the research world, they are rarely discussed in any detail. I explored the barriers and difficulties that translation might raise and the advantages of confronting such difficulties, and shared with readers some thoughts about the connection between language and power.

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8 Although there are words in Hebrew that could be used for both community and caring, they do not hold the kind of emotional closeness that is attached to these English words. The Hebrew word *Kehiliya* does not imply the same kind of closeness and mutual responsibility conveyed by the word *Community*. In addition, *Kehiliya* is used by researchers or teachers in higher education institutions, rather than teachers. As to "caring" (*Ichpatiut*), although the Hebrew word might bring about the kind of emotional attention that is implied in English, it can not be used in the same way because of grammatical difficulties (e.g. there is no way of saying "to care" in Hebrew). This will be further explained in chapters six and nine.

The next part of this chapter discusses the Case Study method and the strategies of inquiry—such as participant observation and interviews—used for collecting and analysing the data.

## **PART 2: CASE STUDY METHODS**

Robert Stake maintains that the term *case study* “draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned from the single case” (Stake, 1994: 236). In an *intrinsic case study*, a researcher seeks a better understanding of one particular case, “all its particularity and ordinariness is of interest” (p. 236). In an *instrumental case study*, a particular case is examined “to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (p. 236). In a *collective case study* several cases are chosen which will lead, it is hoped, “to better understanding, perhaps better theorising, about a still larger collection of cases” (p.236). My study is both intrinsic and instrumental. The case itself, the group of high-school teachers that formed a community to advance their own professional development, was of intrinsic interest. However, by studying this case, it was possible to provide instrumental insight into the broader issues of community.

Prior and conflicting disciplinary understandings and practices make it difficult to precisely define the case study ‘label’ (Stake 1995: 2 fn). For example, my study could be defined as ethnography, not only because it uses ethnographic methods and sensibilities, but also because it is basically interpretative. However, ethnographic techniques are used in many case studies, and there are good reasons to consider this particular project as a case study, mainly because it is bounded by time and place. A case that has boundaries of time and place, and interrelated parts, is “a *bounded system*” (Stake 1995: 2). Stake (1994: 236) maintains that each case is “a functioning specific”. In other words, it is not a set of abstractions, a problem, a relationship, a theme, or a hypothesis. “The case is an entity. The case, in some ways, has a unique life. It is something that we do not sufficiently understand and want to - therefore, we do a case study” (Stake, 1995:133). The entity my case examines is a group of teachers, bounded in time and place, and gathered around a specific program. The case allows specific issues to be developed and issues are central to the case-study definition, which requires “problems about which people disagree, complicated problems within situations and contexts” (Stake 1995: 133).

In conducting case studies, researchers try to observe ordinary activities and to minimise their intrusion. They seek “an accurate but limited understanding” (Stake 1995: 134), in that they usually do not try to generalise to other cases. The case report is often read like a story, the observations are interpretative, and so are the descriptions within the report. My study uses

ample, but not technical descriptions and narratives; it is interpretative, and centres the context, the situation and the complexity at its heart. As in many qualitative case studies, this study is personal; my own perspective, as well as those of other participants, is revealed and discussed. The interactions between me as the researcher and the case being studied are unique; they are not reproducible for other cases and researchers.

Cases are chosen to enhance researchers' understanding of specific phenomena rather than because they are 'typical'. In fact, "highly atypical cases can sometimes contribute to our understanding of other cases" (Stake, 1995: 134). This study is an atypical case. It is unusual to form and sustain a voluntary community of teachers that directs conversations on learning and teaching. Although teachers belong to several different kinds of groups within the school (e.g. teaching subject groups), these are not voluntary associations. Nor do they provide membership in a community characterised by genuine dialogue, trust, and caring. I felt that studying an atypical case of community would reveal some important issues concerning teachers' isolation and its associated disadvantages, compared to the advantages of collaboration and the construction of new norms of behaviour and relationships within a school context.

I now present certain arguments that challenge case study methods. At the end of each argument I respond to the critique.

*(1) Case study reports need to be validated. Validity is usually gained by using different methods and obtaining a variety of perspectives. However, validity depends also on the readers' point of view. Researchers might not know how readers understood the report.*

Readers can be convinced of the validity of case reports if enough evidence is presented and if evidence is validated by triangulation. Throughout a case study inquiry, researchers must ask themselves if they "have it right", if their description and interpretation of the case is not only comprehensive and accurate, but also provides alternative explanations and support.

*(2) Case study reports are more concrete than abstract, thus difficulties arise when abstraction is needed.*

A related argument states that:

*Case studies are not suitable for developing theory because each case is unique; thus integration of case studies for theory-development distorts each one of them.*

While case studies are not conducted to develop formal theory, theoretical assertions and abstractions can be generated. Although case study reports are concrete and include much information about the situation being studied and the context within which the phenomenon occurs, in the last step of the analysis the researcher 'makes sense' of the data and provides an interpretation of 'lessons learned' (Lincoln and Guba 1995; Stake 1995), often drawing on theories or constructs in the literature (Creswell 1998). Additionally, 'grounded theory' can emerge from the wealth of qualitative data collected. Although looking for an abstraction or theory is acceptable, Stake (1994) warns against damage that might occur "when the commitment to generalise or create a theory runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself" (p. 238).

*(3) Case studies seem to be ineffective in producing novel solutions, as they contain details only of the existing case, and nothing from other places. (Shadish, Cook and Leviton, 1991)*

A deep understanding of one case might provide novel solutions for other cases. Thick description, multiple sources of evidence, and multi-faceted interpretations can lead readers to make *naturalistic generalisations from one case to another* (Stake 1995). This specific case study of a teachers' community, for example describes a novel situation that was developed precisely as a result of the wish to study it. In other words, my desire to understand a community of teachers was the driving force for establishing and maintaining such community.

*(4) Case study results are usually qualitative. This can be a problem concerning the use of these results. According to Shadish et al., (1991) "qualitative approaches have been less credible and useful to the client than quantitative ones" (p. 312 authors' emphasis). The reason for this is that quantitative data are easier to manipulate, organise and summarise when large amount of data is presented.*

The supposed superiority of quantitative over qualitative data relates to its tractability. But tractability comes at a cost. These types of inquiry exclude the points of view of participants, thereby weakening the research and lowering its level of credibility. In social science in general, and education in particular, 'scientific hard data' is unlikely to provide the depth of understanding we need. Although qualitative data are not easy to manipulate, through their

variety and multiplicity they provide the depth and interpretative sophistication that quantitative data lack.

### **PART 3: DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

The study reported here is a single-case account of the development of a teachers' community in an Israeli school. In this section, I briefly describe the study site and participants the methods (participant observation and interviews) used for data collection and the way the data were analysed.

#### **Overview: of Site and Participants**

The site of this case study is "Rabin High" a large school of some 1400 students and more than 120 teachers (mostly women) located in the rural mid-southern part of Israel. The students (ages 13-18) are bussed from 25 different villages. School begins at 8:00 A.M. and ends by 1:30 or 3:00 P.M. six days a week (Sunday to Friday). There are several small buildings; each contains 6-7 classrooms for a single grade level. A small classroom in one of these buildings served as our group's meeting place. In addition, there is a large library and an administration building housing the staff-room, and the principal's office. The buildings are set among large lawns, some mature trees, and flower beds: unusual scenery in an Israeli high school. Teachers usually teach only four to five days a week but when in school, their days are hectic. They have limited time for meeting with each other, recesses are short, and they usually rush from one class to another and from one chore to another.

The teachers' group (Hishtalmoot) began its meetings in November 1997 and continued throughout two academic years: 1997-1998, and 1998-1999. The study, however, examines only the first year of meetings. The ten teachers who formed the group volunteered to participate in a self-directed professional development initiative centred on learning and teaching. Self directed learning in this context means "a form of study in which learners have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991: 41). Although I was the initiator of the group, I did not act as the group's leader: I did not decide what issues would be discussed, nor did I guide the group in any particular direction. My intention was to document what happens within

a group of high-school teachers when they are granted time and a safe place to freely discuss their professional interests, successes, and difficulties.

As an experienced teacher in this school, I had no problem negotiating access to the site and potential participants, and securing the principal's written permission for the study. Participants were recruited by way of an invitation letter, posted in the staff room, which described my intentions for this endeavour (see Appendix I) Ten was selected as the optimum number of people to be recruited; this would create a group small enough to allow efficient discussions and large enough to allow diversity of ideas and opinions. Within a few days, ten teachers had proposed themselves as candidates for the Hishtalmoot; all were invited to join and accepted, and the list was closed.

The group was diverse in multiple ways: some members were young and new in the teaching profession, others were at the verge of retirement after almost 30 years of experience. Teachers taught different subjects (Arabic, English, Hebrew literature, Hebrew grammar, Biology, History, Keyboarding, Home Economics, and Special Education), and our students came from different group ages and academic levels. What connected us right from the beginning was our mutual interest in sharing our teaching experience with peers who are familiar with our context and appreciate its complexities.

### **Research Methods**

This study draws on data derived from participating in, observing, and documenting 20 meetings between November 1997 and June 1998, in which secondary-school teachers collaboratively directed their own professional development. Meaningful data are also derived from three sets of interviews conducted at the beginning of the group's meetings (December 1997 to February 1998), at the end of the academic year (June and July 1998), and two academic-years later (end of 1999). Other sources of data included a reflective journal, maintained throughout the study; 'letters to Tami' written by some participants; and several telephone conversations. Although, all meetings and interviews were tape-recorded, the device was always under the control of participants. They were responsible for turning it on at the beginning of the meeting, and any participant could turn it off, at any time, without explanation.

The study is both descriptive and exploratory, which means that its purposes are to document the phenomenon of teachers' professional development (TPD), to investigate and identify themes and issues of importance to TPD. The study inquires into what makes the meetings of this specific group of teachers meaningful to the participants? What salient themes, behaviours, events, beliefs, attitudes and processes emerge in the particular group under study, and how do all these link with one another? The actual research questions are (i) what is the process by which a small group of teachers became a community of teachers? (ii) What are the defining attributes that made this community of teachers more than a group of colleagues? (iii) How does social context influence the process and substance of such a community?

### *Interviews*

In the course of the study, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Most took place in teachers' homes while others were conducted in the school site. Informants were assured their identities would be disguised in published materials, and the name of the school would not be mentioned. Interview data were coded and password protected.

To guide the interviews, I developed a schedule of questions and topics that I hoped to cover. The order of the questions was not important and I did not press for an answer on every one. The main purpose of the guide was to help me stay focused amid the flow of vignettes, anecdotes and opinions. These loosely structured interviews allowed informants to be confident that they could control the content of our conversation. I gave them enough room to talk about topics in their own way and at their own pace and to decide what they counted as important. This approach generated a substantial amount of relevant data and helped save time for both parties.

I conducted three interviews with each participant. The first interview, which took place at the beginning of the academic year (November 1997 to January 1998), allowed us to become familiar with each other. I asked about their reasons for joining the group and explored their expectations and perceptions of learning and teaching. In the second interview, conducted at the end of the academic year (June and July 1998), I asked about the interviewees' experience within the group and their evaluation of it. We explored their perspective of major themes and events during the meetings and discussed possible changes in their perspectives on learning, teaching, group dynamics, and towards me. The third interview took place two years later, at



the beginning of the 1999-00 academic year (September 1999). The purpose was to learn more about participants' lives so I could present them to the readers of this study. This last interview turned out to be an interesting source of evaluation of Hishtalmoot as participants chose to talk about our community and evaluate its impression on their professional lives. More about evaluation see chapter 7.

*Participant-observation: Splitting of Intention and Division of Attention*

In the role of participant-observer, I took part in and recorded the weekly meetings. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and parts<sup>9</sup> of the transcriptions were translated into English. At each meeting I handed participants a short summary (one to two pages) of the previous meeting. Questioning showed that these summaries were considered useful as orientation tools, as long as they were received at the beginning of the meeting.

The role of participant-observer demanded two different kinds of attention, neither of which was natural to me. On the one hand I needed to understand and write down what I heard, saw, felt, and understood. On the other hand, and at the same time, I needed to monitor inner questions, such as: whether or not I was telling the truth (or, whose truth I was telling), and whether my position as a group member was causing me to overlook or conceal certain data. I was constantly aware that I might be "painting" data in bright colours; that my position as a peer teaching in the same school could affect my interpretations. In other words, my attention was divided in the classic dichotomy between participant and observer: careful listening and reflexive assessment on the one hand, and unfettered group participation on the other.

The tension between the two roles is not the only difficulty encountered by participant-observers. Another problem is the 'observer effect'. Once participant observers enter the site, they influence the site and therefore what is observed. The mere fact of observation affects the data and observers themselves are changed by what they observe. Their interpretations of the data constantly change as they keep learning about their site. In social theory, Giddens (1990) describes this effect as a 'double hermeneutic' (p. xxii and 348). Repeated iterations and reiterations are an unavoidable consequence as researchers strive to stabilise their understandings over time.

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<sup>9</sup> Not all the transcripts were translated, as this would be an overwhelming and unnecessary task. There were over 700 pages of transcripts of the meetings and the interviews; therefore I translated only those parts of the transcripts I judged to be of evidentiary significance. These judgements are part of the interpretive journey. A different researcher might well have made different judgements about what was 'worth translating'.

As a participant-observer, I also had to deal with issues of personal trust that could affect the openness of some group members or influence group dynamics. I found that by explaining my role as a researcher, assuring anonymity, and sharing my thoughts and analysis with the group members, I gained enough trust to enable open and free flow of the conversations. Another way of gaining trust is to provide participants with early drafts of the analysis and ask for a response. As already discussed, however, group members chose not to spend time on these reviews and I adopted more informal methods, such as casual conversations, notes, and telephone calls.

### **Other Sources of Data**

#### *Reflective Journal*

Ethnographic work can alter the perceptions of researchers. There is a need to identify and follow these changes, as part of the changed “reality” of the study itself. The use of a reflective journal helps to sensitize researchers to their own ongoing changes. In the journal I kept throughout the study, I noted the ways I was being affected and changed by the intertwining acts of participating and observing. Later, these reflections enabled me to analyse the effects of perceptual changes on my observations. Throughout the year of the study I wrote in the journal after each meeting and interview and sometimes beforehand. As well, as I transcribed the meetings and the interviews, I added passages of additional insights to the journal. I tried to get deeper into my feelings, discomforts and hesitations and record my impressions of group processes. I documented important moments in the life of the school and set down my plans for the dissertation. In constantly exploring my study questions I came to realise how much my understanding of my own culture had expanded, and how naive I had been when I first approached the study. For example, at the beginning of the year I was not aware of the central place of competence in teachers’ professional lives, and I was blind to the group’s tensions and power relations. As I became more sensitive to all these “undercurrents” they found a place in my journal. The very process of writing sharpened my insights and increased my understanding and analysis of the data.

A journal not only documents the changes the observer goes through, but also reveals ideology and biases. Observation is never neutral. Observers come to the site armed with a set of lenses or filters that shape the ways they observe and what they see. To deal with this unavoidable phenomenon researchers are expected to strive for self-awareness: an understanding of their

own biases and of the theories they carry about the world. Thus, through a disciplined process of reflective writing I was able to acknowledge my preconceptions, become explicit about my research agenda, and share (some) data analysis with the participants.

### *'Letters to Tami' and Telephone Conversations*

In a few cases, teachers wrote me notes and letters, some of which were translated and used for analysis as part of the data. All those letters were written at the beginning of the year when teachers felt that as the group's initiator, I should be aware of some specific difficulties. They used this way of communication with me when they didn't feel comfortable enough to talk openly about their conflicts in the group. In one or two cases teachers felt that on certain issues the conversations had taken different directions before they had expressed their opinion, so they wrote me a letter to express their views. It is important to emphasise that these letters were written only at the beginning of the year. After the first few weeks had passed the need for this kind of communication seemed to pass and it disappeared.

### **Data analysis**

Data for analysis derived from descriptions and transcripts of group meetings and interviews, my reflective journal, and letters and telephone conversations. The analysis is a search for patterns in the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call the process a work of synthesis that reconstructs interactions into 'meaningful wholes.' Thus, they state, "data analysis is ... not a matter of data *reduction*, as is frequently claimed, but of *induction*" (p. 333, emphasis in original).

My analysis was based on two constructs—community and caring—that emerged from an examination of the data. I started the analysis in typical ethnographic fashion by coding themes in the data. Two analytical paths emerged. The first related to the content of the data sources (mainly the group's conversations and the interviews). The second related to the group processes and relationships, including the issues that had dominated our conversations, and the hidden processes that were experienced as the group developed into a caring community.

I started the process of analysis by reading and re-reading the transcripts several times to develop a picture of the whole enterprise. By noting patterns, themes and issues, I arrived at a list of a few dozen topics. These were divided into 13 categories, all colour-coded. At that

point, however, I felt I was missing something important. Traditional ways of organising and analysing the data were not doing justice to the findings. They did not provide the right kind of information that would enable readers to appreciate *the spirit of our community*. No matter how many explanations and interpretations were added to lists of themes and issues, they did not capture this essence. I looked for other ways of presenting the data that would allow the special spirit of our community to be appreciated. I wanted to tell the “story of Hishtalmoot” in a way that would be loyal to our perceived reality and that would present its essence in a manner that readers could relate to.

This turn in my understanding of the data and the function of data analysis encouraged me to look deeper into the meaning of the construct “community”, and to seek for the correct Hebrew word to fit my needs. I was astonished to realise that none of the Hebrew words for community matched the sense used in this study. The English word “community” contains the warmth and belonging that is absent in the Hebrew word. The fact that I did not arrive at the English construct of “community” until long after the data were collected and transcribed (re)emphasises the influence of language on the way we think.

The second turn happened when another concept – caring – emerged out of the data. Drawing on Nel Noddings’ (1984, 1992, 1995, 1999) concept of ‘caring relations’, I learned to recognise these when they arose within our community. Noddings’ theory of caring provided a framework for interpreting the data and ascribing caring attitudes to some teachers’ descriptions of their relationships with students. Many of our conversations related to characteristics of caring such as providing respect, maintaining fair and flexible rules, creating a safe emotional environment, and providing personal attention to those who need it. Participants of our community learned to be caring teachers while experiencing caring relations among peers.

These two themes - “community” and “caring” – became central to the whole study; they guided the process of re-reading and analysis. With those constructs in mind, the whole venture of establishing and sustaining this Hishtalmoot seemed to take on a meaning and strength that was hidden in previous stages of analysis. The new understandings, thus, influenced and caused changes in my understanding of the data and the way I approached the analysis.

To conclude: the data analysis proceeded on the basis of issues that crystallised from group conversations and personal interviews; from documented processes that the group went through

during the year, and from understandings of these processes that were constructed after the fact. The analysis was grounded in the two concepts - community and caring - which emerged from the process of reading. Used as conceptual and analytical tools, these concepts provided new insights that affected my interpreting and understanding of the data and helped shape the analysis. Thus the analytic process was not linear and clear-cut but complex and messy, and took many turns along the way.

### **Ethical Issues**

Case study (like ethnography) requires production of "thick descriptions" of contexts, so that those researched can be more respectfully understood and interpreted. In addition, ethnography allows the voices of those researched to be present in the study. However, it is the researcher who describes the context and edits the voices, both of which reflect the researcher's biases and prejudices. This study's methodological strategies were designed to minimise this effect and support a respectful and accurate ethical approach. Five specific areas were foregrounded: (i) acknowledge the researcher's own biases and prejudices; (ii) accommodate and faithfully respect opposing interpretations; (iii) analyse thoughtfully the framing of those who are researched; (iv) acknowledge the relative power disparity of researcher and researched; and (v) conduct research in an authentically engaged rather than exploitative manner.

As the researcher who initiated the study, I am the one who determines its conditions and makes sure that they are not only ethical, but can also result in a better alternative to teachers' professional lives. This was done by determining that the Hishtalmoot would be long-term, and therefore anticipates long-term processes of learning and restructuring before any change can take place; collaborative, and therefore rejects teachers' isolation; and self-directed, and therefore respects teachers' ability to identify needs and work toward fulfilling them. By initiating and sustaining a community of teachers within a school this study might serve as a vehicle for a (limited, but important) social change within this school as well as others.

The methodological tradition of case study recognises that there are *relationships* between the researcher and the researched. These relations should be identified and the researcher should be aware of their implication on the research. In this specific group, my role was not only the role of a participant. I was the observer as well as the researcher who takes notes, interviews each participant and documents the meetings. I was also the initiator of this specific Hishtalmoot, while undertaking research for a university degree. All these gave me much power relative to

other participants. However, my whole research depended on the group. If group members had decided to stop coming to the meetings, I could have ended up unable to complete my dissertation. This is a power that participants had over me. I made it quite clear in our first meeting, mentioned it a few more times throughout the year, kept writing about it in my journal and noting it in the transcriptions.

Nevertheless, this description does not exhaust the inequality between other participants and me. For over ten years I have been teaching teachers in different courses that dealt with learning and teaching. I therefore was recognised as an authority when these issues were discussed. Participants referred to me as the knower, and sometimes, at least at the beginning of the year, they expected me to teach them or help them solve problems. Thus, my voice in the group was probably not equal to the voices of other participants. On top of all this, even as a teacher I have many years of experience which gave me some kind of authority, especially over new teachers.

This issue of power relations and my specific place in this group was discussed in our meetings a few times along the year, but not as an “on-going topic that should be re-examined over time” as was suggested by one of my committee members (Brandes, email June 2001). I agree to this comment and was aware of the need to re-examine the relationships within the group at the time of our meetings, however I had a difficulty to follow it. The fact that the issue of power relations within the group was not frequently raised (we talked about it only when I raised it), might suggest that most teachers were not interested in discussing it. Therefore, in spite of my interest to discuss power relations, introducing this issue time and again could have had an overwhelming influence on the content of the meetings, which was chosen and directed by all the participants rather than by me alone and thus become an unethical deed. Being sensitive to other group members’ needs and interests is probably not less ethical than pushing my agenda, even if this agenda seems to be ethical. Acknowledging this power and being explicit about it is one way to deal with these unequal relationships. This, however, is not enough; as an ethical researcher, I constantly tried to be aware of my power and not take advantage of my status. I was careful to get only information which participants wished to share with me, to use their time thoughtfully, and to make sure they feel free enough to resist me if they feel they need to do so.

Finally, an ethical researcher has to remember that this type of research involves a great deal of commitment. In such research we are dealing with people to whom we must show respect and

care. It is unethical to come-take-go (come to the site, get what we need to get, and go without giving back anything). As people share parts of their lives with the researcher, relations develop and thus some kind of reciprocity is expected. I was committed to constantly be aware of this need for reciprocity. I tried to share my interpretations with the group; let people's voices be heard; keep a reflective journal; and most importantly, take care that no one in the group will be harmed as a result of this study.

## **SUMMARY**

This study is based on Case-Study method. The data were mainly acquired by interviews and participant-observation, which demand a certain division of attention and avoidance of identification with either the insider's view or that of an analyst. Moreover, the participant observer is also required to deal with unavoidable and continuous changes in the observer, the observed, and interpretation of the data collected. Two main concepts - community and caring relationships - were used as the study's analytical tools. These concepts emerged from group conversations and personal interviews, group processes documented throughout the year, and later-constructed understandings of these processes.

To understand the meaning and essence of the teachers' community discussed in this study, it is important to situate it in the structural context within which it is embedded. The following chapter provides a detailed description of the Israeli social and educational system and 'Rabin High' high school where this study takes place.

## CHAPTER 4: CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

This chapter describes the two contexts within which the teachers' community studied was embedded. The section on the Israeli context describes some traits of Israeli society, including life under a constant threat of war; everyday tensions and stress; military service; communal experiences; and the way we (Israelis) talk and communicate. The section on school structures and culture describes the pace of school life, the tension within the school, and the informal relations that exist between and among teachers and students.

### INTRODUCTION

Israeli and North American high-school teachers share many similarities, but the context within which each group works and lives is quite different. These contextual differences inevitably shape the interpretations and understandings of each group's reality. As a methodological necessity, a case study must be described within its specific context and situation but this is not the only reason to provide readers with contextual background. Presenting this study outside of its context, as if 'teachers are teachers are teachers', would contradict the philosophy in which this study is anchored. I believe that cultures and contexts matter; they profoundly affect the ways people construct meaning, understand their situation, and relate to each other personally and professionally. I argue that learning is social in nature and is affected by the particular physical and social contexts in which it occurs. This 'situated perspective'<sup>10</sup> focuses on "coordination of actions of individuals with each other and with material and informational systems" (Anderson, et al., 2000: 12). In other words, to understand what people mean, we need to connect their words to their roots, to the place they come from. In this case, the connecting links run to both the broad Israeli context and the narrower context of the high school.

But whose reality and context am I describing here? What features are common and important to everyone? The "Israeli context" means different things to different people. This chapter thus represents my own understanding of the contextual factors and draws on examples from my personal history to allow readers develop a closer understanding of Israeli culture.

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<sup>10</sup> For further explanation of this perspective see also Anderson, Røder and Simon (1996); Greeno (1997); and Putnam and Borko (2000).



Residents of Israel experience a great deal of stress. Their country is continuously threatened by wars and conscription into military service is a fact of life. Hot, dry summers, years of drought, and the threat of desertification burden the country. Social stress is a factor of waves of immigration and a fast-growing, overcrowded population. Teachers and students are not immune to the tensions that surround them; all too often schools can become strained and discontented places<sup>11</sup>. In a complex society characterised by deep splits and limited tolerance to cultural, political, ethnic, or religious differences, a group of caring peers is a scarce phenomenon. Our teachers' community was an island of calm, where we offered each other time and empathetic attention. To understand what belonging to our community meant to us, the wider contexts within which it grew and developed should be elucidated.

In what follows, I first describe what it means to live under continuous threat of war and explain the requirements of compulsory military service. For me, these represent two major stressors of the national social context. I then describe the temporal structure of an Israeli high school (which can be seen as a microcosm of the wider society) and connect it to the progression of our teachers' community over time. This community is tightly connected to the rhythms of school-life that are, in turn, tightly connected to the larger, Israeli context.

#### **THE THREAT OF WAR AND MILITARY SERVICE: CORE TRAITS OF ISRAELI SOCIETY**

Since 1948, the year Israel was declared a state; four major wars (a war every decade) have been punctuated by a series of long, exhausting, frightening fights to defend our borders.

Most of us in the 'baby boom' generation are children of European holocaust survivors or of new immigrants who fled to Israel from Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Only a small proportion of this generation was born to 'old-timers', settlers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who became a social elite by virtue of their social capital and establishment connections. Faced as they were by the immediate threat of war, our parents had little time to shape new ideas or philosophies. The War of Independence started in 1948, just three years after the Second World War ended. Spanning almost a year, it cost the lives of almost 1% of the Israeli population while countless thousands more were injured. Having a country to fight for, however, after thousands of years of exile, was a novelty that helped in the process of

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<sup>11</sup> The last UNESCO report on violence in schools (cited in *Ha'aretz*, March 20, 2001: 15 a) announced that the level of violence in Israeli schools is the highest in the world! This finding is not surprising when we consider the difficult social, emotional, and economic conditions that the Israeli society faces.

rehabilitation. I was born in the midst of this war that killed or injured so many of my parents' generation. The melancholy songs of those times, and stories of heroism and victory ("David over Goliath"), dominated our childhood.

I was about 8 years old when the Sinai conflict (Suez) broke out in 1956. I have a clear recollection of a family conversation around the dinner table at this time. My older brother, then 14 years old, complained about "missing the chance to fight". My parents assured him that, sadly, in our area of the world, that chance would almost certainly come again. Although they hoped for peace and demobilisation their hope was not realised, and both my brother and I served in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

Ten years later, the Six Days War broke out (1967). This was during my military service and the first day of war found me in the central bus station of a southern town, surrounded by fearful or hysterical new immigrants. Needing someone to tell them what to do when the alarm went off, they turned to the one person in the area wearing an army uniform. Young as I was, I remember my sense of great responsibility, maturity, and pride at this time.

As the war ended, the media was flooded with stories of David's heroic victory over Goliath, and also tales of the young soldiers killed in the war. Visiting grieving parents I heard first-hand accounts that demonstrated the ugliness, pain, disorientation, and frustration that were war's hideous legacies. Many of us believed that peace was now within our grasp but unfortunately, this was not the case.

Seven years later, in 1973, the Yom Kippur War broke out; probably the most dreadful of all the wars fought on Israeli soil. I was pregnant with my first child and alone at home since my husband, like all men, had been recalled to his unit. The consequences of this war were devastating. Thousands of young men died, and for many months the whole nation was deep in mourning and grief. My oldest girl was born towards the end of the war. I promised her things would change and when she grew up, there would be no need for her to serve in the military, but good intentions were not enough. She has served in the military like everyone else.

In 1982, less than a decade later, Israel became involved in a war with Lebanon, on Lebanese soil. My memories take me to a scene where I was watching the war on television, with my three children, trying to recognise faces of friends and relatives. I heard my daughters telling

their baby brother that there would be no need for him to join the military when he grew up. He is now a soldier.

In 1990, we again found ourselves listening to air raid sirens as the Gulf War broke out. The war was far away in Iraq, and there was no direct threat to our soldiers. However, Israeli civilians faced missile raids, and the terrifying threat of chemical and biological warfare. No one knew what to do or how to defend himself or herself and the information given out was very confusing. Although gas masks were issued, many people panicked when they heard the alarm and failed to use the masks properly. I remember feeling anxious and disoriented. Missiles were falling all over Israel, and thousands of people were driving from place to place trying to find shelter.

In 1997, the year I conducted my study, we thought this last experience would be repeated. Threats from Iraq were again reported in the media and people became very fearful. There was little they could do to prepare beyond ensuring they had a sealed room and gas masks at the ready. The realisation that there was no real defence against biological or chemical weapons caused much anxiety, although the political situation was resolved a few weeks later. In a place like Israel, where wars and their consequences have been ever-present, even verbal hostilities can drive people to the limits of their emotional and behavioural capacity. Tension and aggression abounds and normal difficulties become unbearable. These stressors influence both teachers and students and were reflected in some of the study group's meetings and conversations.

Beyond the tensions of "official" wars, the continuing threat of terrorist attacks produces particular norms or rituals of behaviour. Aggressive driving is one indicator of these tensions. Listening to the news every hour on the hour is an almost-sacred ritual, as is watching the evening news every single night. The eagerness to command a continuous flow of up-to-date information can be explained by the fact that most Israelis have someone close – son, husband, friend or relative – serving in the military at any particular time and being exposed to danger. This situation explains the 'news-junkie' habit and also indicates the levels of stress people experience even at "normal" times. To get a better understanding of this phenomenon, we need to explain what military service means for Israelis.

## **Military service**

In Israel, all high school graduates beyond the age of 18 years are required by law to serve in the military, men for 3 years and women for 2 years. Compulsory military service has become an important rite of passage for young Israelis, representing their connection and commitment to the state. The military reflects the “melting pot” diversity of Israeli society. Norms of citizenship dictate that civil rights are earned only by serving the country.

Soldiering is a difficult and dangerous experience whether in wartime or peace. Young men in particular, specifically those in combat roles, find themselves facing three challenging years of social, mental, emotional, and physical development. After compulsory service, men are required by law to serve up to 90 days a year in the military reserve until the age of 45. Thus military service is a lifelong commitment for most men, rather than an experience limited by time (three years) and age (18-21). This ongoing commitment has a considerable impact on Israel’s economy as well as on family life in general.

Women’s military service is quite different. The perception of Israeli young women fighting side by side with their brothers is a myth. Traditionally, women’s military service has been confined to clerical work and teaching (I’ll explain about soldier-teachers shortly). Recent changes have opened up more professional opportunities to women soldiers, but many capable young women find themselves performing below their potential with little chance for growth. Women do not regularly serve in the military reserve.

Service as a soldier-teacher is one of the more meaningful assignments traditionally open to women in the Israeli army. In the intense waves of immigration of the 1950s and 1990s, these teachers taught Hebrew and cultural norms to the newcomers, in order to ease their entrance into the Israeli society. They also teach in small, remote places in parts of the country where there are few settlements and rarely enough teachers. In our group of ten women, seven had served in the army, two as soldier teachers. One of these was trained by the military (a short course) the other studied in Teachers’ College<sup>12</sup> before military service.

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<sup>12</sup> For many years, teachers’ colleges in Israel were non-academic, post secondary schools. Students of teachers’ college were mainly people who wished to become elementary school teachers and get the kind of education that would help them to teach all subjects. In some cases, students chose to study in teachers’ colleges because they weren’t accepted to universities. With the years, the direction of education in these colleges had changed. Since the early 1990’s most of the teachers’ colleges in Israel are oriented toward academic studies and provide their students with bachelor degree in Education.

Three teachers in this study had served in a special unit of the Israeli army known as Nahal. This is composed of groups of youngsters, mostly members of socialist youth-movements, who wish to live a communal way of life. Some groups build new settlements along the borders. Others dedicate their army years to small, remote communities where they participate in the social life and help prevent bored youth from deteriorating into delinquency. Serving in the Nahal, then, is targeted to answer some national and social needs, but also provides participants with some experience of communal life.

The importance that Israelis ascribe to their military service came through clearly in the interviews. For each teacher, no matter what her age or how long ago she had served, this part of her life remained particularly vivid. The seven women with military experience told me where they had served and what their jobs had been. The three who did not serve explained, without prompting, why this was the case. Members of the group also spoke about the difficulty of teaching grade 12 students, whose immediate interest is in their pending military service rather than their future academic studies.

### **Communal experiences**

Communal experiences are not confined to the military. A significant number of Israelis have civilian experience of communities like the Kibbutz or the Communal Moshav. Most of our school's teachers are (or were) members of such communities, and thus had experienced communal relationships. Even those from urban areas were not strangers to communal ideas and ideology. In many small towns in Israel, especially those that attract new immigrants, people form communities. Here they are able to express and fulfil their need for close, attentive, intimate, and meaningful relations with neighbours who share similar difficulties in the new culture. Although this study does not examine the influence of earlier communal experiences on the decision to develop and participate in a teachers' community, it is interesting that eight of the ten participants had experienced communitarian life either in Kibbutzim or close ethnic/kinship communities. It is reasonable to assume that people with prior positive experience of communal relationships would be willing to repeat the experience in the work place. Indeed, seven of ten participants stated the need for, and satisfaction they received from, the communal relationships that had developed in our community.

## HOW ISRAELIS COMMUNICATE

Israel is a small and crowded place with a fast-growing population resulting from waves of massive immigration. New immigrants from different parts of the world bring with them different cultural customs, norms of living, languages, music, and even alternative interpretation of Judaism. This mixed society has no tradition of tolerant conversation and dialogue of the type found in many Western countries and cultures. Instead, there is an ancient and strong tradition of argument and debate. Rather than listening to each other, people struggle for attention and the chance to be heard. In this culture, when you want to say something, you say it quickly and cut to the "bottom line". People are pressed; there is no time for developing complex arguments and little tolerance for the feelings and beliefs of others. This kind of communication characterises the Israeli public sphere: radio and television talk shows, public places where political (or other) arguments are ignited, and the Knesset.

Perhaps partly attributable to our level of anxiety as a country, these conversational norms need to be explored and explained more deeply. This study aims to understand the meaning that people ascribe to specific events (such as our group's meetings). *What* people do (and do not) say in these circumstances is very important, as is *how* they say it. These conventions contain a lot of information. It is important to look at how we conversed, and in what way(s) these conversations differed from North American norms of communication.

The following chapters contain translations of some of our group conversations. Readers will note that participants frequently complete each other's sentences and that often everyone talks at once. In Israeli discourse, these two tendencies are cultural norms that need to be explained.

In contrast to North American codes of proper conversational behaviour, completing someone else's sentences is not considered rude in Israel. Rather, it is often perceived as a sign of attention: a means of signalling to the talker that her ideas are being heard and understood in a particular way. In ending someone's sentence we are usually suggesting not prescribing; the 'owner' of the sentence can always reject the suggestion and complete her sentence herself. Although these interventions add some tension to the conversation, they are usually accepted as customary and non-aggressive behaviour. When the suggested ending suits her meanings, the 'owner' might repeat it, signalling that she too is paying attention.

Another cultural norm is the tendency for everyone to talk at once, in conversational 'bursts'. A group listens for a little while, follows some arguments then, if the subject becomes exciting, everyone joins in. This chaotic state continues for a few moments before the group slowly returns to some order. Such 'events' were frequent in our meetings making the tapes difficult to transcribe at times. People would remind each other: that "Tami won't be able to listen to the tape" but would still keep talking. The transcription challenges taught me important things about the nature of Israeli conversational culture. Bursts happen when people are highly engaged in the subject being discussed; the conversation becomes alive with energy and emotional involvement. When the conversation fails to touch the participants they simply listen politely. Later on, I realised that during class students behave in exactly the same way. When interested in the subject, they first listen carefully, then ask some questions, a short, managed conversation might develop, and then all speak at once. These last a few minutes then slowly everything calms down and there is another period of quietness.

When students are asked about this pattern they say that they are talking about the subject. They check their understanding with their peers, try to explain to each other what they understand, and "put it in the right place" so that it makes sense. This action is at the heart of the theory of socio-cultural learning. It is exactly during those moments of "sense making" that the students are learning: when they are speaking their understanding out loud, questioning new knowledge, and trying to see whether it fits or contrasts with the "old" knowledge. Shulman (1997) maintains that such a "chaotic mess" happens in a classroom where "activity, reflection, collaboration, passion, generativity<sup>13</sup> and community were all going on the same time" (p. 22). The same applies to our group of teachers: the process of learning happens in, and during, these 'bursts' of interaction.

In conclusion, the cultural habits and norms governing the way Israelis talk are deeply rooted in the country's hectic, stressful milieu. Although not understood by Israelis as aggressive, conversational 'bursts' and finishing another's sentences suggest a sense of perturbation and anxiety and add yet more tension to an already stressful atmosphere. Even in our teachers' community, which was marked by caring interpersonal relations, these cultural norms act against our wish to listen carefully and be deeply attentive to one another.

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13 Frank et al (2001) explain: "Generativity refers to individuals' ability to continue to add to their understanding; they can apply their knowledge to learn new topics and solve new and unfamiliar problems" (p.656). Knowledge is seen generative when new knowledge is integrated with existing knowledge and when it is continuously change in light of the new knowledge.

Because life in Israel is fraught with anxiety and tension, schools can become stressful places for teachers and students alike. In the next section, I will review some contextual and cultural structures of Israeli high schools. Rather than attempting to survey Israel's many different types of high schools and high school cultures, the description focuses on the school in which this study took place.

## **SCHOOL STRUCTURES AND CULTURE**

### **Class and homeroom**

In most Israeli schools, students study with the same class of about 30-40 students for three years, from grade 7 through grade 9, the end of middle-school, at which point new classes are formed for the final three years. Most subjects are taken in the class's "homeroom", although some (e.g. English, Math, and Science) may be studied in smaller groups, and/or in specialised spaces like science labs or computer rooms. Most of a student's time in school, then, will be spent with his/her class, or closest peer group, in the specific space of the homeroom. This is where they meet their friends, their class educator (see next paragraph), and most other teachers. Students are responsible for keeping the room clean, decorating it, and making it their home away from home. If standards are not maintained, teachers normally complain to the class-educator.

### **Class educator**

In the Israeli education system, "class-educators" are homeroom teachers, but their duties extend beyond limited bureaucratic tasks. Once appointed by the principal, educators will usually stay with a class for three consecutive years. They develop an intimate knowledge of each student: strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, school life and family life. The educator serves as liaison between school and student and between school and parents. Students will turn to their class educator when they have difficulties—with teachers, friends, learning, behaviour, even with parents. In the latter case the educator will sometimes involve the school counsellor, but more often will talk directly with students and parents to help them resolve conflicts and other complex situations.

One of the educator's duties is to raise students' awareness of political, ethical, existential, or cultural issues that are not directly connected to the curriculum. Weekly "education lessons"



are devoted to these extra-curricular subjects. Each educator can decide how s/he wants to structure these hours. Some might devote those lessons to discussion of news, politics, ethics, or students' relations with teachers; others might choose to play with their students or to help them develop artistic capabilities. The ideological drive behind these weekly education lessons is to allow the teacher to represent the adult world to students in a more relaxed, less authoritative atmosphere that fosters the development of trust relations. This atmosphere can help students develop their abilities to cope with tasks or to broaden horizons.

However, many teachers equate "good education" with "good behaviour". It is quite common for a teacher to approach the educator and complain about the class's behaviour and for the educator to serve as a conduit for the complaint by lecturing the class on the topic. Thus being an educator can be frustrating but also provides much satisfaction. The small amount of additional salary educators receive does not compensate for the extra work and responsibility, but being a class educator carries high status, both within and outside the school. It reveals the principal's appreciation for that teacher; it gives the teacher a strong sense of connection to the school and the students; and the heavy responsibility is understood and appreciated by parents and the wider community.

Although not every teacher is classified 'educator', some will say that they serve *as* educators, to indicate their attitude and emotional connections to their students. In our group for example, three members were class educators, one was taking time off the role after serving for many years, and two teachers who were not "officially" class-educators said they adopted this role naturally as they taught.

### **The pace of school life**

Students are bussed to our school from 25 different villages within the same municipality. Students and teachers alike arrive at school just before 8:00 A.M. and leave by 1:30 or 3:00 P.M. The school day is divided into six to eight 45-minute periods, two 10-minute recesses, and one 20-minute recess.

Short recesses allow no time for a proper lunch or decent conversation. Teachers quickly sip their coffee and take care of myriad minor duties before starting the next lesson. As well, recess is the only time teachers can meet privately with students. There is never enough time to talk

with colleagues and share thoughts and feelings about anything that is not urgent. Teachers thus find themselves in an endless and constantly frustrated search for attention.

Teachers expressed some of this frustration in our meetings. “We need some rest, we are entitled to some rest, and if I need to spend part of my short recess talking with students I get too tired, it is too much” (fieldnotes, November 24, 1997). Another teacher added

We work in harsh conditions. We need better conditions to become better teachers. When do we have time to talk with students? I can’t even do it during recess, because I have so many other things to do. [...] I really need to sit down and rest and I also need to talk with students.

Recesses are also too short for many students who need more time to be with their friends or to digest what they have just studied before moving to the next subject. Although many teachers are aware of this situation, no one took the initiative to suggest a change. It seems likely, then, that the tight schedule meets other needs. It allows teachers and students to eat lunch at home and to complete the work-day before the hot hours of the early afternoons descend on the classroom.

Short, pressured recesses are only a small part of the stress that makes up the school day. Students frequently become overworked to the point that it diminishes their ability to study. For many years we gave an exam for every hour we taught; for example, a subject taught 3 hours per week would entail 3 exams per semester. With eight to ten different subjects to study, students faced up to 30 exams per semester which teachers then had to mark. This situation was untenable and the rules were changed, in 1997, to two exams per subject each semester. Although an improvement, this is still an intensive workload.

The “big exams” – the external matriculation exams at the end of grades 11 and 12 – loom over all our teaching efforts and dominate the high school years to an excessive degree. In our group’s very first meeting, an experienced teacher<sup>14</sup> said:

[...] I feel like we have a sharp knife on our neck. I’m talking about grades 7 and 8, they are still far from the matriculation exams but I already feel the kids getting nervous. [They ask] ‘what will happen when we get to the matriculation

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14 Participants will be introduced fully in the next chapter.

exams? What happens if we don't cover the whole material?' This fear of not covering the material frustrates me so much...(Fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997)

Another teacher, - Bobbey – worried that the continuous emphasis on examinations stresses students and inhibits her ability to teach them the connectedness of knowledge domains.

What is really bad about this stress is that it comes from the students. Imagine what it means when a 14-year-old kid in grade 8 says to me: but Bobbey, you are off the subject, we must cover the whole material before the exam. We manipulated the students to such a frame of mind that they are not ready to talk about anything that is outside of the material for the exam. When I want to connect our subject in History to our life, to things that actually happen here, in our society, students say to me: you are talking about what happens here and now, instead of History. When I hear students talking like this I wonder what have we done to them? What are we doing to them? (Fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

For both teachers and students alike, then, school is a stressful place. Students worry that they might not have time to learn all the required material, and teachers feel pressured to "cover" all the subject matter. In our community's conversations we talked about this stress and wondered if things could (or should) be different. The overall agreement was that although (limited) tension can serve as a motivator for learning, the stressful atmosphere in our school tended to cause frustration, anger, and aggressive behaviour in both students and teachers.

### **Informal relations**

Like many schools in Israel, ours is very demanding academically. The atmosphere is quite strict which means that students must abide by prescribed codes of behaviour. Breaches such as violence, impudence and rudeness are dealt with severely, although not always with much success. It is a challenge for teachers to police students' behaviour while nurturing informal relations with them. These relations are expressed in a number of ways: friendliness between teachers and students, the nature of their conversations together, and the informal manner of discourse.

It is a norm in many Israeli schools, including my own, for students to call the teachers by their first names rather than their surnames.<sup>15</sup> This is not to be seen as a sign of disrespect. Nor should it be understood as indicating that relations between students and teachers are closer or more caring than in those schools that demand more formality. Rather, informal modes of expression reflect a wider norm in Israeli society that idealises directness and dismisses needless formality.

In this study, a similar recoiling from formality was evident from the start. Before commencing my research, I asked the principal's permission to conduct the study in the school and gave her an official letter (Appendix III) to sign to this effect. Although she readily granted permission, she refused at first to sign the letter and agreed to do so only after I made clear that this was a requirement of the university. Signing such forms in this context indicates mistrust. Although the principal understood the reasons behind my request, she did not like to do it.

The group participants reacted in similar fashion to the "Interview/Observation Consent Form" (Appendix II) they were asked to sign. Teachers did not understand the need for such a form, and some were somewhat offended by it. While all signed, each person indicated some level of reluctance. When I tried to explain that it is a requirement of the university that protects their rights, Maya said: "after 20 years during which I have followed you through fire and water do I now need to read such a thing?!?" (Fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 97). I believe that this attitude of suspicion towards forms is an attribute of the education context rather than the Israeli culture. In a business context, for example, such requests would be treated as a matter of course. It is important to stress that the absence of formality does not entail the presence of close or caring relations. Informality is a cultural norm, and teachers can be both hostile and competitive while maintaining informal relations.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter, which describes the cultural and social background of the study, provides the contextual frame for analysing the data. The chapter begins with a description of the stresses of life in Israel, largely the result of frequent wars and threats of war, and violent terrorist attacks. The tension penetrates into and affects all parts of life. Sometimes subconsciously, it touches us all—both adults and children—and distorts our interpersonal relations. The educational system

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<sup>15</sup> In some schools, however, the norm is for students to refer to their teachers, very formally, in the third person, as a sign of respect.

is one of the areas affected by the continuous tension. Students and teachers perceive schools as stressful alike. Students are stressed by high academic demands and conservative evaluations of learning. Teachers are stressed by their workloads, tight schedules, and the culture of competition and impatience that characterises relationships in many Israeli staff rooms.

The reader should remember, however, that this chapter provides a limited and partial description as the contextual features presented were chosen for a specific purpose. The description foregrounds the lack of - and thus the inherent need for - teachers' communities. Such communities are believed to help teachers overcome the tension and stress that is so common in their lives.

The next chapter will describe the study site and participants, as well as their motivations for participating. This provides the background for subsequent analysis of the content of our conversations and the mechanisms developed to nurture our community.

## CHAPTER 5: STUDY SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

### THE SITE

The site of this study is “Rabin High” a large school of some 1400 students and more than 120 teachers located in the rural mid-southern part of Israel. Situated between three villages, the school is surrounded by the fields and orchards of neighbouring farms. To approach the school and its surroundings, we turn off the highway onto a secondary road. On the right, are the outskirts of Kiriath Malachi, a poor neighbourhood with four-story town houses, no trees, no gardens, and lines of drying clothes hanging along the windows facing the road. The people who live here are immigrants from North Africa (1960s) or Russia (1990s). On the left are fields of corn, which belong to the villagers, many of whom were born and brought up in Israel. Unlike the immigrants, these people are fairly well-to-do. Each family lives in a large house surrounded with lawns, flowers and trees.

Entering the school through the main gate we drive into the parking lot, where teachers’ vehicles wait alongside the motorbikes and small cars of grade 11 and 12 students. A glance at the teachers’ vehicles gives a sense of the special character of this school. Some are quite different from those found in a city. For example, one big truck has flowers painted on it. It belongs to a Hebrew literature teacher who lives on a near-by farm where she and her husband grow flowers and bulbs and export them to Europe and North America. Just before the 8am bell rings another truck arrives, driven by a man who has been milking cows since 4:00 a.m. while listening to classical music. Now he will teach Bible lessons to students in grades 10-12, preparing them for the matriculation exam in this subject, which combines history, literature and religious studies. Another teacher arrives on a tractor; because his wife needed the family car that day. A group of teachers who car-pool from a town farther away arrive in a hurry. Last words are exchanged about arrangements for the return trip then they rush off to the staff room to collect material needed for the first lesson. The bell rings summoning students to class. We enter the empty school yard—still clean and tidy at this hour of the day—and begin to collect impressions of our surroundings.

Most of the buildings are single storey and each is surrounded with lawns, flowers and mature trees. On the right is the municipal library that serves the school, a two-storey building with a basement. The first floor has all the facilities of a modern library: computers with Internet

access, video-library, and the professional services of four librarians. The second floor consists of six Grade 12 classrooms. The basement is one of the schools' air-raid shelters, which is generally used as a video room.

On the left, the two-storey administration building contains offices and a large staff room furnished with light-grey tables and chairs. During recess, teachers crowd around particular tables according to the subjects they teach. The English teachers have their rectangular table; Math teachers gather at the long table at the far end of the room. Biology and Chemistry teachers meet around the big round table, and Humanities teachers sit near the door. The coffee machine dispenses "mud" coffee (the Israeli version for Turkish coffee) and smokers gather in a separate seating area. Bulletin boards on the walls are crowded with announcements, as is a long blackboard. A few computers sit on a table under the windows at the end of the room. Around the room are cupboards with teachers' drawers. Each drawer has a name on it and some also have a small red circle, signalling that the teacher is a class educator.

Returning to the school yard, each grade level occupies a single small building and every student is assigned to a classroom for that year. There are well-equipped Biology, Chemistry and Physics labs, and four computer labs with about 30 computers in each. At the end of the yard is a kiosk where students can buy sandwiches and beverages. By law, every building in Israel must contain air-raid shelters. In our school, these shelters provide space in which specific groups of students can work (e.g. the school-band, special-education students, or those doing artwork). The library shelter is used as a video room. Only in times of tension and when we have alarm drills are these shelters used for their intended purpose. Fortunately, most of the time the guns are quiet.

At the heart of the school yard is a huge lawn with palm trees at one end and a white war memorial at the other. Except on those days when ceremonies are held at the memorial, the place is full of life and joy. Students enjoy lying on the grass and warming up in the sun. Some hide behind the memorial to smoke, and others socialise under the palm trees that provide some shade on hot days.

This, then, was the physical setting in which our teachers' community took root. We met every Monday afternoon for a year, in a classroom in the Grade 10 building. This small room was home to a group of about 20 students, who decorated its walls with pictures of rock, film, and television stars. Each student also made a poster on which they wrote their names and

birthdays, some thoughts on love and friendship and, from time to time, small articles about current events. They also “decorated” their desks with graffiti, including dirty jokes. The surroundings reminded us of the various ways students express themselves, both formally (posters on the walls) and informally (graffiti on their desks). Although we saw this phenomenon of self-expression every day in our own classrooms, we seemed to notice it more on Monday afternoons. As we moved the desks to form a circle, we talked about the content of the materials, about students’ mistakes, their understanding and use of swear words, and about their need for a community of their own, with their own language, symbols, clothes, behaviour and norms. Meetings in this classroom offered us a rare opportunity to observe the “secret” feelings of students.

The school administration provided us with sandwiches and hot water for tea and coffee. At the start of each meeting, participants made themselves a drink and relaxed while eating a sandwich. Those first few moments of informality and relaxation at the end of a teaching day were much appreciated by the teachers, who had little time to eat or rest otherwise. We developed some group humour about the administration’s choice of sandwich fillings: will it be tuna this time? Maybe some cheese? From time to time, teachers would bring cookies to share with the group. At the end of the year of meetings we celebrated with a cake and cold drinks. Creating this informal atmosphere helped us feel at ease with each other. As a result, we got to know each other quickly and were able to start building up our community.

## **THE PARTICIPANTS**

### **Introduction**

I collected the personal information required to introduce study participants to the reader in a third set of interviews conducted towards the end of 1999 (one took place in May, 2000). Although this was two years after my field work, none of the participants refused to be reinterviewed. The teachers seemed eager to talk about their careers and other life experiences. My only interview question was: “tell me about yourself; anything that will help someone get to know you a little.” This opened long conversations in which teachers not only presented themselves, but also explained their perceptions of their professional lives, evaluated our community, and connected their past teaching experience to present practices.



I came to realise how little I know about my peers, even those with whom I had spent a year building close community-based relationships. This raises questions about the place of intimacy in the workplace context and the possible connection between the development of personal acquaintance and the development of communities in schools. Although this is an important question, which can be the topic of further research, it is beyond the limits of this study.

Although their anonymity had been guaranteed, most teachers disliked the idea of being presented in this study under a pseudonym (for further discussion on this issue, see also J. Shulman, 1990). I decided, therefore, as a courtesy, to ask each to choose a "study-name" for themselves. The following section briefly introduces each participant by study name. Note that while some of the participants were acquainted before the study, most were strangers, even though they worked in the same school.

### **Biographical Sketches**

#### *Karen*

During recess, Karen can often be seen framed in the smoking-room lintel, looking for someone to chat with. She does not attract attention, and there are many people in the staff room who do not know her at all, although she has worked many years in the school. Karen's mother tongue is French. She was born in Marrakech, Morocco, in 1952 and raised in a warm extended family. In 1962, when her father asked permission to move to Israel, he was put in jail and the family had to scatter and flee. Reunited six months later in Italy, they moved to the town of Ashdod, in Israel, where their neighbours were all French-speaking new immigrants from North Africa like themselves. It was a warm, supportive community where learning Hebrew was the major challenge for the new Israelis.

Once she learned the language, Karen's skills in Math helped her finish high-school by the age of 16. Upon graduation she went straight to teachers' college (without serving in the army), got her teaching certificate in accountancy and management, and returned to her hometown school to teach. She stayed there for 10 years, five of which she taught in two schools: her hometown school and in Rabin High, then moved to teach only in the latter where, by the year of the study (1997), she had been teaching for 22 years. She specialised in teaching keyboarding skills to slower students who needed individual attention and a non-academic curriculum. Many came

from families originating in North Africa and Karen's familiarity with their cultural background helped her teaching.

### *Vini*

Vini, like Karen, can be found in the smoking-room at recess. Her tobacco habit has given her a husky voice. Although she belongs to the "older generation" of teachers in our school, Vini's social status is not as high as might be expected for a good, experienced teacher. This is probably because, like Karen, she usually teaches remedial students<sup>16</sup>.

Vini was born in 1941 in a small town near Tel-Aviv. Her early memories are of the British occupation and the war of independence. In primary school her teachers conveyed the excitement of what it meant to build the new state. She attended a Tel-Aviv high school well-known for its competitive, high-pressure culture. "I didn't like school, it didn't encourage creativity, it was very dogmatic and looked only for high achievements" (interview, October 28, 1999). Vini joined a socialist youth movement and her military service was in the Nahal, a military unit design for building new settlements along the borders of Israel. She was helping to build a new kibbutz on the shore of the Lake Galilee, near the Syrian border. More than the air-raids, fires, and bombs Vini remembers the camaraderie of those days. Her long experience of communal life taught her the advantages of the trust and care that might be developed in a community.

Years later, in 1971, she and her husband left the kibbutz and moved to an agricultural community (Moshav) near our school. Vini started to work as a special-education teacher, first in the neighbouring primary school and then in our high school. While teaching, she studied for a bachelor's degree in history at the Hebrew University, graduating with honours. Vini is a journalist and editor as well as a teacher. She also writes and directs for the local theatre group.

### *Ya'ara*

Ya'ara was born in 1960 in Tel-Aviv where she grew up as a "good kid that always tested the limits of the system". As such, she finds it hard to discipline students who do the same. Ya'ara

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<sup>16</sup> Teaching remedial students is a difficult task that needs special qualifications. One might expect that these skills and qualifications would be recognised and rewarded with higher social status in the staff room. However, this is not the case. Teachers of slower students are often considered as "fit for their students". In other words, they are viewed as slow themselves, thus their social status is almost always low.

studied agriculture, graduated in 1984, and worked for a while as a research assistant. Later, she continued her agricultural studies and earned her Master's degree in Genetics. After working in a high-tech company, she began teaching biology in 1995. Two years later, in 1997, she started studying for her teaching certificate and became a participant in this research study. The biology team at our school does not assign teachers to particular grades and educational levels. Everyone teaches all grades and slow as well as fast students. Right from her first year in our school, therefore, Ya'ara began to teach students of different ages and abilities. She quickly had to learn to operate in different environments and to use different ways of teaching to suit the demands of such different populations. As a member of the same biology team, I can attest to the challenge. Ya'ara said that participating in my research group helped her accommodate to this complex reality.

### *Noy*

Noy was born in 1971, and grew up in an orthodox Jewish Yemenite family in a small town south of Tel-Aviv. She studied in an orthodox high school and went on to attend Bar-Ilan, an orthodox Jewish University, where she earned her first and second degrees in Linguistics, and got a teaching certificate in that subject. As all orthodox women do, Noy was exempted from military service; however, during her university years she became secular and thus stressed her regret for not having the opportunity to experience military service. Although originally she had no ambitions to teach she began coaching small groups of high school students and adults who attended community centres in the afternoons, to prepare themselves for the matriculation exams. She came to love teaching and joined our school in 1995. The year our group started, 1997, was Noy's third year of experience as a teacher.

### *Bobbey*

Bobbey is always busy. You can see and hear her in the staff room organising, taking notes, talking to other teachers, and making announcements. She is never alone, and never moves at a leisurely pace. She is our teachers' union representative and has the qualities of a leader. Bobbey is a native of Tel-Aviv. Born in 1970, her favourite subject in high school was Arabic, a language that served her well during her military service. When released from the army in 1990, she spent a year in what she calls 'the university of life', working as a sales person in the main market of Tel-Aviv. After that, she studied Arabic Language and Literature at Tel-Aviv University. She started work at our school in 1994, during the last year of her studies and

before she had received a Teaching Certificate. She teaches Arabic language and Middle East studies to students in grades 9-12. The year of the group [1997-8] was Bobbey's fourth year in school and the year she went through some major changes in her life. At this time, she says, "I got much support from management and teachers and the group was an important part of this support" (Interview, December 1, 1999).

### *Yarden*

Yarden is known as a caring teacher who is deeply involved in her students' lives and needs. She is highly respected by students and peers alike. Born in 1956, Yarden was raised in a middle-size town south of Tel-Aviv. For her military service, she worked with children in remote settlements near the Lebanese border. These were tense times on the northern border and children needed to be tended after school. Yarden organised a play-centre where she helped children to develop their social skills, prepare for holidays, play, and study. Following the army, Yarden studied General and Jewish History and received her Bachelor degree and Teaching Certificate from Ben-Gurion University. She started teaching in 1981 and joined our school in 1986, teaching students from grades 9 to 12. From the start, she has been a class educator. Also, for many years, she has been an "age-group manager". This means she is responsible for a group of 250 students: social activities, student-teacher relationships, student achievements, and group administration. Yarden enjoys her position and duties in school; she loves teaching and is always ready to provide her peers with help and advice.

### *Vered*

Vered smiles a lot and her lilting Brazilian accent triggers smiles from those around her. She was born in 1963 in Brazil, where she grew up and earned her first degree in Sociology. In 1986, at the age of 23, she moved to Israel by herself and attempted to continue her studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But her limited knowledge of Hebrew caused her to quit the university and look for a job.

She became a part time English teacher in a special military school where the students were former high-school drop-outs. These young people joined the army and there, after a few months of training, got a chance to earn their Grade 12 equivalency certificate. Because few teachers are willing to work in these military schools, even someone who does not meet the minimum Board of Education requirements is acceptable. This explains how Vered, who had

no relevant certificates, got the job. This work was “not an easy experience.” It drove Vered to study English Language and Literature in Ben-Gurion University where she earned her degree and a Teaching Certificate in 1996, and was accepted into our school. The “year of the study group” was Vered’s second year. She still felt like and introduced herself as a new teacher.

### *Mairav*

Mairav was born in 1941, in Sofia, Bulgaria. Her family moved to Israel when she was 3 years old, and she was brought up in Tel-Aviv, where she studied in a vocational high school. Directly after, she studied for a Teaching Certificate that allowed her to teach handicraft in grades 1 to 6. During her military service she served as a soldier-teacher, and later studied for three more years to get certified for grades 7 to 9. Mairav taught for 35 years, most of them in our school. She retired a year after the Board of Education decided to take her subject out of the curriculum.

During the last few years of her work, Mairav earned a B. Ed., a degree she claimed was never necessary for her work, but had helped raise her salary. Although “the year of the study group” was Mairav’s last year before retirement, she was an active and full participant. Her participation in our community was “a meaningful experience” that she keeps sharing with other teacher-friends.

### *Yael*

In the staff room Yael always seems to be surrounded by younger teachers who are trying to get advice or new ideas for working with slow or problematic students. Yael was born in 1952, in Tel Aviv, one of three children in a troubled single-parent family. After high school, Yael joined the military and like Vini she served in the Nahal. She belonged to community of youngsters who were committed to live together and earn their living from agriculture. Yael emphasised her long-term connections to community: “I was always connected to groups. I was a member of a youth movement, played flute in a group of players, danced with a group of folk dancers, [I’m] always connected to people” (Interview, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000).

After her military service, and a few false starts, she studied Special Education in a teachers’ college and specialised in Rehabilitative Teaching. This is a specific way of teaching slower students that was developed by Professor Frankenstein at the Hebrew University. For most of

her adult life (20 years) Yael lived in a kibbutz and taught there. She then decided to leave this communal way of life, moved to a small town not far from our school, began work as a special education teacher in our school, and soon became head of the special education department. With her energy and innovative ideas Yael has turned the area of special education into a major field of discussion and reference in the school.

### *Maya*

During the year of our meetings, Maya's participation in our group was quite limited, but her presence was meaningful and her words were remembered and repeated many times by members of the group. Maya was born in 1946, in Hungary. Her family moved to Israel when she was 3 years old and lived in a small town south of Tel-Aviv. Maya remembers being an outsider as a child: the only fair girl in the group; the one wearing beautiful dresses and white shoes which prevented her playing in the street with the rest of the children. These experiences of "otherness" helped sensitise Maya to the cultures and languages of difference.

After her military service she earned a Master's degree in General and Jewish Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she also earned a Teaching Certificate. She has been a literature teacher in our school for the last 25 years and is admired by students and teachers alike. For many years she has helped students to find their own voices and to express themselves in new creative ways. As well as being a successful high-school teacher, Maya is one of the most prominent poets in Israel. She has published 8 highly-praised books of poetry, which have been translated into many languages. She teaches creative writing to beginning poets and facilitates workshops to young writers and is a popular lecture for university and general audiences in Israel and Europe.

### *Tami*

Besides being an observer in this group of teachers, I was also a participant therefore I need to present myself. I always carry a big, green backpack loaded with Biology books and papers, and people joke that it is heavier than I am. I was born in 1948, in Israel, and grew up in a small, middle-class suburb of Tel-Aviv. I studied in a high school known for its radical brand of socialism. Like Vini and Yael, I was an active member of a youth movement that guided us towards the communal life of a kibbutz. Like them also, my military service was in the Nahal.

The social/radical way of thinking and the ethical issues discussed during those years strongly influenced my world-view.

After military service I earned a Master's degree in Biology (Neurophysiology) and a teaching certificate at Tel Aviv University and started to teach high-school biology in 1973. Between 1984 and 1987, I studied for a Master's degree in Adult Education at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education). In 1997, I was accepted as a doctoral student in the department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. When not studying, I work as a biology teacher at Rabin High and as a lecturer and facilitator in several universities, teachers' colleges, and in teachers' professional development endeavours.

### **REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE HISHTALMOOT**

Early in the study, in response to questioning, teachers articulated four main reasons for participating in the Hishtalmoot: (a) to give and receive support; (b) to share knowledge and understanding of practice; (c) to break the walls of isolation; and (d) to get credit for participating in a professional development. In addition, I had my own reasons for initiating the group and a number of goals for it. The following paragraphs expand on these intentions.

#### **The need to provide and receive support**

The most common reason for joining the group was to provide a means through which to receive support (newer teachers) or provide it (more experienced teachers). The latter also hoped to take away some practical ideas from the group. Noy wanted the group to help her make sense of, and cope with, her classes.

As a new teacher, I have all sorts of questions about situations that happen in the classroom. [...] It will be useful to hear from experienced teachers how to cope with [these] (Noy, fieldnotes, November 10, 1997)

Experienced teachers conveyed a sense of 'give' and 'take': "I can give from my own experience or learn from the experience of new teachers" (Karen, fieldnotes, November 10, 1997). "I want to get as much as possible [from the group] and I have much to give" (Yael, same date). To my ears, "to give" sounded the same as "to teach"; to do for each other what we do for students. In other words, to channel knowledge from experts to novices. Like other

experienced teachers, Karen was ready to share her experience with others. She also mentioned her desire to learn from more junior colleagues. But she made it quite clear that she wanted to “get” or gain something from participating in this Hishtalmoot; something, as yet unknown, that would help in her teaching.

### **Sharing knowledge and understanding of practice**

Bobbey expressed her need to be part of a community of teachers who share their understandings of practice:

I wish to have an opportunity to sit and talk about difficulties, how to improve [my teaching], to talk about coping with the material. I miss having a weekly meeting of *educators*. Not for administration or for all sorts of bureaucracy, but for work! A meeting in which [teachers] really listen to each other [and talk about] these issues. And I truly hope that these meetings will fill in some of what I miss. I might be able to get things here that I’m unable to think about when I’m on my own. I want to listen to other people’s ideas [...] Truly, to include other people who have the same aim, people who meet in order to discuss [teaching], [who want] to improve, to do it better, in more interesting ways and with more quality. (Fieldnotes November 10, 1997, Bobbey’s emphasis)

Ya’ara was looking for practical advice as well as constructive feedback on both subject matter and her relations with students:

I need whatever I can get from people with more experience that can look at my issues from different angles. [I need] anything that relates to teaching, to the material itself and to the relations with students. (Ya’ara, fieldnotes November 10, 1997)

Vini found it hard to formulate her expectations of the Hishtalmoot. She gave us a short explanation of the major issues that disturb her as a teacher, and said she wanted to share with us her long teaching experience, as well as her beliefs and frustrations. She added that this Hishtalmoot might be the place “for letting everything out” (fieldnotes, November 10, 1997). Although we meet on other occasions, for other purposes, she said we never have any opportunity to talk about teaching. “For years I was wondering, why don’t we ever talk about



our work? Why don't we talk about what we give [to our students] and what we get [from them]" (ibid.).

### **Breaking the walls of isolation**

Breaking the walls of isolation was a strong motivation for joining the group. One teacher called herself a "loner", and noted that the group meetings were her first opportunity in 30 years of teaching to exchange ideas with peers. For another experienced teacher, the walls of isolation were so thick that breaking them felt therapeutic. After our first meeting, she called her daughter in North America and talked for two hours "about the fact that I have someone to exchange experiences with [...]. For me it was like a therapy" (Karen, fieldnotes, November 16, 1997). I used to drive Karen to the bus station after our meetings. During one of our conversations in the car, she told me how lonely she had felt in the past. "They [friends and family members] don't understand" she said, "they don't know what it means to be a teacher. They think I only tell the students what to do, and they just do it, as if it is not a hard work at all" (Journal, November 17, 1997).

Karen's expectation was that the Hishtalmoot would allow her to become a member of a community of teachers, where she could share her experiences with people who understood the complexity of teaching and who could appreciate her work. Mairav, who is on the verge of retirement, remembers her own hard times of being isolated:

For me it [being isolated] was very difficult. I had to learn everything by myself. No one instructed me. I was very young, just came from teacher-college to be a soldier-teacher. I hardly knew what they wanted from me. [...] When I hear now how people complain, I remember how I struggled. It is good to be able to share. One advises another [...] there is someone to help a new teacher (First interview, January 18, 1998).

For a new teacher like Ya'ara, breaking the walls of isolation meant being able to compare her work to that of other teachers, to find out if others were experiencing similar difficulties, and to get some confidence and help.

This Hishtalmoot is one of my ways to find out if my ideas about teaching are like others, and to see if other teachers have problems that I do, and if not, how

they arrived at such a place where they don't have these problems. (First interview, December 31, 1997).

New teachers are unlikely to publicly admit failures (or "problems" as Ya'ara preferred to say), as this would put their jobs at risk. They tend to keep their troubles to themselves. Indeed, Hargreaves (1992) argues that there is a value to isolation: it offers teachers the comfort of privacy, a protection from outside interference. More experienced teachers might be more open about difficulties, but they too are usually quite reluctant to talk openly about them with colleagues. Robertson (1992: 57) speaking from a feminist perspective, asserts that "isolation is sometimes solace", especially for women who experience their environment as hostile. But in the supportive atmosphere of the community, teachers—whether new or experienced—had the chance to open up, find support, try out ideas before bringing them to class, and share their failures and successes.

### **Getting credit**

Although one teacher voluntarily mentioned professional development credit as the first and most important reason for joining the group, others talked about it only when asked directly. At that point, some teachers said credit was part of their consideration, although not the most important reason for joining or returning every week, while for others it was never a factor. As a rule, credit was a bigger issue for older teachers, as it could make a significant difference to their pension after retirement.

During the interviews I tried to help participants feel comfortable talking about this issue, as I was aware that some might not wish to offend me by acknowledging the importance of credit in their decision to participate in the study. By talking directly about the relationship between credit and salary, I legitimated this reason.

As previously stated, only one teacher talked directly about credit as a primary motivation, but there were indicators that it served as a motivating factor for other teachers as well. Just before meetings, I often overheard snatches of conversation on the amount of credit teachers would earn at the end of the year, or the number of meetings required for credit. Although the Board of Education allows teachers to miss up to 20% of meetings without losing credit, rarely did anyone in the group miss a meeting.

## **My intentions**

Although my own intention was to get data for my dissertation, this was not the only reason for germinating and sustaining this group. I chose to do my research on this specific topic and in this specific way for two reasons. The first is my interest in the professional lives of teachers; the second is my strong belief that teachers need to break down their isolation. My years of experience as a schoolteacher and a professional development leader directed me to seek ways to provide teachers with a professionally supportive community that could enhance their learning. Conventionally, “support group” suggests that participants are weak and in need of support. I had something else in mind: a community of teachers that mutually direct and define their own growth. It was important for me to show that teachers can work together to conduct a different type of professional development—one that relates directly to the needs of its participants.

My initial intentions were to find out if participating in this Hishtalmoot would impact teachers’ practices and help them to develop their perspectives on teaching. However, with time, these intentions were replaced by others. The meetings became increasingly important for me. I began to feel that we were building a real sense of community and belonging, a sense of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. My focus became the community itself: keeping the dialogue going, finding out what would help our growth, and what difficulties and changes we would encounter throughout the year.

Although participants had a variety of reasons for joining the group, we all shared the view that we would benefit from discussing teaching and learning. We all agreed that sharing, reflecting on our teaching, and deliberating upon ways and strategies of teaching, were important for our professional development. We also agreed that since it takes time to establish the necessary atmosphere of trust and reciprocity, which we would benefit if this Hishtalmoot spanned the entire academic year.

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter provides a description of the site in which the study took place, and the participants of our group. The participants’ histories are embedded in the larger context of Israeli society as well as in the closer context of the school. The description of these contexts in the previous chapter helps readers understand the participants’ histories presented here. The last

part of the chapter reveals the participants' reasons for participating in this Hishtalmoot and their intentions for it.

The next chapter sheds light on the impact of the context on our group, by linking the rhythms of the school-life to the progression of our community. The description entails a course of one year in an Israeli high school, and relates the three major parts of the year to the progression of our community.

## CHAPTER 6: DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL'S CONTEXT AND CULTURE

This chapter describes the strong ties connecting our group's development and dynamic with the context of the school. The group was strongly influenced by the wider contexts of school and nation; for example, the school schedule, holidays, exams, weather, threat of war, and other related events. To show these connections, I provide two parallel descriptions: the first is of the school year with its main characteristics and the second is the progression of our community.

In the following section, I divide the academic year into three uneven parts: the first few weeks of the year; then the five to six months of the mid-year; finally, the last few weeks of the year. I discuss the characteristics of each and map the progression of our community in relation to them.

### SCHOOL CONTEXT - THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

The academic year in Israel is based mostly on the Jewish holidays. The academic year begins on September first, but three major Jewish holidays fall three to six weeks later<sup>17</sup>. During these 'high holidays'—Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and Succoth—school is closed for almost three weeks. Any kind of new venture at the beginning of the school year is always deferred until "after the holidays". This time of year also marks the end of the eight months of summer. Days are getting shorter and cooler, and everyone is waiting for the first rains. There is a feeling of energy and renewal at this time of the year. Teachers and students are still fresh from the summer and Jewish holidays. They are ready to invest the energy and effort needed for success. It is a good time to start a new venture, and this was when we started our teachers' group.

### BEGINNING OUR COMMUNITY

#### Initial negotiations

Right after the holidays, at the beginning of November 1997, I approached the school principal. I explained my plans for the Hishtalmoot, and asked for her permission to conduct it in the

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<sup>17</sup> As the Jewish months and holidays are calculated according to the moon, the holidays do not always coincide with the months of the "civil year" which are calculated according to the sun. Therefore, the Jewish New-Year is sometimes in September and sometimes in October.

school. She agreed to grant access and signed the “institutional Interview/Observation Letter” (Appendix III).

The next step was to approach the pedagogical principal, the person responsible for teacher professional development in the school. She expressed concern that the Hishtalmoot would become some kind of ‘encounter group’, where teachers would be pushed to expose themselves more than is acceptable in the workplace. I assured her that this was not the intention and agreed to make this clear in my invitation letter to the teachers. The pedagogical principal arranged for participants to receive credit for their participation. In order to get the school superintendent’s permission, I wrote a letter describing the Hishtalmoot as a self-directed “course” about learning and teaching. Once the requested permission was received, there were no further interactions with administrators concerning the Hishtalmoot.

The decision to have a self-selected group is a matter of ethics. On the one hand I did not want any outsider (such as the school’s principal) to decide for teachers whether they ‘need’ this Hishtalmoot or ‘good enough’ for participating in it, nor did I want to play into anyone’s hands and to use the group for pushing someone’s agenda. On the other hand, I did not have any criteria for selecting teachers, as I believe that every teacher is entitled to participate in a group of teachers that discusses learning and teaching. Therefore, the decision to have teachers select themselves to participate seemed as the most ethical solution.

Considering the number of participants in the group, I looked for an optimum number that would form a group not too large - to ensure a functioning group where each person feels comfortable and have enough time to express him/her self - and not too small - to allow a variety of opinions and ways of thinking about learning and teaching. My experience with groups of teachers brought me to suggest an upper limit of 12 and a lower limit of 6 participants. I expected that some people would not continue to come, and some would miss a few meetings, therefore, beginning with 10 participants allows continuing the conversation even if later the number would be reduced. Taking into consideration the Israeli way of talking together with other people, I knew that more than ten people would work against my wish to study what each one is thinking and saying. In addition, although every one in the school was invited, only female teachers volunteered to participate. The reason for this is that from the 120 teachers in the school at the year of the study, there were 10 male teachers, and 110 female teachers. Under these circumstances, the probability to have a male teacher volunteer to participate in the group was very low.

By November 4<sup>th</sup> 1997, the invitation letter to teachers (Appendix I) was posted on the staffroom board. The letter was headed "Thinking Together about Learning and Teaching". It stressed that we were planning to construct an open and supportive group, where disclosures would be confined to professional matters. I had decided as part of my research design that the group would be limited to the first 10 volunteers. The announcement invited interested teachers to sign their names at the bottom of the letter. Within two days 10 people had signed. We started our first weekly meeting on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997.

*Notes from my journal: a conversation at UBC*

In Vancouver, walking along the sidewalk of UBC in the summer of 1997, I had the following conversation with Dr. David Coulter:

D. - What will you talk about in your group?

T. - We will talk about whatever teachers would like to talk about, as long as it is connected to teaching and learning.

D. - And what if teachers talk about other things?

T. - I'm not in charge of the content of this Hishtalmoot; whatever teachers find important to bring to the group will be fine with me.

D. - Do you believe that teachers will share difficulties?

T. - I don't know. It depends on the trust and openness that we will develop in this group.

D. - What if teachers complain all the time (about school, management, board of education, too much pressures), or blame students for teachers' difficulties?

T. - I don't believe that teachers will spend all their time complaining. We would want to make use of our time together. I trust that teachers are intelligent enough to know what is good for them.

D. - What if no one talks?

T. - That's a hard one. I don't know. I'll probably have a hard time constraining myself from filling the silence with my own words. I will have to refrain from taking too much of the group's time.

As teachers stood at the bulletin board reading the invitation letter, they asked me similar questions. They got very similar answers, as I had no others.

### **Forming the group**

Within the next week or two, several teachers who had not seen the announcement approached me about joining the group. I explained that in order to comply with my research design, the group was limited to ten members. As the year went by, teachers continued to approach members of the Hishtalmoot, wanting to participate. I took these requests seriously and promised to consider opening another group in the future.

The first few meetings (November/December 1997) were taken up with getting to know each other, forming some kind of cohesion, and beginning to establish some of the group's norms. Teachers introduced themselves to the group (mostly by presenting obvious, non-controversial facts), spoke about their own learning experiences, and explained their reasons for joining and what they expected to achieve. Certain overt expectations were expressed about the roles of the facilitator, and we passed several infertile hours in search of direction (as discussed by Bennis and Shepard 1956). But as we continued to meet, norms began to be formulated, such as "rituals" associated with starting the meeting: preparing the coffee, joking about the sandwiches, pulling the chairs around two tables, and searching for the comments and graffiti students wrote on these tables. Another norm was the ceremony of 'taking attendance'—recording the names of those present at the meeting. One teacher (who realised that I would not do it) volunteered to undertake this task for the year.

Probably the most interesting component of this early part of being together was identifying the need for a leader and a clear structure for the meetings. Teachers found the lack of structure frustrating; they wanted a better understanding of our purpose and goals. For example, at the end of the first meeting, Vini said:

We sit here; the original idea was to speak about learning. What happens is that we "throw" many things, we "clear our systems" [talking about the difficulties



of teaching], and I try to listen, we didn't yet talk about learning. It feels as if we need a [safe] place [where we can] open our mouth, to speak about things that we all share. [It seems that] we don't know yet what to do with all these things that we talk about. It is quite frustrating (fieldnotes November 10<sup>th</sup> 1997).

Some teachers seemed to share the same sentiment although they also pointed out that "we have time, it is only the first of many meetings". But Yael did not agree with Vini's understanding of the meeting's outcome: "There is nothing that we talked about which is not connected to learning... I feel that everything we talked about is connected to learning" (fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997)

Although it seemed at first that Yael was satisfied with the flow of the conversation, two weeks later she wrote me a letter saying that:

[...] I expect a clearer line in our meetings, one [that will define] what our topic is, what we should be talking about, while allowing us to deviate when appropriate. Our approach so far seems disjointed and the pace is slow (A letter to Tami, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1997).

Bobbey was also concerned about our lack of clear direction. During our fourth meeting, she said:

I don't know for sure where all this is taking us, what is our goal. Maybe we need some guidance [that will help us decide] what is our goal for today, where we want to arrive at the end of the meeting (Fieldnotes, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Maya agreed with Bobbey:

I would like us to define at the beginning of a meeting what is the main issue of this meeting. This will help us to be focused. [...] we'll get out of here with a feeling that we have thoroughly examined one issue (Fieldnotes, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Maya went on to suggest strategies such as setting topics ahead of time so people could prepare. After the fourth meeting, she wrote me a note saying that

There is a strong sense of dispersion and associative talk that results in superficiality. It is an interesting conversation, but it is not focused and I'm not sure where it leads (A letter to Tami, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Karen's opinion was quite different. She enjoyed the conversational format and felt that

Although we touch on many topics, we still develop them [...] I get much from these meetings, maybe because I have someone to talk to, someone who understands the issues, the topic, the work [which are] the same for all of us (fieldnotes, December 8<sup>th</sup> 1997).

Vini, Yael, Bobbey, and Maya articulate the need for clearly defined and structured meetings. The hidden fear is that we will spend all our time talking and finish the year with nothing to show for our efforts. This fear is accompanied with a strong desire to be practical and useful, to "do something that will stay with us", although none of these four participants could explain exactly what they had in mind.

This feeling of discontent accompanied us for the first two months. It took that long for people to realise that they were "getting something" from the meetings. When we gained more confidence with our way of doing things, the calls for more structured, pre-organised meetings started to diminish.

#### **SCHOOL CONTEXT: MID-YEAR**

The school year is divided into two terms (semesters). The first term starts in September and ends in December, right before Hanukah. Although a well-known holiday outside of Israel, within the country Hanukah is not considered important because it has no religious significance. Most adults continue working but schools are closed for a week. The second term starts after Hanukah and lasts to the end of the year - June 20<sup>th</sup>. Most of the teaching is done during the 6 months of cooler weather between October (after the three holidays described earlier) and April (before the three weeks schools are closed for Passover). Most of our community's meetings were held during these months and most of our learning and development occurred during this time.

## DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS: CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY

Our group developed quite impressively during this mid-year period. By January, with six or seven meetings behind us, we had established some norms and each of us had brought and shared at least one class event. With time, members grew more confident talking about their teaching, telling stories that revealed less-than-perfect behaviour, and exposing emotions such as discontent, embarrassment, or frustration. This confidence indicates the development of mutual trust; teachers knew that disclosing such stories would generate solutions for difficulties rather than embarrassment for the teller.

Our meetings became increasingly lively and... boisterous. The atmosphere became more relaxed and we enjoyed them more. There was a lot of laughter, teachers got excited, talked at the same time, and ended one another's sentences. By this time, participants' attitudes towards the need for structure and strong leadership had changed completely. As Yael noted:

The most important thing that I have learned here is how to have a self-directed workshop, with no structure... At the beginning of the year, it was obvious to me that we had to have structure and direction. But now, suddenly, we are having a workshop and it is all about learning and teaching. I really think it is one of the most important things, and many good ideas have followed [from the unstructured format] (Yael, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998).

By mid February 1998 the Middle East was extremely tense. Iraqi missiles were threatening Israel and our 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> meetings were deeply affected by this tension. Memories from the 1991 Gulf War were still vivid, and people were nervous about what was being called 'the second Gulf War'. Our 10<sup>th</sup> meeting (February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998) commenced with a conversation about the current situation and the 1991 war. Younger teachers were discussing the difficulty of getting little children to wear gas masks, and worrying about looking after their students in the event of an air raid. After a few minutes, I said:

When I try to tell my university examiners how context affects my study, maybe I'll give them an example from this meeting: 'How do Israeli teachers prepare for a war?' Can you imagine a group of ten women in Canada (it feels like another world) assembling and discussing whether or not to be hysterical

towards a war that might start within two days? (Tami, fieldnotes, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998)

This raised an ironic laugh and the conversation continued. We moved on to discuss the difficulties students experience as a result of the tension:

**Yael** - During the Gulf War there was a lot of restlessness in the classrooms. Although we didn't make the connection at the time, we eventually realised that this restlessness was a result of the war. Children have anxieties. [I'm saying this] just to attract your attention that if you see some unusual behaviour in class, you might connect it to the war.

**Tami** – This is true, and I see it when I teach Biology. In grade 9 we talked about enzymes and I explained how the nerve gas works...and what exactly we can do about it. Then students told me they are afraid, and suffer from anxiety. I thought that the more they understand the less anxiety they might have, but it didn't work.

**Ya'ara** – Right, I had the same idea. In my class today we talked about the probability that Saddam Hussein will launch missiles. The children co-operated very nicely. They read the newspapers, watch TV and are up-to date (at least some of them). I felt that it helped them to talk about what they know.

At the meeting a week later, the threat of war had passed but we still discussed it for a while, critiquing the situation, the damage to the country's economy, and the scare-mongering media. The conversation ended with jokes and creative ideas for making use of the huge amounts of nylon and masking tape that we had all accumulated for sealing rooms against gas attacks.

Our gatherings began to take on increasing importance in the professional, social and emotional lives of participants. The March meeting opened with Bobbey's remark:

One of this group's qualities is that we really have connections between us. The interactions that we have developed, the close relations between people... we really have a... group. I have a feeling that we are united; that we have a kind of friendship (Bobbey, fieldnotes, March, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998).

Teachers continued to talk about issues that bothered them or that they considered important for sharing. At almost every meeting, new teaching strategies were presented. In some instances, these strategies were adopted by other teachers and brought back to the group for discussion. Sometimes the meetings centred on one major issue, while at others conversations ranged widely. Monday meetings became part of our lives.

This intensive part of the school year ended in April with the three-week Passover holiday.

#### **SCHOOL CONTEXT: END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR**

Although Passover is considered “the holiday of spring”, this time of the year is characterised by frequent changes in the weather. Cool, beautiful days alternate with “Hamseens”, days of hot winds from the Sahara, which dry all the vegetation and cover everything with a thin layer of dust. Within a few days of such Hamseens, all the green fields turn yellow. In no time at all, the short, beautiful spring is over and summer returns to its kingdom.

When we return to school after Passover, there are three major events within two weeks: Holocaust Day, Memorial Day for those killed in wars and terrorist attacks, and Independence Day. The whole country changes moods, and in schools these two weeks are emotionally loaded. Regular classes are cancelled as students and teachers invest most of their time and energy in preparing ceremonies, and participating in programs dedicated to these special days.

As described earlier, a white war memorial sits on a huge plain of grass at the end of our school yard. The names inscribed on this memorial are those of former students; young soldiers—boys and girls—who died during the many wars and terrorist actions. Every year, on Memorial Day, the whole school gathers on this grass plain, with the families of the dead soldiers, and a short, powerful, memorial ceremony is held.

Once those two hectic weeks pass, the last part of the year really begins. Grade 12 students leave school to prepare for the matriculation exams and their big party – (they put on a big show for their parents and the whole school) – and grade 11 students officially take on some of their responsibilities. Other students are also preparing for the end of the year, with the exams and evaluations that are typical of this time, and the preparations for end-of-the-year parties and celebrations.

## CLOSURE AND EVALUATION WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY

The conversations in our community always related to the living events of the school. For example, after Passover, when the school's attention was focused on the Second World War, the Holocaust, and subsequent wars, we talked a lot about ways of teaching modern history. Most of us had experienced at least one war, and many teachers and students had lost friends or relatives to political violence of various types. Vini, in our group, and other older teachers in the school, could remember the 1948 war of independence. We talked about how to turn painful personal experiences into history lessons

This week, between Holocaust Day and the Day of Independence, I told all my students: don't bring History books. The History teachers of grades 7 and 8 had developed a program about the Declaration of Independence, and I said I would do it *my* way. Well, I told the kids stories from my memory, stories from my own experience. They loved it. [When the class ended] they asked me to finish the stories, reminded me where I had stopped, and begged for more. When I asked what was so interesting for them, they said that no one had ever taught them History from first-hand experience before (Vini, fieldnotes, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1998)

As the end of the year approached, the sense of closure that was in the air invaded our community. During our last few meetings teachers talked about their difficulty regulating student's behaviour, suggested ways to conclude the subjects they were teaching, and discussed strategies for alternative evaluations. During the last two meetings, no one brought vignettes from their classes, not even a single example of the week's events, as if it did not matter any more. The last meeting was dedicated almost entirely to evaluating our group meetings. Although that meeting marked the end of the year, it did not mark the end of our community, as we decided to continue together for another year.

## SUMMARY

This chapter describes our community's development over time, and its tight coupling to the life of the school and the school year. In the beginning, we presented ourselves to other group members and tried to figure out roles and norms that would help define the directions of our conversations. During the next period, which took the better part of the year, we got closer and

began the process of creating a community. This period mirrored the time when students and teachers already know each other quite well, relationships develop, learning occurs, and knowledge is being constructed. Processes of closure and evaluation within our community mirrored the school's year-end occurrences. This restless period, fraught with exams and other evaluations, was echoed in our community and led us to the final evaluation of this endeavour.

This overview of our group's development provides the framework within which it is possible to understand the subjects of the group's conversations. The next chapter, then, describes and analyses the topics of these conversations.

## CHAPTER 7: IMPACT OF SCHOOL CONTEXT AND CULTURE ON GROUP CONVERSATIONS

This chapter discusses the “how” and “what” of our community’s conversations. It begins by explaining how the nature of teachers’ in-school relationships limits the kind of conversations likely to be heard in this context. The chapter then examines the impact of the group’s interdisciplinary nature on our conversations and describes the narrative manner in which we shared our experience as teachers. Finally, I identify some specific characteristics of our conversations, detail the main topics upon which we deliberated in our meetings, and relate these topics to the development of our community.

### MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATIONS

Teachers in the group came from different disciplines. This multidisciplinaryity is an important factor in understanding the way the group became a secure and safe place for teachers, and thus for understanding the nature of our conversations. To explain why this is so, I now provide a short explanation about teacher culture and communication.

In big schools with many staff, teachers tend to spend recesses in the staff-room, gathering in subgroups according to their disciplines (Hargreaves, 1992; Kainan, 1996 b). Among the 120 teachers in our school, this tendency is quite marked. Each subgroup sits around a specific table and strict boundaries divide subgroups. Teachers from one group do not usually sit with teachers from another. Some disciplines (e.g. math and the sciences) are considered more prestigious than others. The ‘prestige factor’ helps explain why members of these disciplines make efforts to construct and defend their borders. Hargreaves (1992) uses the word “Balkanization” to describe the phenomenon whereby teachers “attach their loyalties and identities to particular groups of their colleagues. These are usually colleagues with whom they work most closely, spend more time, socialise more often in the staffroom” (p. 223).

Kainan (1996 b), who studied the social relations of teachers in an Israeli high school, writes about two different types of relations: collaboration and competition. While collaboration contributes to the sense of belonging to the group, competition contributes to the status and priority of certain teachers at the expense of others. Hargreaves argues that Balkanization leads to competition *between* groups of teachers. Kainan (1996 b) develops the argument and



describes the competition *within* the group. Although one would expect teachers within a subgroup to be mutually helpful and cooperative, this is not always the case; many use their recess time to gain appreciation and respect from their peers<sup>18</sup>. These self-advancing efforts sometimes undermine other teachers, especially the new and inexperienced ones.

Kainan (1996 b) notes that, in her study, teachers tried to hide the fact that they compete with each other. Although they are endemic, fights, friction and competition in the staff-room are usually camouflaged. Teachers tend to present themselves as subscribing to a collaborative ideal, where people help and support each other in both private and professional matters. This tendency to hide disagreements was also noticeable in the group under study. Although they hinted at the difficulty of getting help from disciplinary peers, teachers were hesitant to discuss it openly. There seemed to be an over-riding norm of loyalty to their discipline subgroup that constrained criticism in front of teachers from other groups.

But there were hints of criticism. For example, at one early meeting we were talking about the possibility of making some changes in the way History teachers teach. In order to teach differently, these teachers would need to develop a substitute to the matriculation exams.

Yarden said:

If the History teachers, for example, *and there is a problem here*, had the power to work together, we could get permission to develop a school-based program in History [...]. Don't we have enough good teachers in our school to do this?!? I can't do it alone; this has to be a project of the History team (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997, my emphasis).

Reading this quote, one might infer that the History team does not tend to work together, share ideas, and help each other. Yarden knows that developing a school-based program is a complicated task, but although there are "enough good [History] teachers in our school", the team does not provide the cooperative atmosphere needed for such a project.

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18 Many consider it a privilege to be assigned to a group of high-achieving students, or to teach higher grades. Only those known as good teachers get these privileges. The school principal, who decides about this matter, gets information from peers and the teacher in charge of the subject. Hence, teachers tend to present themselves as successful rather than disclose problems and look for help. However, this attitude is different in different groups. The Biology team, for example, decided not to discriminate on the basis of grade and ability levels, when assigning teachers.

Over time, there were more hints of this sort and sometimes overt disclosures of competitive relationships within some discipline teams. Actually, one of the signs that teachers had started to feel secure in our community was their willingness to engage in critique of their discipline teams. At the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting, for example, Yarden expressed herself frankly, making no effort to cover her criticism. There was a problem getting grade 12 students to read the History textbook. Instead of finding ways to entice or force students to comply with reading requirements, teachers were simply summarising the book and handing the summaries to their students.

I fought A. [another History teacher] right from the beginning of the year, but at the end she went and wrote these summaries, [and handed them to her students]. After that, the pressure from my students was intolerable: 'why does A. give her students summaries and you don't?' So I had to do it too (fieldnotes, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998).

Besides criticising another team member's teaching strategies, Yarden was also alluding to competition between teachers within the History group. Teachers were competing for the students' appreciation by providing materials that might help them succeed in the matriculation exams. For some teachers and many students, writing summaries of the History textbook was a sign of good teaching, or - at least - of care. In order to compete, Yarden was forced to act against her own understanding of what constituted good teaching and good care.

Vered spoke about her need to share "what happen in class and how I feel about it, without considering anything else" (fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997). This phrase hints at Vered's reluctance to speak openly about difficulties with her peers from the English team. New teachers like Vered rarely discuss their problems until they have established a firm base of peer support. In a climate of 'last hired, first fired', they tend to expose themselves and their difficulties as little as possible.

The multidisciplinary nature of our group proved to be an important factor in freeing teachers from the need to identify with their discipline teams. Our community allowed teachers to be open without exposing themselves to criticism and undesirable consequences. In contrast to the norms within discipline teams, we were able to converse in an open, direct, and trustful manner.

From this aspect of our group's communications we move to the next section which describes and analyses our specific mode of communication: the sharing of stories from our daily practice. Actual topics and conversational themes are examined.

### SHARING THROUGH STORIES

Telling stories is a common mode of communication in Israeli culture as well as in many other cultures (see Polanyi, 1989). People tell stories of their life events as a matter of course, and professionals often tell stories of their profession (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, 1996; Elbaz, 1983; Hollingsworth and Sockett, 1994; Kainan 1995, 1996 a; McDonald, 1992). In the school context, telling a story about class events is more than a mode of communication; it is a way to ask for and provide help. Michael Huberman (1991) explains why and how it works:

Within the school building, one does not ask spontaneously for help and one does not cavalierly offer advice. Both behaviours are reckless. To ask for help is publicly to compromise one's professional reputation (self-abasement); to offer help is to violate important norms of status equality (arrogance, hubris, bad form). One may ask help indirectly, *by telling a story* about a period wasted on a diabolical pupil or an unrepentant class or an extraordinary morning that went inexplicably sour in the afternoon. And one can offer advice, indirectly, by 'telling back' a story that contains some germs of resolution (p. 13, emphasis added).

Rather than asking for help, teachers tend to present themselves (to both strangers and colleagues) as competent, knowledgeable, and successful professionals. Despite the contradictory reality of most classrooms, teaching is usually presented as smooth, well-planned, constructive, and fruitful. In other words, teachers would rather close the doors of their classrooms and present themselves as they wish to be rather than as they are.

The difficult, less-than-perfect moments in class are revealed only under special circumstances, or to a few trusted associates, rarely to those outside the profession or even 'everyday' teaching colleagues. On the one hand, "it seems almost impossible to convey the complexity of what goes on in teaching" to someone who is not a teacher (Pratt, June 2000, personal email). For those who have never taught, teaching seems a simple task; the daily complexity and unpredictability are difficult to grasp and appreciate. Colleagues, on the other hand— those

who understand the joys and challenges all too well, and who could provide help when needed—usually obey the culture of silence teachers subscribe to. What happens behind the classroom door is rarely discussed.

Stories, then, become a safe and useful vehicle to overcome this silence and to seek help, which is found in the resolutions others offer to the difficulties presented in the story. Telling stories is a safe strategy, because the teller can “test” what can be told and what is best kept untold. If the test attracts admonitions or band-aid solutions, the teacher would probably retreat without disclosing to colleagues what happened in class. By dismissing the issue or deflecting it, colleagues signal the teller to maintain the cultural silence. On the other hand, empathic understanding and stories ‘told back’ that contain “some germs of resolutions but with all necessary qualifiers” (Huberman, 1991: 13), would encourage the teller to continue to the heart of what happened and the feelings it generated. In our group, teachers used stories “as a means of negotiating safe spaces in which they could find how much to actually tell, or reveal, or ask of each other” (Pratt, June 2000, personal email).

Teachers’ stories originated in their practices and were told in various, sometimes humorous and creative ways. Classroom stories were the preferred means of sharing the context and richness of an event with the group. Stories are able to capture the complexity and beauty of teaching because they allow rich descriptions and examples. Brandes (Personal communication, November 1998) expresses their essence in a single sentence: “Stories help teachers to capture a moment of teaching, reflect on it and make sense of it”.

At each group meeting teachers brought at least one such story, usually more. They reflected on and analysed the stories and helped each other find creative solutions or better teaching strategies. The stories allowed teachers to share and solve problematic situations, and describe complicated interactions in the classroom. Telling classroom stories helped teachers assign meaning to their actions. Further, telling ‘success stories’ was a delicate way for teachers establish their status within the group.

At every meeting we moved through one or two main issues (or topics) that were illustrated by several stories which explained enriched and gave them meaning. From one perspective, stories can be understood as the heart of the meetings; everything else in the conversations can be viewed as explanations and analyses of these stories. An example can be found in our 6<sup>th</sup> meeting (December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1997):

**Yarden** – [...] Did you hear what happened in grade 11 B?

(Some teachers shake their heads in a “no” gesture, and have a question on their faces).

**Mairav** – I have no idea.

**Yarden** – This is a very difficult class to teach. From the beginning of the year I’ve had to keep fighting them, and I am not used to this. At the end of the year they need to do the matriculation exam, but they are far from being ready. I tried [to convince them to study] in all possible ways, softly, and by testing them at the end of every lesson, but nothing helped. The classroom itself is terribly dirty. You’ve never seen anything like it!

**Mairav** – How does such a thing can happen?

**Yarden** – The whole age group is the same, there is a kind of careless attitude. I’d go into the classroom and it was shocking: the whole floor was covered with papers; students were walking out of class in the middle of the lessons... It is the last period every Friday and I go home distressed. Distressed! Nothing like this has happened to me before. I thought: what’s going on here? One day I told them: listen, if I need to repeat one more sentence, I will leave the room and you will not learn History, at least, not with me. And I did it. I got up and left the room.

**Karen** – Ah, you did!

**Yarden** – Yes!

**Mairav** – I thought they’d have been frightened enough to behave themselves. But [they weren’t, so] you did it!

**Yarden** – I got up and left the room. They were shocked. And the best part was that T. [the principal] backed me up. Then all the other teachers of this class started to talk and feel good.

(Laughter)

**Yarden** – Suddenly they all felt so good! The fact that I'd left the room helped all the other teachers who'd felt horrible about this class but hadn't known what to do. I was not ready to be disgraced, not ready! I decided that I would not return to this class until some changes were made. At the end, because of my move, it was decided that instead of having three classes of 40 students each we would have four classes with 30 students each. Meanwhile, they [the students] were told that if anyone misbehaved they would be thrown out of class. They are so quiet now that it is almost uncomfortable...

(Laughter)

**Yarden** – Suddenly, students who [said they were] bored to death, are finding that it [learning History] is interesting. They ask questions, they argue, they express their feelings about what we learn, and they actually are engaged in History. Once I forced them to study they came to realise that if they listen and get to the heart of the matter it can be interesting.

**Yael** – They needed this pressure.

**Noy** – And they don't misbehave any more.

**Bobbey** - You are taking a weight off my heart. You don't know how much [you have helped me]. This is the first time I have taught grade 11 and I don't dare to say many things.

**Mairav** – Everyone is afraid.

**Bobbey** – Right! ...they do whatever they want, they simply - excuse my language - they piss on us.

**Yarden** – Right! Someone has to make a move. I felt that because I'm older and have taught for more than 14 years, I could afford to take a stand. Maybe if I were younger I wouldn't have dared doing it.

**Bobbey** – I must say that this is exactly the truth.... This is the first year that I've had the chance [to teach grade 11] and I know that people are watching me with a magnifying glass. Would I dare do something like this?! [I don't think so.]

**Yarden** – You are right, I agree with you. But I was never in such a situation before. I never saw students who misbehaved so badly [...].

This excerpt reveals the contribution of such a story to the teller as well as to other group members<sup>19</sup>. Bobbey no longer felt alone with her difficulties with Grade 11 students. Once she realised that other teachers with more experience and higher status shared the same feelings, it “took a weight off [her] heart”. When Mairav said “everyone is afraid”, she actually exposed her own feelings as well as her long experience in teaching difficult groups of students. This was a gentle and generous way of saying to Bobbey that experienced teachers confront similar difficulties and are just as fearful of exposing them.

This reaction gave Yarden another chance to stress her position and professional competence: she was past forty and had more than 14 years experience. She “could afford” to take the risk she did because of her solid reputation.

Teachers used stories to ask for the group’s help or to tell the group how they resolved a specific problem (as with Yarden). A teacher would tell the group a story about a specific situation and usually one or two others would “answer” with stories about similar situations and how they had resolved them. On only a few occasions did we talk about teaching or learning from a theoretical rather than experiential perspective. One of those times was in our second meeting we tried to look for a definition for learning. Another example comes from the third meeting (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997) when Yael, in answer to someone’s question, provided us with some theories about special-education students. After her short “presentation” we talked briefly about these theories and their possible use in our practice but quickly moved to practical examples of our experience with such students.

The word “story” was freely used during our conversations: “listen to this story” or “you won’t believe my story!” When teachers used the slang word “piece” instead, as in “listen to this piece”, it was a hint to expect a humorous anecdote rather than a “problem” or a difficulty. Sharing through stories seems to be a natural and common way for teachers to communicate and to safely open the closed doors of the classroom. Telling about an event is under the teller’s control and expresses the teller’s point of view: she decides what to tell, what to stress, and

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19 Most stories that teachers brought to the meetings were well received by the rest of the group. They listened carefully, expressed empathy, asked questions, offered solutions, and “gave back” a story to match the one told. However, some stories were not so well-received. Two examples of stories that weren’t well accepted by the group and weren’t treated with a caring and attentive attitude are further described and explained in Chapter 9 (The case of Vered and the story of Ya’ara).

what to ignore. Participants seldom undermined or questioned the “facts” that were presented but rather treated the story as a parcel of information that required responses.

However, “telling a story” is not an accurate enough description of the way teachers shared their experience in our group. The sharing was a complex weaving, an art. The tapestry started with a vignette by one teacher, from which someone else wove a bridge for her own story, while others in turn threaded in their own contributions. One or more of these stories could reappear later in the meeting (or in another meeting) when it could take on a different meaning. Once told, the story changed to meet the needs of participants. It was used and reused by different teachers, for different purposes, and became the group’s ‘common knowledge’. Brandes (1994), who describes and analyses the way teachers’ stories are “crafted” during professional conversations, prefers to call them “shared situated cases”. This term points to the idea of sharing, to the importance of the originating contexts, and the context in which they are shared and “crafted”. As in our community, these mutually constructed “cases” were “oral, generative and evolving” (Brandes, 1994: 143), and sharing them was an act of “craft[ing] simultaneously and orally by the different participants” (ibid.).

With time, it became common for teachers to combine their own and others’ stories in order to make a point or show a common understanding. Looking at this work of weaving, it was not always easy to find the pattern. Sometimes teachers lost the thread of their stories, at other times the point of the stories or of telling them was not entirely clear to other participants. Nevertheless, the group seemed to prefer this story-sharing mode of communication and persisted with it the whole year.

#### CONVERSATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

In Chapter 4 I explained some characteristics of conversation among Israelis, such as ending one-another’s sentences and talking together in “bursts”. Reading through the transcripts of our meetings reveals additional characteristics relating to the way teachers react when faced with a story that presented a question. First, they tend to draw on memories of themselves as students or of past experiences with students. The next step would be talking about suggestions for actions, and actual actions in class. Second, they tend to answer the question with a story, and to commence their stories by showing agreement with the previous story and then continue with a sentence such as “I had a similar experience in my class”. While so doing, they tend also to express emotions (such as anger, relief, etc.), that were evoked by the previous story.



Although the experiences told in the different stories were sometimes quite different, no one ever objected to the opening “declaration” of similarity. These two different conversational characteristics are illustrated below. .

Regarding the first characteristic, Vini drew on her memories as a student and exposed her emotions in reacting to a suggestion about a teaching strategy<sup>20</sup>, saying: “I hated it when my teachers used to give us words to learn for spelling tests”. Maya’s story of the way she was badly treated by a teacher who disrespected her was one which evoked memories of student days and helped teachers put themselves in students’ shoes. Yarden’s eagerness to tell us (“I must tell you”) how she helped a student to overcome a “blackout” period during an important exam is an example of how past experience with students informed the current conversation.

Regarding the second characteristic, in a short conversation between Yael, Ya’ara and myself (see previous Chapter), Yael reminded us that we should be alert to students’ needs in a time of special tension. Both Ya’ara and I verbalised agreement with her remark (“this is true” and “Right!”) and contributed two different stories to illustrate why this was the case. Although the stories differed, each was connected through the need to be aware of students’ anxiety. Earlier in this chapter there were examples of the way teachers express agreement with what was said (“this is exactly the truth” “right”, “you are absolutely right”) and their way of exposing their emotions (“you are taking a weight off my heart”).

The two characteristics helped make the conversation more intimate and thus provided opportunities for gentle disagreement or critique. For example, a teacher might say: “Yes, I think you are absolutely right”. But then, instead of explaining why and to what she agreed so soundly, she might tell another story with a somewhat different perspective. The first teller receives dual affirmation: emphatic verbal agreement and having her story being linked to another story yet to be told. The second teller can either deepen the discussion, by throwing a slightly different light on the problem originally posed, or lead the group in a new direction.

Each teacher had her own interpretation of the stories told, and there was no demand for consensus on what we were learning from them. As a result, the shift from one story to the next was based on associations and thus was very fluent and non-threatening. This way of communication seems helpful in creating a safe atmosphere for further and deeper

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20 For further details see chapter 8.

understanding of practice. The conversational characteristics described above might teach us how to create a climate of open sharing in a culture that does not enhance such communication.

## **CONVERSATIONAL TOPICS**

The transcripts reveal that teachers revisited a number of topics time and again. The three presented here were among the most dominant and took much of the group's time and attention. These topics are: (i) student-teacher relations; (ii) teaching strategies across different subjects; and (iii) evaluation of students' learning.

### **Relations with students**

The teacher and the act of teaching are actualised in the relationships between teachers and students. These relationships provide much of the meaning that teachers give to the teaching experience. The dialogue between teacher and students is at the heart of these relations. When meaningful relationships are not established, teachers express discontent.

Arieli's (1995) longitudinal study of 49 teachers provides many examples the levels of discontent that teachers experience as a result of unsatisfactory relationships with their students. He describes and analyses the sources of students' power, and the way teachers feel as a result of being hurt by students. Although most of the book concentrates on discontent in teaching, it also addresses the authority and power teachers wield over students and the joyful aspects of student-teacher relationships. In one of Arieli's interview a teacher maintained that "in a lucky year, my home-room class<sup>21</sup> is like a family" (Arieli 1995: 149, translated).

Conversations about relations with students took place right at the start of our community; however, these conversations were limited in scope, as will soon be explained. Class-educators mentioned the topic as part of their presentation to the group. Others stressed their strong ties and good relationships with their students and gave examples. Talk centred on the need to show respect and consideration for students, be aware of their needs, and recognise their different understanding and interpretations of words and actions. During these meetings, only Vered demanded that students should show respect to teachers as well as vice versa. She did not approve of the common practice of students calling teachers by their first names.

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21 This is a class-educator who talks about "her" class.

Claiming good relations with one's students was a legitimate way to establish a place in the group. 'Good relations' extends beyond caring and mutual respect to include the ability to control the behaviour of students. This means that the teacher does not need to yell at students or punish them to ensure proper behaviour. Teaching can proceed without the need to be tough or aggressive to gain some peace and quiet in the classroom. 'Good relations' might mean that this teacher has gained the reputation of being not only a caring teacher, but also a good teacher: Someone who is liked and trusted by students and so respected for teaching ability that there is no need to waste class time on discipline problems. Therefore, claiming good relations with students gives teachers a status closer to that of the class-educators who get (at least part of) their high status from this source.

The issue of controlling students' behaviour is highly problematic. All teachers know how difficult it is to cope with aggressive, frustrated students who turn their frustrations and anger towards teachers. These students pay no attention to what they are told. They provoke, disrupt, and prevent the teacher(s) from teaching. In some cases, teachers become so distressed by students' behaviour that they are unable to function. Although coping with such students is the biggest challenge teachers face, this issue did *not* dominate group conversations. One of the reasons for the relative silence on this topic was the shared conviction that teachers who can attract and hold their students' attention do not need to deal with controlling their behaviour. Students' misbehaviour is commonly conceived as resulting mainly from boredom. Thus a teacher who admits to having behavioural problems is also admitting to being boring. But in order to engage the attention of students in class, the teacher must make a huge investment in preparation, as Vered describes:

A child deserves a teacher who is well prepared for the lesson. But in many classes, especially the slower classes, we must prepare a lot, use many different strategies, and instruct the students to act in a variety of ways during the lesson to keep it lively and interesting. Well, I can't do that all the time, for every lesson. How many hours do I need to invest in enriching one lesson? So when a student tells me he is bored I always say that the belly dancer will be along shortly. (Laughter). Not every lesson can be so great... (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Vered acknowledges the difficulties of consistently providing interesting, lively lessons that attract the students' attention and distract them from misbehaving.

Although most teachers maintained a code of silence on these matters, Yarden chose to speak about it quite early in the year when, as already described, she told us about walking out of one of her classes. In telling this story to the group, Yarden was able to stress her powerful position and professional reputation within the teachers' community. The decision to leave the class, which could be seen as a weakness, was presented and understood as a legitimate, powerful decision and the conversation that followed centred on when a teacher's social position allows such decisions. The group's reaction reinforced Yarden's decision. Her fight was our fight, and her victory our victory. No one questioned her actions or suggested any alternative way of solving the problem.

Although not open and exposed, the matter of controlling students' behaviour underpinned many other topics. Choosing to develop certain teaching strategies was a pedagogical approach to this issue. We found it easier and more useful to develop ways to attract students' attention than to complain about their behaviour.

Another approach was to talk about "problematic students", throwing responsibility for behavioural issues back on the students themselves instead of relating their behaviour to problematic relationships with teachers. Conversations were manipulated so that misbehaviour was isolated from the classroom context, and tied to the personal learning difficulties or disabilities of these students. The presence of a group member with expertise in special education facilitated this shift, which also allowed teachers to present themselves as interested in, and caring for, their students. This felt much safer than presenting themselves as people with so little power they could be manipulated by students. I was not surprised that only established teachers spoke openly about such difficulties. Less experienced teachers need more than one year of group participation to find enough courage and confidence to disclose their difficulties in this regard.

### **Cross-disciplinary teaching strategies**

The multidisciplinary of our community worked to provide teachers with strategies and ideas from different subjects for use in their own classrooms. The Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) groups (Baird and Northfield, 1992; Baird and Mitchel 1987) in Australia spent much of their time sharing and preparing enhanced teaching strategies to "generate awareness of, and responsibility for, personal learning" (Baird, 1987: 10). Teachers tried to initiate novel ways to "shift the responsibility for learning-performance from the teacher to the

student" (ibid.) and make learning a more active and conscious process where students "are aware of the way they go about their own learning and can manipulate it usefully and productively" (Baird, 1987: 11). In other words, teaching students to think about their ways of learning and their ways of thinking - metacognition - was one of the basic elements that comprised these groups.

In our group, we had no pre-set ideas of how learning should be, nor did we invest time in developing teaching strategies and techniques. Instead, in a natural way, teachers listened to someone's story then suggested different strategies that seemed appropriate for the situation. In this way, sharing teaching strategies gradually became an important part of our meetings. At times participants wanted to discuss new strategies before trying them out in class. But most of the time, teaching strategies emerged from stories and responses. Teachers elaborated on strategies that had worked for them, and about those they could not use in class for various reasons. In a number of cases participants tried out suggested strategies in their own classes and reported results back to the group.

In the first meeting Ya'ara told us that when her students "know that they need to learn a certain amount of material in a limited time, it blocks them". (Fieldnotes, November 10, 1997). Her students seem unable to understand her explanations in these circumstances. This provoked a few comments from other participants, including myself. My question was "what do I (a student) need in order to learn?" Other teachers added more questions and spoke about the ties between emotions and learning. Karen began the next meeting with the question "how does one learn?" We kept shifting between 'teaching talk' and 'learning talk' and eventually established that the process of learning has to do with the learner's investment of effort in, and engagement with, the subject under study. Our conversations were then directed towards seeking strategies that would enhance students' efforts and active engagement in knowledge construction.

The following conversational excerpt comes from our 13<sup>th</sup> meeting (March 9<sup>th</sup> 1998). Vered, the English teacher, asked the group's help in planning a follow-up to a story-telling session, and asked what exercises might best help her students expand their English vocabularies. She handed us a copy of the story she was teaching in grade 8 and some examples of questions she asked in class.

**Vered:** What you see here is the text and a few questions to see if the reader has understood the story.

**Tami:** Did you tell them the story in Hebrew or in English?

**Vered:** Well, I have learned that it is important to introduce a text to the students before I start teaching it, but this time I decided not to do it. I said: now you close [your notebooks and books] and I'll tell you a story in English.

**Vini:** Did you read them the story?

**Vered:** Yes, I read them the story. Their books were closed and they listened. I like to tell stories, I like it very much, and I do it quite dramatically. They listened carefully and then they opened their books and started working on the meaning of words, and that was one lesson. Do I need to repeat it? Do I need to keep working on words [from the story]? There are a few questions in the book, some of them are very simple while others are more complex and require some creativity. What do I do with it?

**Yarden:** [You can ask them] to use the words in sentences that are not connected to the story.

**Tami:** They can try and continue the story. You can provide them with a list of words, and each student continues the story, using some of the words.

**Yarden:** And bringing it to a different path.

**Vered:** Another idea is that each student will be responsible for one word. It means that s/he needs to check the word at home and find a way to explain it to the whole class.

**Yarden:** I like it. [A few meetings ago] we were searching for ways to enhance students' responsibility for their own learning. This idea is just the right one for us. [Each student is] responsible for one word.

**Tami:** There is also a game you can play: the word is explained in mime, and one student explains it [in mime] to the next, until it arrives at the one who needs to guess what the word was.

**Vered:** I could write the words on the blackboard and ask them to look for sentences that are...

**Vini:** ... in the story.

This excerpt gives a taste of the flow of ideas, which resulted in a number of suggestions in response to Vered's questions. As teachers trained to provide answers to our students, we felt responsible for providing Vered with some teaching strategies. And as we spoke, Vered herself came up with further ideas. The intent was to increase students' engagement in, and responsibility for their learning. The need for new ideas, for something different to try in class, seems to be always present. The group generated a greater pool of creative ideas than any individual. The excerpt also provides a "taste" of the atmosphere in our community and the kind of relationships that were developed throughout the year. The supportive atmosphere allowed teachers like Vered to present their needs and get the attention they required. Trust was built slowly during the year, and became the source of our power as a group. Also of note is the parallel between our interest in using stories as a teaching strategy to the way we learn from, and teach each other in the group. The excerpt above is part of a long conversation about the use of stories as a teaching strategy, which will be continued in the next chapter.

## **Evaluation**

Evaluation of students' learning was an important part of our conversations. As explained earlier, students in our school are required to work towards many exams (sometimes up to two per week) throughout the whole year, while the matriculation exams<sup>22</sup> at the end of grade 11 and 12 loom over all our teaching efforts. Teachers of the higher grades have more status not only because they are (supposed to be) more knowledgeable, but also because they "prepare" the students for the matriculation exams. Much of the learning in Israeli high schools, therefore, is directed towards evaluating rather than enriching the learner. This situation creates much frustration among teachers of all grade levels. For example, in our first meeting, Vini and Bobbey told us that even the students as young as those in grades 7 or 8 were nervous about "finishing the material" so that they would be ready for the matriculation exams. The conversations about exams, evaluations, and the stress they cause began as early as the second meeting.

In our third meeting (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997) the issue of evaluation reappeared in a different guise. This time, the focus was on our duty as teachers to care for our students, and help them

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<sup>22</sup> The matriculation exams are nation-wide exams taken by all students at the end of grades 11 and 12. Only those who pass the exams are allowed to enrol into higher-education institutions.

overcome the stress caused by these constant examinations. We discussed ways the exams might be used as vehicles for communicating with students and for enhancing, rather than simply evaluating, their learning.

**Vini** – Sometimes I give them an exam with open books. [I tell them] you have the information, work on it. In History I think we don't need exams, we need projects. I would rather have a student work at home with a book than learn by heart for exams. Why should I mind if students would sit at home with a book?

**Bobbey** – But Vini, there is a problem here because the system has some other requirements. The fact is that they need to cope with the matriculation exams, and we have to prepare them for this moment

**Yarden** – In grade 7?!

**Bobbey** – Well, I don't say that in grade 7, but if you teach them how to study two chapters for an exam, then in grade 12 they will be able to study three books.

**Vini** – I don't think so. If a student learns how to write an essay, figures out what is important, writes it according to some rules with proper introduction and a main section based on evidence... don't you think it is a better way to learn?

**Bobbey** – I think that we blur the lines between what we dream of—what we would like the system to be—and what it really is.

**Vini** – So let's change it!

**Bobbey** – Well, with all due respect to you and the rest of the people here, we can change very little...

**Yarden** – That's not true! If the History teachers, for example - and there is a problem here - had the power to work together, we could get permission to develop a school-based program in History and the students would do a different type of exam, probably an essay [...]



This meeting started a series of long conversations about alternative types of evaluation. Alternative evaluation is a concept that attracts considerable attention from the Israeli Board of Education; it has become a big issue in Israel during the last few years. In most schools, including ours, courses and professional development days aimed to equip teachers with standard strategies and ideas for coping with the demand to evaluate students in “alternative” ways. Teachers tended to resist this new demand as it entailed much more work as well as changes in long-established habits of work.

In our community, the search for alternative evaluation emerged only after we had already gained new understandings about the process of learning and tried out some “alternative” ways of teaching. We started to develop new teaching strategies for enhancing active learning and students’ responsibility for their own learning. The more we talked about learning and experimented with different strategies to enhance it, the more we understood that there is no reason to keep evaluating students only by their tests results. Instead, there is a real need to find creative, alternative, methods of evaluation. Group participants not only started to look for these but also used “regular” evaluation strategies (such as tests and exams) for learning about their students’ difficulties. Ya’ara, for example wanted to investigate the reason some of her students failed a test:

I told you in one of the meetings that I had no idea how come so many students had failed [the Chemistry test] and what had happened to them. So I followed Yael’s advice and handed them the same paper, but instead of the heading “exam” I put another heading – “class-work”. I told them that I want to see in real time how do they work, what do they do, and what were their difficulties in the test. The result was very simple: [I realised that] they don’t read instructions well, they don’t read the sentence to its end (May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

Failing the test, then, didn’t result from the teacher’s failure to teach, or from the student’s failure to learn. It was connected to students’ stress and their failure to read instructions. Ya’ara made use of Yael’s advice, and it helped her to pinpoint the cause for students’ difficulty. Besides learning about her students in this way, Ya’ara made use of the group’s conversations to find an alternative way to evaluate her students’ understanding. She now uses the exams as a tool for understanding her students’ thinking.

I started to look at exams differently. While I was correcting them, *I was searching for the students' ways of thinking*. Once I understood better what their problems were, I could better direct their study. [...] I started to question what they understand as a result of my teaching (May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Ya'ara's emphasis).

We held the evaluation of students in tension with the evaluation of our own community. We kept checking and evaluating our ways of communication and the topics and substance of our conversations. The impression of our group conversations on teachers' ways of teaching could be heard in Yarden's explanation:

In grade 10A, the kids are very intelligent, really a good class. The kind of students of whom you can ask questions which are not directly attached to the subject. I tried to ask them many questions and, actually, I tried to *entice them to ask questions* such as 'why do we learn this'? 'How does it connect to our lives'? Instead of telling them that they have to learn it because someone in the Board of Education had decided they must, we talked about the connection of what they learn to their own lives. I did it as a result of our conversations here. (May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Yarden's emphasis).

Yarden evaluates our meetings as useful in that they led her to question her teaching style. Previously, she had begun to feel bored with teaching and its many frustrations. But now, she can point to a specific change for the better: she tries to entice students to question the relevance of History to their own lives and to evoke questions and conversations about issues previously discarded as irrelevant.

Our last meeting (May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998) was devoted to teachers' evaluation of our community and their learning in it. Although Mairav no longer taught regular classes, she said that she "kept comparing the new things [I learned] to what I did in the past". Noy started to take new ideas from the group "right from the beginning of the year." She learned a lot from Yael, the special-education expert and began "to think differently about students with learning difficulties". Yael said that at first she had found the meetings unfocussed and disorganised, "but as I kept coming, I realised that I'm learning in a different way, learning in a group. This is a totally different way of learning". While Yael did not feel that the Hishtalmoot had changed or improved her teaching, she felt she had "opened a door" for the others in their understanding of special-education students. Karen wished "all the Hishtalmooyot (plural for Hishtalmoot) were like this one. At the end you really know something [about] teaching". Bobbey pointed to a

critical feature in the process of learning. "We distanced ourselves a bit from the actual teaching and had a chance to look at our work, to think of it. I think this is very important".

Evaluation, then, involved two processes. One was directed toward improving our ways of evaluating students' learning, and the other was directed toward evaluating our own learning in this community.

The three subjects mentioned above—student-teacher relations; teaching strategies across different subjects; and evaluation of students' learning—are linked to the progression of our group. The following section explains this connection.

### **RELATIONS BETWEEN CONVERSATIONS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The subjects of our conversations are linked to the relationships and atmosphere that were developed in our community, and to the progression of our community over time. Relations with students and the need for mutual respect between teachers and students were discussed mainly at the beginning of our group formation. These conversations about respectful relations were strongly linked to each teacher's wish to be respected in the Hishtalmoot and to define her place in it. They were connected to our wish for authentic relations within the community, and probably to our fear of not achieving authenticity. Conversations about our obligation to care for our students were linked to our own needs as community participants to care, and to be cared for, by others.

Teaching strategies were discussed during most of our community's meetings, starting as early as the fourth meeting and ending toward the end of the year. As the meetings continued, we all gained confidence and developed a sense of responsibility towards other community members and to the community as a whole. Whenever a teacher asked for the group's help she got it, with attention and good will to spare. At that time we were a working group, assessing and responding to our own needs. We mirrored what we wanted for our students: We were active learners, who participated in conversations, were deeply engaged in the subject being discussed, and who developed new strategies to be tried in class. We were responsible for our own learning and we led ourselves toward issues which interested us, just as we wanted our students to do.

As to the third issue – evaluation of students’ learning - we revisited it many times throughout the year. Like other issues it developed with time and correlated to our evaluation of our own experience as a learning community.

## SUMMARY

The two issues that this chapter explores are the “how” and “what” of our conversations. The “how” relates to the way in which we communicated through vignettes or stories. Sharing anecdotes from their practice allowed teachers to carefully present class events, and test their colleagues’ reactions to their presentation. Stories were used in order to ask for the group’s help (if needed) or for sharing success, but in some cases stories were used for establishing teacher’s position in the group. Teachers told their stories in a specific manner. A teacher would usually express her agreement with a story she just heard, then she would draw on her memories as a student or on her experience as a teacher, and tell a new story which would either be truly connected or very loosely related to the story she heard.

Three topics were revisited many times throughout the year: relationships with students, teaching strategies, and evaluation of students’ learning. When considering relations with students, teachers talked mainly about the need to show respect to students, to consider them, and to be aware of their needs. Teachers avoided open conversations about their difficulty in controlling students’ behaviour and their relations with students, and spoke instead about their former lives as students and their own relations with teachers. Teaching strategies were not developed according to any pre-set ideas of how learning should be, nor did we intentionally invest much time in developing teaching strategies and techniques. However, when teachers listened to each other’s stories they suggested different strategies that seemed to be appropriate for the situation. The last topic – evaluation - relates to both the evaluation of students’ learning and to the evaluation of our own learning in this community.

After getting the “taste” of how we conversed and what we talked about when we met, the next chapter describes and analyses the characteristics of our community, centring on the concept of community knowledge.

## CHAPTER 8: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

In this chapter, I use Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) criteria as a starting point for defining features of our community. My intent is not to suggest a perfect alignment between the features suggested by these researchers and the features of the community described in this study. Rather, I use their suggestions to highlight the special qualities and features of this community.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) propose five characteristics of what they call "knowledge-building communities". Participants in such communities: (1) share their knowledge; (2) support one another in knowledge construction; (3) develop a kind of collective expertise that is distinguishable from that of the individual group member; (4) develop and engage in progressive discourse; and (5) demonstrate respect and recognition for peers. In this chapter I address each of these and three additional characteristics: passion, developing power for creative change, and experiencing transformative learning. Two examples will show that these criteria were identified in our community.

### SHARING KNOWLEDGE

The words "sharing" and "knowledge" each carry a specific definition in this study. The notion of sharing is not always clear, even to those who think they are participating in the action of sharing. There is a difference between *saying* that one wishes to share, and actually sharing knowledge and understandings. There is also difference between *sharing* knowledge and wanting to teach, make an impression, or just participating in the meeting. Sharing means here a specific way of presenting one's knowledge so that other participants are able to listen, discuss, reflect on, try for themselves and develop their own understandings, and re-present it back to the community.

By definition, then, a story-sharer must be willing to accept educational interpretations that are different from her own. She must accept that others may use her story (stories) in ways she never imagined. As well, she must be willing to receive and accept the stories of others. Sharing implies a notion of equity, it takes place among equals, unlike "teaching" or "leading" or other forms of unequal communication common in schools, for example between students and teacher, or teacher and principal.

This study also draws on a specialised understanding of 'knowledge' that Fenstermacher (1993) calls "Teacher Knowledge/Practical (TK/P)". TK/P is:

knowledge or understanding developed from participating in and reflecting on action and experience. It is bounded by the situation or context in which it arises, and it may or may not be capable of immediate expression in speech or writing. TK/P is generally related to how to do things, or the right place and time to do them, or about how to see and interpret events related to one's actions (p. 9).

Clandinin's (1992) term is *personal practical knowledge*, "a kind of knowledge carved out of, and shaped by, situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection" (p. 125). Thus the action of teachers sharing stories is seen here not only as a means for revealing existing knowledge but also as a means for generating it. The knowledge constructed in our community was developed from stories (vignettes) brought by teachers from their practice. Teachers reacted to those stories in a way that could be described as engaging "in a form of deliberative inquiry" (Brandes and Erickson, 1998: 47). Teachers listened to the story and collaboratively developed solutions to the dilemma(s) posed in it. By so doing, teachers constructed shared knowledge.

As previously mentioned, teachers shared their understandings of what it means to learn and teach, and their critique of the educational system, right from the beginning of the year. The following is an example of a sharing conversation that occurred during our 13<sup>th</sup> meeting (March 9<sup>th</sup> 1998). It is the continuation of the conversation discussed earlier, where Vered sought help in planning follow-up exercises to a story-telling session. To be more specific, she asked what exercises might best help her Israeli students learn new words in English and was rewarded with a flood of ideas. I (Tami) criticised the suggested exercises as sterile and the discussion took shape as follows:

**Tami:** Those exercises take the life out of the story. The kids don't enjoy the story anymore, they want to answer the questions and finish with it. Why do you want to repeat it? What else do you want them to know? What is important for you here?

**Vered:** The words.

**Vini:** The excitement was there [in class], and now, if the kids reads the story again at home and answer the questions [that are at the end of the story], they must use those words. I would have told them to do only the last question, the one that asks them to continue the story.

**Bobbey:** [to Vini] But this is a difficult question and only the best students would be able to answer it. Other kids in Vered's class, who might not be able to continue the story, would be able to answer the first few information questions.

**Vini:** Well, I would give them the choice. Students don't need to answer all the questions suggested in the book.

**Vered:** In class there is always some tension for me: I need to understand [and] answer questions, to do something with [the students]. What I liked in this last lesson was that they were not required to do anything, just listen.

**Tami:** I also tell stories, sometimes in English, and I don't do anything else with them. If the story is good, it does whatever it needs to do. The kids understand, otherwise they wouldn't have listened so carefully.

**Yarden:** Yes, but in an English class it is not enough to know that they understand, you want to know how they write answers.

**Vini:** I hated it when my teachers used to give us words to learn for spelling tests.

**Yael:** But what is the alternative? To teach stories and not teach vocabulary? If something is beautiful, do not destroy it, is this your suggestion?

**Vini:** No, no...

**Bobbey:** Or teach English vocabulary only with a weak story? They do it in Arabic. The stories [in the book] are so silly!

(Laughter).

**Vered:** I tried to bring interesting stories to teach in class, but the students were not attentive. [The stories] didn't touch them, they were not moved.

**Yarden:** [They want] love, jealousy...

**Yael:** ...murder, horror stories...

**Ya'ara:** When I learned English in high school, I remember reading "Late-night Stories". They were frightening and I just loved reading them.

**Karen:** [Another strategy is] to start a story and stop in the middle, at a place where...

**Vini:** ...before it ends

**Yael:** ...and ask them to guess the end.

Everyone talks at once.

Clearly, teachers are aware of the power of stories (and storytelling or reading) and incorporate them into their practice as a source of knowledge. Students seem to learn readily from stories, not only from their content but also from their style, language, atmosphere, and so on. The use of stories as a teaching tool in the classroom is in congruent with the use of teachers' stories within our community. In both places (class and community) learning is at stake. In class students learn from teachers' stories, from books and from their conversations with other students. In our community we learned the tacit knowledge of practice from each other's stories, as well as from reflecting on our stories.

Going back to the conversation presented above, it is clear that two teachers (Vini and Tami) regard the task of the story to be student enrichment. The teacher's task is to provide the kind of story that engages students in a thought-provoking emotional experience that results in learning: "If the story is good, it does whatever it needs to do". According to this perspective, knowledge is neither in the story nor in the teacher's head; it is constructed by the students as they listen to the story and talk about it in the classroom. Thus, the goal of teaching is to enhance learning by stimulating or provoking the students, and stories are excellent tools for reaching this goal.

For Bobbey, Yarden, and Yael story-telling is instrumental. It is a means, in this case, to help students learn new English words, a task that requires some practice – such as answering the questions at the end of the page. Knowledge is constructed in the acts of practising the



language and answering questions. Thus the teacher's responsibility is to help students construct knowledge by making this task as interesting as possible (i.e. telling a story).

The questions "What else do you want them to know? What is important for you here?" did not receive much attention. Vered said she had two reasons for telling the story: one was to help her students learn new words; the other was to attract and hold her students' attention, without making special efforts to keep them busy. Vered seems to believe that it is the teacher's (tiring) task to keep students busy all the time. Practising the language and entertaining them (telling stories) are two of her strategies. She wants her students to construct knowledge of new words; therefore the need to practice and rehearse these new words is unquestionable. Stories are the vehicles for this knowledge construction. Other reasons for telling a story— such as learning the "music" of the language or developing the skill to extract meaning without understanding every word—are not considered legitimate by Vered.

The notion of equity comes through clearly in the transcript. There is no authoritative "teacher" who tells the "right answer"; we all offer different and creative suggestions of how to use a good story for teaching English. Although Vered responded to some options and not others, this does not signal different levels of respect. Perhaps not all the suggestions were new for her, or she had no time to respond to everyone. Only Bobbey was a language teacher (Arabic). However, we all felt that by sharing our practical knowledge as experienced teachers we could help Vered.

Vered was able to share her hesitations of how she should continue with her teaching after a story-telling session, because she felt safe enough<sup>23</sup> to share such information with other community members. As a result of her sharing, Vered received several rewards. She got group recognition that her question was appropriate, and that it was worth the time we dedicated to it. She was also reassured that she was doing the right things in class – using different teaching strategies for helping her students learn English words. And above all, she got different ideas from different group members.

An interesting development occurred two weeks later (March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998), when Vered shared with us how she used another story-telling session for learning English:

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23 In this situation (as in a few other similar situations in our group) the one who asked for help was the one who was the expert, in this case- Vered; no one in the group knew better than Vered how to teach English. The reason for this might be that the expert feels strong enough to raise real questions and ask for help, or that being an expert means having the knowledge to pinpoint what one doesn't know and the confidence to ask for help.

**Vered** – Do you remember the lesson I told you about, the story-telling lesson?

**Bobbey** – Yes, yes!

**Vered** – Well, I told them another story, which they didn't see in writing. I told it by heart and repeated the same words that were in the previous one. I chose some words that I thought were important and used them [a few times] in the second story. Their homework was to tell the story in seven sentences. I asked them to write whatever they understood, but I also handed them seven pictures that actually tell the story, so it helped them. After they wrote it, I took their papers home, corrected them and told them that each student learns his story by heart for the next exam.

By sharing with us how she used a story for teaching English, Vered added to the group's "load" of teaching strategies. The second time she told a story in class, she carried with her some of the group's suggestions (e.g. Yarden's suggestion to "use the words in sentences that are not connected to the story", or my suggestion to let students continue the story). However, Vered developed her teaching strategies far beyond these suggestions.

Her strategy suggests that on the second occasion Vered engaged her students more actively in the lesson. Students were instructed to tell the story, not only hear it, and were also engaged in understanding, remembering and writing. Vered invested much thought (and work) in the assignment she gave them, and found an alternative way of assessing their knowledge of the English language. She no longer speaks about entertaining students or keeping them busy. Instead, she now sees the teacher's task as helping students to construct knowledge.

By recounting her different experience the second time, Vered also conveyed her gratitude to the group. In sharing her second experience she was actually saying "I have been thinking of what you said and this is what I did with it". Bringing her newly-constructed knowledge back to the group was a way to "give back" and to show us that she was growing, learning and developing.

In this example, as in the earlier ones, group members related to each other's ideas, developed them, agreed with or argued against them. This was all part of the knowledge-sharing process.

## SUPPORT IN KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

Within the community, teachers are supported to construct the kind of knowledge that they may be unable to generate as individuals. The following example of collaborative knowledge construction illustrates this process. It was developed as a solution to a problem that was frequently presented in our meetings.

### The problem

During our meetings we spent many hours discussing the importance of writing long and elaborate feedback on student papers, and the opportunity for learning that these represented for students, beyond the mark itself. However, time and again teachers lamented that despite their many nights of work correcting papers, students merely glanced at the mark and threw the paper away. Such behaviour made many of us frustrated and angry; we felt that our hard work was being ignored. Alternative methods of evaluation were discussed in depth, but nothing seemed to solve the problem: we are required to assign a mark and students were paying attention only to their marks and not to our comments. The period of returning marked exams—when we explain the questions and go over solutions—became unbearable. Students were interested only in the “bottom line”, their grades and were impatient and inattentive. We needed to change their attitudes toward written feedback, and turn the traditional exam analysis class into a learning experience rather than the bore it seemed to be.

### *First stage of the solution*

At one meeting (March 16, 1998), Yael shared a strategy she uses for diagnosing children with learning disabilities. She handed out a copy of a short story copied from a newspaper. It was four lines long and had a blurred picture beside it. She asked us to answer the single question written at the end of it. Then she handed out a list of 20 different answers to the question given verbally by Grade 7 students. Our task, she explained, was to decide which answers were correct and explain why other students got the answer wrong. In other words, we were to work out the ways of thinking that brought students to either right or wrong answers.

In the first case, we decided that the student had not fully understood all the words in the question and thus missed its meaning. The next student told the story in his own words instead of answering the question. It was not very obvious but once we saw it there was a burst of

talking, as teachers realised how often this occurs. Another student gave such an unreasonable answer that we had no idea how she had gone so far astray. Yael explained that she had figured out that the answer was based on the blurry picture next to the story, and that the child could not read. Now we were quite excited, one answer followed another. We were competing in giving explanations and were laughing and enjoying both the answers and our own intellectual effort to explain them. We enjoyed learning something new about our students' ways of thinking as much as we enjoyed the experience, which was energetic, creative and challenging.

### *Second stage of the solution*

The next meeting (March, 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998) started with Ya'ara asking us to help her evaluate her students' answers. She tried out Yael's idea and wrote down a list of students' answers for a question in their Biology exam. The students had been asked to explain a few biological terms and were allowed to open books during the exam. Ya'ara told us what she had expected the answers to be, then handed each of us a list of 12 answers, and asked us to help her decide how to evaluate them. We spent about an hour analysing the questions and answers. Sometimes we suggested alternative phrasings and/or emphases in several questions, while trying to decide how many points each answer should get, and why.

Ya'ara wanted our advice on which were straightforward fact-based questions and which were more complex, demanding deeper understandings of processes, and how to allocate marks accordingly. She then asked our advice on what should be considered as a good (or a "full") answer and why. Towards the end of the meeting, we discussed the difficulty of constructing tests that give a fair picture of students' understanding of subject matter. It then occurred to Yarden that we could probably take the discussion technique Yael had introduced and adapt it for use in class. Having marked exam papers, we could hand out anonymous lists of answers "and discuss with [students] which is right and which is wrong, and why. They will probably learn much from analysing [each others'] answers."

### *Final stage of solution*

Two meetings later (April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1998), Noy and Yarden told the group how they had used "Yael's technique". Yarden had tried it with a grade 11 History class and Noy with an eighth grade Hebrew-grammar class. Each had distributed an anonymous list of answers to one exam questions and asked students to reason why each answer was right or wrong. Both teachers

reported that this was the best lesson they had taught for a long time. For the first time students were arguing, criticising, and “defending” their answers. Instead of just being interested in their grades they actually seemed to be learning. At first students had tried to identify who wrote each answer, but soon realised that this information would not be revealed. Once that became clear, they felt confident enough not only to defend an answer, but also to “attack” it and explain why it was wrong. This teaching strategy proved an effective way to enhance students’ engagement in the subject being taught, develop their thinking, and improve student-teacher relationships.

### *Concluding the chain of events*

The successful classroom experiment described above was the end result of a chain of events. First came a willingness to “open the doors of our classrooms” and speak about our frustrations when students refused to pay attention to reviews of their corrected exams. Once we shared this difficulty, and realised it was a common problem, there was a place in the group for collectively seeking a solution. This had to be a creative solution, since the traditional approaches did not work. We discussed a number of ideas, but none attracted us.

In the meantime, Yael brought her “technique” for diagnosing students with learning disabilities and actually practiced it with us in the meeting. This was an important learning experience: we needed to be active in the learning in order to take it to the classroom. Yael did not tell us about her technique, she made us work with it; each of us had to participate, to be involved in the process. The fact that we experienced it “hands on”, rather than through our regular “show and tell”, was an important reason for its effectiveness; it was a different type of learning experience for us. Knowledge was constructed in the group when we came to understand that we could ‘export’ the technique and use it in different contexts and purposes: Yael taught us this technique in the context of diagnosing learning disabilities. Ya’ara applied it to get help constructing pedagogical knowledge (what is a good exam, how to construct it, how to improve students’ evaluation). Helping out Ya’ara allowed the group a chance to practice Yael’s technique, elaborate on it, and develop it for use in another context. The knowledge we constructed was practical knowledge, “knowledge or understanding developed from participating in and reflecting on action and experience” (Fenstermacher 1994: 9).

At that point, some teachers took the step of applying the technique in the classroom, to overcome the problem of fighting for students’ attention in the traditional exam-review lesson.

These teachers had constructed pedagogical knowledge about the power of active learning. Involving students in the process of evaluating examination answers allowed them to learn, and the time the teachers spent on correcting papers was not wasted. However, this was not the end of the "story". One teacher outside our community told me she heard of "Yael's technique" during one recess, used it in her class and was quite happy with the results. She asked me to write down "other good ideas" that we construct, so she and other teachers might use them (Journal, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998). This chain of events strengthens my claim that a supportive environment assists the construction of knowledge; in the absence of our community, this new pedagogical knowledge would have been unlikely to occur.

An interesting question related to these events, is: what moved the ideas we had learned in the group into actions in our classroom? The answer is connected to the practical orientation of our group. All participants were interested in improving their teaching; many of us admitted to our problems with exam reviews. We were searching for a practical solution to a real problem. When a good idea proved effective in the group, it is little wonder that we quickly turned it into action in the classroom. The group's support and enthusiasm reinforced that decision. Thus the combination of real problem, practical solution, and group support helped us move the idea into action.

#### **COLLECTIVE EXPERTISE: CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE**

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) used the concept "collective expertise" to describe the type of knowledge that is distinguishable from that of the individual group member. In other words, the knowledge that is constructed when participants interact is different from the knowledge each participant brings into the interaction. Collective expertise emerges from interactions, collaboration, and mutual support within the community. Shulman (1997) maintains that participants in community collaborate in specific ways: "they can work together in ways that scaffold and support each other's learning and in ways that supplement each other's knowledge" (p. 17). In the company of others, learners address difficult intellectual challenges that are almost impossible to accomplish alone.

The evolution of "Yael's technique" from a diagnostic instrument (as used by Yael), to a learning-evaluation instrument (as used by Ya'ara) and then to a teaching strategy (as used by Noy and Yarden), is an example of knowledge constructed as a community endeavour. Although the strategy stayed the same, its uses changed dramatically and provided the group

participants with collective expertise. Another example of the construction of collective expertise is the response to Vered's question (described earlier): 'what do I do after a story-telling session?' None of us had a clear idea how to answer the question, but as we continued our conversation, the answer(s) seemed to slowly develop. Teachers appreciated the process of collectively constructing knowledge and the benefits of gaining new understandings as a result of our conversations. In her second interview (June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998), Noy explained the way she experienced our collective expertise:

I came out of it [the Hishtalmoot] with a load of knowledge, truly, with much knowledge about learning. I [also] know better how to cope with [students who have] learning disabilities, because Yael talked about it. Let's say I accept what she said and now see the problem in a different light, which I have never seen before. I learned many things from other teachers as well. Some teachers have much knowledge and experience and I adopted many things that were offered in the meetings. [...] Here [in this group] we talked about our difficulties, and when do you ever talk about difficulties? You rarely have such a chance—to talk about problems that you face in class and how you cope with them. I truly got out of this Hishtalmoot with tools, and I use them.

Vered said that she learned much about her own teaching by talking with other teachers:

What was interesting was this kind of integration we experienced. You tell me your problems, I'll tell you mine, and although I might not remember yours, the sole fact that we talked about them teaches me much about myself (June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

The process described above, of learning within this community, did not happen spontaneously but rather developed during many meetings and conversations. Although some of these conversations were redundant, most of them moved us from a lower level of awareness about our practice to a higher level of awareness.

### **PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE**

Brandes and Erickson (1998) maintain that progressive discourse entails both a kind of language that group members develop and a way of practicing that "motivates inquiry and transforms its results into knowledge" (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993: 209). Participants of

such discourse recognise that they currently understand certain phenomena in a more complex and advanced way compared to their earlier understanding. The earlier discussion of 'Yael's technique' is one example that illustrates the process by which a common language was constructed. As was demonstrated above, Yael's technique was explained and exercised in the group, different teachers used it in different grade levels, subjects, and contexts. Each time they used it, they brought the specific examples to the group, and we all listened, discussed and critiqued the examples. At the end of the year, the term 'Yael's technique' became part of the common language used by group participants who carried with them not only the actual technique but also the different examples and the discussions that accompanied them.

Note the length of time needed for developing such progressive discourse. Participants in our community "enter with others into a common search for meaning in their work lives" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001: 53). To reach a deeper understanding of their practice, teachers must spend together long chunks of time and work as a group over a sufficient period of time. However, only if teachers are committed to work through *complicated* issues over time, do ideas have a chance to incubate, and progressive discourse might develop. This means that the development of a progressive discourse requires a certain level of openness needed for revealing the complexity of teaching. The example provided above shows the slow nature of such development. We needed a long time of working together without being hurried to construct common discourse, develop some shared experiences that function as touchstones and arrive at the kind of solutions that were useful not only for the participants, but also for other teachers in the school who learned them from us. Our community, just as the PEEL groups (Baird and Mitchell, 1986; and Baird and Northfield, 1992) and the LSG group (Brandes and Erickson, 1998) generated progressive discourse that can be used by non-participants.

#### **RESPECT AND RECOGNITION FOR PEERS**

Although respect and recognition for peers is probably a precondition for the creation of any community, this characteristic is especially important in a community where trust and dialogue are the vehicles for achieving practical and professional development. Novice teachers showed respect to older teachers, as they were eager to learn from the latter's rich experience. This respectful attitude was reciprocated; experienced teachers were interested in the new ideas of new teachers, and were willing to listen and advise as colleagues. To encourage new teachers, they freely shared their own failures and successes. The willingness to learn from junior



colleagues was articulated by one senior teacher at the very first meeting, during the introductions. This might be interpreted as lip-service or mere politeness except that in meetings throughout the whole year this teacher demonstrated the genuine sentiment behind her words. She as well as other experienced teachers listened carefully to novice teachers and related to their ideas, difficulties, and hesitations with respect and empathy.

Trust-building takes time and it was only towards the end of the first term that teachers started to open up and reveal a few of their professional difficulties. However, without a foundation of respect and recognition, such trust would not have been built. Teachers cared for, supported, and paid attention to each other. Not only were these relationships essential for their learning, they were of primary importance for their sense of worth and belonging (caring relationships are further explored in the next chapter).

By its nature, teaching is private, personal and individualistic. Teachers work in isolation and stress without collegial and intellectual support or emotional care. Our community provided teachers with support and care based on mutual respect and recognition. Teachers felt safe expressing ideas and asking for help; there was no professional danger in revealing weakness, and admitting to a mistake or a change in perspective tended to earn peers' respect.

Two other features not mentioned by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), appeared significant in our community; these were (1) passion and (2) developing power for change. Shulman (1997) mentioned passion but presented no empirical evidence to support his claim. Developing power for creative change has been identified by many authors who maintain that school change is tightly linked to teachers' communities (e.g. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001; Franke et al., 1998; Hargreaves, 1992; and Lieberman, 1986 a, b). However, I look at this feature somewhat differently. I do not see communities of teachers as vehicles for externally-driven change, nor do I argue that our teachers' community caused change in the school. Instead, I claim that membership in the community initiated a shift in teachers' understandings of learning, teaching and the purpose of schooling, that encouraged them to suggest change in the school. The combination of passion and developing power for change brought about another feature: (3) transformative learning. I now briefly elaborate on each of these three community features.

## PASSION

Shulman (1997) emphasises the passion that participants share: “[they] are emotionally committed to the ideas, processes and activities and see the work as connected to present and future goals” (p. 17). Passion and excitement were evident in our group right from the beginning. During recess, we would talk to each other with such energy that others would ask ‘what are you doing there, in your Hishtalmoot?’ At meetings, these emotions could be mapped in the conversational dynamics: the way teachers got into each other’s sentences, offered solutions, and had to be reminded when the meeting was to end. Teachers were “talking from their hearts”. They exposed their thoughts, beliefs and practice to the eyes of other practitioners. They defended their actions, described successes and admitted failures. Such exchanges could not be conducted without passion, (at least, not in the heat of the Middle-East...). Teachers were eager to share the excitement of constructing and sharing knowledge. “We should present ourselves to the rest of the teachers in school, listen to those who have [new] ideas and wish to advance those ideas, and help them” (Bobbey, interview, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

The following paragraph from my journal is a synopsis of my understanding of the role passion played in constructing and maintaining this group endeavour:

Passion is the right word to describe my feelings about this group of teachers. There were good reasons to initiate such group and to be a member of this community, but it was the excitement and the passion that was most important of all. I believe in what I am doing. I know- in my heart more than in my mind - that it is important, that this project must get on its way. It is exciting to hear teachers saying that they were drawn to the group because of a need for a community where they expect to share teaching experiences and overcome their traditional solitude. It is exciting to find that I might be providing teachers with what we all needed and never thought we could get – a community of practitioners (Journal, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

Teachers are often passionate about their teaching, their relationships with students, and the subject they teach. Now, in addition, teachers were passionate about our group: the relationships we established, the way we conversed, the absence of official facilitation, and most importantly, about their own change and transformation. The passion we shared for our

community attracted inquiries about it from other teachers. But more importantly, it provided teachers within the group with the power to take upon themselves high levels of risk and unpredictability. Their passion pushed teachers to try new strategies in class, to seek help from group members, to talk about their practice openly and honestly, and to reflect, analyse and critique their thoughts, beliefs and actions.

### **DEVELOPING POWER FOR CHANGE**

Membership in community provides the individual with a certain power that she might not have without it, therefore things that cannot be done in isolation seem doable when with others (see Franke et al. 1998). The sense of power that teachers gained as they started to feel the support of the community encouraged them to suggest changes, to try different ways of teaching in their own classes, and then to discuss these changes with other teachers inside and outside the group. Teachers told me that, as a result of participating in our community, they started to see the whole school (not just the classroom) as a target for change.

During our first few meetings some teachers had speculated about group's potential for pioneering change in the school, but others had been sceptical about our ability to do so. Time and again the argument was made that we were 'simple soldiers' who only follow orders; we better not mislead ourselves that we were policy makers. In our third meeting (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997) Yarden and Vini were talking about alternative ways for evaluating students and suggested ways for helping students decrease their stress. Bobbey disagreed with them and presented a very conservative perception of our job as teachers: "The fact is that they [the students] need to cope with the matriculation exams, and we have to prepare them to this moment". Throughout this conversation Bobbey kept reminding us that teachers have no mandate to change the system, but rather work within it. She concluded: "I think that we blur the lines between what we dream of, how we would like the system to be, and what it really is. [...] we can change very little... "

Yet in the interviews at the end of the school year, when asked to evaluate the Hishtalmoot, a repeated theme was teachers' claims that as a result of participating in a community they had gained a sense of power and the desire to enact large-scale change. Even Bobbey's opinion changed. As she put it:

I think that this is a beginning of something that should continue. *I truly want to see this group becoming a leading agent for school change.* I think that the relationships we established here, the very special connections we have with each other, even the 'thinking connections' between us, *if it does not lead to something bigger, it's a waste!* I wish to see us moving one step forward. [...]

In her evaluation, Bobbey spoke movingly about the importance belonging to the Hishtalmoot community has assumed for her:

We internalised this process; we built it gradually, once a week throughout the whole year. It dripped into our blood... it is a different way of looking at things. No, not different, a deeper, wider understanding of my own learning as an individual and as a teacher; a deeper understanding of my teaching and of my students. [The learning] I got in this Hishtalmoot I never experienced before in any of my university and Teacher Education courses (interview, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1998. my emphases).

When compared with her thinking at the beginning of the year, Bobbey's ideas on learning, teaching, and the teacher's place as an agent of school change, had changed quite dramatically. When the year started, she was looking for "practical" solutions, and didn't accept any idea that might bend the rules. She didn't believe in, and had no aspiration for making any kind of change in the "system". Such obedience to the system with no critique or wish to change it is not unusual, though one could expect it more from a cynical, experienced teacher rather than a young, energetic and passionate teacher like Bobbey.

Bobbey's words at the end of the year convey the excitement, the awakening of the spirit. She starts her evaluation of the Hishtalmoot with an emotional description of the very special connections that teachers had established during this year. These relationships, she believes, empowered her and gave her energy to seek a change for a better school both for students and teachers. Bobbey makes a straight connection between the "special connections" that were established in our community and the need to "lead to something bigger". The opportunity to become a member of this community of teachers enhanced her motivation to share her new understanding with people outside it. Participating in the community served Bobbey as a trigger for growth and provided her with the trust and confidence needed for suggesting change and renewal for the whole school.

Yarden, the History teacher, said in her evaluation that as a result of our group meetings “I got the courage to say things that I have never dared to say in the History team”. Participating in our group helped her refresh her attitude towards teaching, and allowed her to critique her own teaching as well as that of her peers in the History department. Our conversations made her re-think how students learn best, and this process pushed her to look for alternative ways of teaching. However, in order to persuade her department peers to make a change, she needed the support of the group. “In order to do things differently, people need to go through a great change, and for this we need much strength”, such strength, she said, was developed here, in this group.

Unaware of Yarden’s words, Yael suggested a similar approach. Yael reinforced the groups’ ability to empower participants, and suggested we should develop a unit in History. Responding to the suggestion that our interdisciplinary group might not be the best group for developing a unit in History, she said:

In order to start this thing going we don’t need History teachers! Yarden will talk with the other History teachers [in her department], *but we will help her to start moving them along* (interview, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1998, my emphasis).

In other words, Yael understands the group as an agent that can (and probably should) help teachers in initiating processes of change. Such processes are complicated and frightening for one teacher to carry by herself thus the help of the community is essential. Yael saw our group as a source of support for different kinds of change that individual teachers might offer<sup>24</sup>. Along with other group members, she perceived our community as a place for teachers to share ideas, hesitations, successes and failures, and get the needed critique and support to carry their ideas into practice. The task of our community was thus to be the sounding board for teachers’ creative innovations.

Vini explained that the atmosphere created in the group allowed new ideas to develop. Like other group members she realised the power for potential change that such a group could exercise within the school.

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24 It is important to note that although teachers in our community developed a wish to lead change in the whole school; this was not actually accomplished within the frame of the school year 1997-1998. However, two years later – after 30 years of leading the school— our principal retired. This marked an opportunity and some of this community’s members were leaders in the organizational and pedagogical changes that followed.

There must be a continuum for these meetings, because once this group has already been created, *it should crystallise some program* (interview, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1998, my emphasis).

By “crystallise some program” Vini, like the others, means develop a program for school change.

Some teachers talked about the impact of the community on their personal and professional lives in a way that showed not only that they had developed a power and will for change, but also that this had happened as a result of a process of inner change, or transformation. The learning that occurred in the community is thus a transformative learning.

### TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Mezirow (1996) explains transformative learning as a change in both meaning schemes (specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes and value judgements) and meaning perspectives (broad, generalised, orienting predispositions). Such a change, if happens at all, usually takes a long time and many phases to occur (Kean 1988). One characteristic of transformational learning is that it is private: only the person who experienced it can testify that it occurred. However, when people do experience transformative learning, they usually develop a wish to act: “Praxis is a requisite condition of transformative learning” (Mezirow 1990: 356).

The experience of participating in our community and the process of knowledge construction clearly impressed some participants. While broadening their understanding of learning and teaching it sometimes resulted in (limited) changes of their practice. Although not using the word “transformation”, teachers expressed the deep change they had experienced. Bobby’s words on the way the group influenced her understanding of students, teaching and evaluation can serve as evidence for transformative learning.

This year I went through many processes, [now] I teach and evaluate differently. Not that I did it wrong and now I do it well, but I think I do it differently, and probably better. I see things differently, when dealing with students I search for things I have never searched for before. [...] We went through a process, a long process... I feel that everything had changed. I see myself making more changes next year. I plan to prepare for next year totally different: I think of many more alternative ways of teaching and evaluating, to

give students the time and place to show their talents and abilities other than in the conventional exams (Bobbey, interview, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

While Yarden did not feel that participation in our community had changed her understanding of her practice, our group conversations forced her to ask questions that she had not asked before. Eventually they caused her to make some changes in her practice. Participating in our community helped her to dare to frankly express her professional disagreement with some of teachers in her department:

This Hishtalmoot had thrown me into myself and forced me to ask myself if this [way of teaching] is what I really want and believe. [...] It took time, but gradually I started to investigate my students' learning and change my teaching. [For example], when they ask me before the exam what chapters they need to learn for the exam, I give them the list of chapters, and then I ask them why we had learned these chapters. Not what we learned, but rather – why we had learned it? And one more thing that happened to me in this Hishtalmoot: I got the courage to say things to other teachers from my department, things that for a very long time I didn't dare say. I really believe they need to make some changes in their conceptions of teaching [...] (Yarden, fieldnotes, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998, my emphasis).

Both examples serve as evidence that these teachers went through some kind of deep inner change, that reshaped their understanding of their practice, and gradually (as they both stress) brought them to change their practice. These changes occurred without the forced or planned intervention of any authority. They occurred gradually, as a result of participating in conversations about teaching, learning, education and schooling. I thus join Brandes and Erickson (1998) in claiming that transformation process can be achieved through this kind of community.

## SUMMARY

This chapter describes a total of eight features that characterise our community. These are: (i) knowledge sharing; (ii) support in knowledge construction; (iii) development of collective expertise (community knowledge) distinguishable from that of the individual group member; (iv) progressive discourse; (v) demonstration of respect and recognition for peers; (vi) passion; (vii) developing power for change, and (viii) experiencing transformative learning.

Participating in such a community encouraged us to go a step beyond the construction of knowledge to applying this knowledge in practice, and proposing change in the greater context. The first three features combined with the trust and care that teachers provided to each other supported them in processes of development and transformation. The caring relationships that teachers created within the group encouraged them to develop the power for making changes in their teaching and to suggest changes for the whole school. The next chapter is devoted to a deeper exploration of these relationships and investigates the place of caring relations in the development of our community.



## CHAPTER 9: CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY

Drawing on Nel Noddings' (1984, 1992, 1995, 1999) concept of caring relations, this chapter provides evidence that our group of teachers formed a caring community, where participants learned to be caring teachers while experiencing caring peer relations. The last part of the chapter explores situations where we failed to exhibit such relations, within our community and with our students.

### CARING RELATIONS IN OUR COMMUNITY

#### **Notes from my journal (May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000)**

Yesterday we had the school's "Grand End-of- the-Year Teachers' Meeting". It was 2:00 P.M.; most teachers had just finished their workday and were quite tired. As I entered the room, Bobbey came toward me, hugged me and with a smile asked how was my writing going. I started to tell her and then Karen came over and hugged us and said, "I miss you" and then corrected herself "I missed us". We formed a little animated circle of three in the middle of the big auditorium. Ya'ara entered, came toward the circle and asked where we intended to sit. I pointed at my chair and she put her bag on the one next to it, and then joined the "magic" circle. Vini came over, put her bag on the next chair, and joined our circle too. Karen repeated: "I really miss us"! Vini corrected her: "we miss us". I liked it; I felt exactly the same. Noy was waving at us from the other side of the room. She had just returned from three months maternity leave. She pointed to indicate that she couldn't cross the room to join us because the chairs were in the way. Yarden was sitting at the back of the room. When I looked around she caught my glance and waved at me. Those of us in the circle smiled and touched each other's arms, staying close to each other until the meeting started.

The meeting was quite long. Most of it was interesting, some parts were funny and others were boring, as all such meetings are. At a certain point all teachers were invited to communicate requests or concerns to our new principal. One experienced teacher talked about the need for support for teachers of certain classes. "What kind of support do you mean?" asked the principal.

“Psychological support” she replied. We all had a good laugh. Then a novice teacher said that new teachers also needed help or some kind of support. She didn’t know what she was looking for but said, “maybe we need a professional that would meet with us”. A burst of conversation followed her remark. Another teacher said, “it’s not just the novice teachers that need support. We all need it”. “What kind of support you are talking about?” asked the principal. “We need groups like Tami’s”, said one teacher. People started to applaud, and soon all 140 teachers in the room were clapping their agreement with this suggestion. I could not help smiling and became somewhat embarrassed, but as I looked around I saw Bobbey clapping vigorously, next to Ya’ara who kept saying “yes, right!” and Karen who was smiling and nodding her agreement. They were not embarrassed at all. They proudly made their point that everyone engaged in the hard task of teaching should be part of a supportive community.

The May 2000 meeting occurred two years after our final community meeting. Yet the close relationships and tight connections between us were obvious to anyone who saw us gathering and hugging each other so warmly. The spontaneous applause of everyone in the room made me realise that although our community included only ten participants, something about it impressed the whole school. I believe it was the caring relationships developed within the community that allowed it to become so meaningful for its members and, by extension, for the school as a whole.

Caring relationships based on trust and openness is an essential feature of community. Trusting one another, being open and sincere, and caring for each other are essential for the development of dialogue, which in turn allows the development of community. In our group we learned that exposing our difficulties and vulnerability would not harm us, but rather would help us learn and develop as professionals and as human beings. Through being attentive, friendly, and considerate we experienced the healing nature of caring for each other while conversing about caring relations with students. On-going conversations were the means by which we investigated our practice. These were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and care that allowed the development of dialogue and promoted the formation of our community.

In the following pages I concentrate on the constructs of caring and trust development to argue that our group of teachers developed into a caring community. However, our conversations revealed a more complex picture, thus other kinds of relations were also present in our group

meetings. These are presented in the second part of this chapter. The questions that guide this chapter are not whether or not we ever reached 'a genuine' dialogue or became an 'authentic' community. Rather, they concern what were the necessary conditions that allowed us to be more open to each other? How did we gain the trust to expose our difficulties and frustrations? How did we develop the kind of dialogue that could help us question basic beliefs? How did we listen and attend to each other? And finally: how did we develop caring relationships? Providing answers to these questions will affirm the claim that we moved from the social structure of a group to a set of relations that created a community.

Note that 'caring relations' supplements the characteristics of community described in the previous chapter. By dedicating an entire chapter to caring, I mean to emphasise its centrality in the creation of our community. Thus, I view Noddings' model as complementary to Bereiter and Scardamalia's model; used together, both help to identify this group of teachers as a community.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF CARING

In the summer of 1999 I participated in the Third International Conference on Teacher Education in Israel (Almost 2000: Crises and Challenges in Teacher Education) – The conference was stimulating, especially for those of us who presented and received feedback on our work<sup>25</sup>. The keynote speaker was Professor Nel Noddings, whose lecture "Caring and competence in teaching" touched me deeply. To Noddings, care is not only a human and moral necessity in the educational system; it is also a professional behaviour: competent teachers *must* care for their students.

The Noddings lecture prompted me to understand caring as an issue that underpinned most of our group meetings. Without overtly connecting caring and competence, teachers' stories revealed that they believed in this connection. Caring characterised not only the *substance* of our conversations but also their *nature* as well. Most teachers in our group participated for the feeling of community, and this was embodied in the acts of giving and receiving care. Thus caring was directed not only from teachers to students (as revealed in teachers' stories), but also

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25 Ours was a presentation in Hebrew, titled: Teacher's Professional Development – Hishtalmoot Morim: Two Cases in Two Countries. It was a comparison between two studies on communities of teachers. One community was described and analysed by Dr. Gabriella Minnes Brandes, who conducted a longitudinal study in Canada, the other (based on this study) was conducted in Israel. The preparation for the presentation was a joint work, which was done while we were in two different countries and kept exchanging emails.

from teachers to teachers, which itself has a positive effect on teacher-student relations. (For more on these effects see the literature of the culture of teaching; for example Duckworth et. al, 1997; Hollingsworth, 1992; Leiberman, 1988; Leiberman and Miller, 1991; 2001). In other words, teachers in our community learned how to establish caring relations with their students by giving and receiving peer care, as well as by participating in conversations that raised their awareness of this subject. The following section provides the framework for using caring as a construct that helps explain the nature of our community and the processes of constructing caring relation within it.

### WHAT IS "CARING"?

Noddings (1999) explains that caring can be understood and used in two main ways; the first is the everyday use, which sees caring as a virtue or set of virtues. The second is using and understanding the word in a relational context. When we say: "He is a caring person" we credit this person with a virtue, just like we credit people with honesty, decency, or loyalty" (p. 205). To talk about *caring relations*, says Noddings; we need to concentrate on the encounter. In an encounter that may rightly be described as a caring relation, the carer - the person who cares for the other(s) - is attentive and receptive to the cared-for.

When we care, we listen openly without laying on structures activated by our own needs and desires. [...] In a caring encounter, we put aside (temporarily) our own interests and immediate concerns. Next, if the relation is to be one of caring *now* for *this* one who addresses us, our motive energy must begin to flow toward the other and his or her needs. We feel our own needs and purposes receding (however briefly), and we want to help or share in the experience described (p. 206 emphasis in original).

Noddings calls this inner change within the carer "motivational displacement" and maintains that motivational displacement and receptivity (engrossment) are the two characteristics that "always mark the consciousness of carers in caring relations" (ibid. p. 206). Engrossment is "an open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for"; a moment in which "the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the other" (Noddings 1992: 15, 16). Although it may be fleeting, engrossment is not "infatuation, enchantment, or obsession" but represents a "full and essential" attention (ibid.). Engrossment describes the carer's level of acceptance of the other; however, in a caring encounter, the carer also *wishes* to help the other and to further the other's

purpose. This wish or desire presents a “motivational displacement” that occurs within the carer’s consciousness: a conscious displacement of one’s own interests with those of the other. Motivational displacement then, is the sense that our motive energy is flowing toward others and their projects. As a carer I receive what the other conveys, and I want to respond in a way that furthers the other’s purpose or project (ibid. p.16).

When care is looked upon as relational, rather than as a virtue, the cared-for has a part to play as well. In a caring encounter, the cared-for must recognise or acknowledge the act of caring in some way. Whether verbally or by a hug, or a nod, some kind of recognition, says Noddings, must be forthcoming when caring relations are at stake.

This acknowledgement is important for three reasons. First, it is possible for people who claim to care to perform cruel, thoughtless, and clumsy acts. To discover whether this is the case one must learn the cared-for’s thoughts and feelings regarding these acts. Second, when the cared-for denies that care has been received, it forces us to probe deeper. Is this the one-caring’s fault? Is it the cared-for’s failure to recognise the care? Or is it the situation that prevents successful caring relations? Only by considering both parties’ thoughts and feelings can we learn and know enough to answer these questions. Third, when teachers who wish to care fail to establish caring relationships, or feel that existing caring relations are weakening, feedback from students can help re-establish them.

In the next section I will provide evidence for the claims that our group was a caring community, and that by experiencing both sides of the caring relations teachers were encouraged to establish caring relations with their students. This is not to say that teachers did not care for their students beforehand, but rather that by experiencing caring relations within our community and discussing the centrality of caring in teacher-student relations, teachers’ understanding of caring developed. In order to do this I have to show that teachers’ descriptions of their relations with students were actually descriptions of caring relations. Here (again) I face a language difficulty, which has to do with the absence of a Hebrew word that holds the exact notion of “caring”. Therefore, before moving to present teachers’ conversations about caring, I would like to briefly explain what directed me in choosing and analysing these specific parts of the transcript.

## What is “caring” in Hebrew?

In the Hebrew language there is no exact word for caring. The closest word in Hebrew for the English “care *for*” can be understood as “to be concerned with” or “to be involved in”. This word is mostly used in its negative sense, like in “no one minds/cares” and less so (and only in slang) is it used in the positive sense, as in “she cares for us”. However, there are many other words in Hebrew, which partially describe the meaning of caring. For example, the Hebrew word that translates to “give/put the heart” is the English “to pay attention”. Attention, then, has to do with the heart, the place of emotions, thus using the words for paying attention (or being attentive) is connected to caring. Respect is another word heard lately in the Israeli educational milieu<sup>26</sup>. When teachers talk about “respecting students”, they mean attending to their needs, listening to them, and honouring their rights to express their feelings and thoughts. Respect means seeing the student as an individual with a specific personal history and a full spectrum of emotions and conceptions which are to be legitimised (or challenged) rather than denied. Therefore, when I translated teachers’ words from Hebrew into English, I used “minding” “respect” and “attention” to express different aspects of the word “caring”.

## CARING TEACHERS

Caring teachers are those who establish caring relations with their students. Noddings identifies some characteristics of caring teachers: “They are respectful toward students, have fair rules that they do not apply rigidly, create a safe emotional environment and give personal attention to students who need it” (Noddings, 1999: 208). Thus caring teachers *respect* their students, *modify* rules according to the needs of individual students or specific situations, make sure that the class is a *safe* place to ask questions and to err, give *personal attention* when needed, and are sensitive to students’ *inferred needs*.

In the following pages I will use these criteria to support the claims that by experiencing both sides of the caring relation - the one-caring and the cared-for - teachers were encouraged to establish caring relations with their students. Combined with the community’s interest in fostering caring relations with students, these caring actions among peers made it a caring community.

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<sup>26</sup> It is a custom in the Israeli educational system to announce at the beginning of each year the central theme that will guide the whole educational system that year. These themes are usually connected to Israeli society as a whole, and many hours in television, radio and even parliament, are devoted to discussions and debates over these themes. For example, ‘peace’ was the “theme of the year” when Israel was negotiating agreements with neighbouring countries.

## **Caring teachers respect their students**

From the very first meeting teachers talked about the need to show respect to students, consider them, and be aware of their needs. Teachers chose to draw on memories of their own lives as disrespected students. Although told with good humour, the stories were quite emotional and represented examples of the way teachers sometimes abuse their power over students. Maya shared the following story with us:

The strongest memory I have is of my mathematics teacher saying “come to the blackboard, Frid” (my family name then) and giving me a problem to do. Then, smoking his cigarettes (teachers could smoke in class then), he looked at me and said: “Frid, you have a head... good only for a hat”. This is true! He really said it! And I remember it to this day, after so many years (Fieldnotes November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

This example prompted conversations on the topic of teachers, students, and respect. Maya explained at a subsequent meeting that she sees the act of respecting students as an important component in the path for establishing deeper relationships between teachers and students:

A student who feels respected will learn better than one who does not. Respect is the real curiosity that you have for the person in front of you, the authentic curiosity to hear what he says, feels, or wants to tell you that he experienced during the day. [...] (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Vered listened carefully to Maya's words, and then provided us with a slightly different perspective. Vered is from Brazil and has taught in many different schools. She believes that informality between teachers and students in Israel has undermined respectful relationships.

**Vered:** I find it very strange that I need to think of respecting children. I never thought it should be otherwise! But I think that there must be some limits. We learn from Child Psychology that children need limits, boundaries. I think that the limits here [in Israel] are not very clear. I'll give you an example although you might think I'm quite conservative: I try to stop them from calling me Vered.

**Yarden:** How are they supposed to call you?

**Vered:** (talking in English) Not Mrs. B., but "Teacher Vered"

**Maya:** In English it sounds even better. (Laughter)

**Vered:** The word "teacher" is there and [it shows respect]. I think to myself when talking to a student: I respect you and you respect me because each of us has a role here. But we don't know each other yet. If you see me in a restaurant, you can call me Vered, but here, within these four walls, I decide what we do. I always joke with them and tell them that within these four walls I'm the queen. I do it because I think that here [in Israel] the boundaries [between teachers and students] are not clear enough. And besides, there is the question of professionalism. What we need is [to get and provide] respect and [to be] professionals (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Vered believes that teachers are not only required to respect their students, they also ought to demand respectful behaviour from them. This behaviour, according to her understanding, is possible only if we emphasise the differences between the teacher and the students. The Israeli custom of calling teachers by their first name is quite strange for people from other cultures. For Vered, it makes students seem disrespectful toward their teachers and the teaching profession. At the same time, she finds it self-evident that teachers should be respectful toward their students. Respecting students and demanding respectful behaviour from them, is part of being a professional. She re-emphasised the link between respecting students and professionalism later that same meeting. Preparing the lesson and making it interesting and engaging is not only a professional demand, but also a sign that the teacher truly respects her students: "We have to show respect together with professionalism [...]. A teacher must prepare a lot; use many different strategies to keep the lesson lively and interesting" (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

### **Caring teachers provide personal attention**

The following is a transcript from our third meeting (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997). Teachers were concerned with the impersonal attitude and the lack of real caring that was becoming a norm in school. Vini had described a situation where a student got back a History exam, with nothing written on it except the grade. The others were shocked at the lack of respect implied and the fact that students would be unable to discern where they had made mistakes.



**Bobbey** – Were there no corrections at all?

**Vini** – Not a word!

**Mairav** – Many teachers don't write anything on their students' work.

**Vini** – There were check signs in those places where there were "close" questions that you needed to choose the right answer, but with composition questions... you don't know what to think of it.

*Everybody speaks together*

**Vini** – This student said "I studied so much, I invested so much, and I don't know what is wrong with my answers". Since that time, I promised myself to never do such a thing to any student. So first of all, I give a grade to each part of every question, and I always write some words, some sentences at the end of the exam.

**Maya** – And I mention the name of the student.

**Vini** – [I write sentences like] 'I enjoyed reading your work', or 'your work is good but some things are missing, please come to discuss it with me'.

**Yarden** – I do it [too]. I always do it.

*Everybody speaks together*

**Maya** – sometimes I even draw [on the exam] a little 'smily' when I enjoy a good answer. Little things like this are quite important for them.

**Tami** – [Do you do it] to grade 11 [students]?

**Maya** – To grade 12!

Teachers believe that each student is entitled to receive personal attention, to be approached by name, to some kind of positive evaluation on the work, and to feel special in some way, even if only by getting a 'smily' pasted near a good answer. However, they complained about not having enough time to converse with each student and to provide them with the personal attention they need. Vini, for example, was frustrated by the limited time given in school for establishing personal communication with students:

Once you know the child you are in a better position to help him. It is true that twice a year we get some information about each child, things that we didn't know like divorce in the family, special support that a kid needs because of specific events and so on. I think this is very important, but it is not enough. I get to "see" the child when he writes a test. After I read two or three of the child's works I already see where his problems are, and then, when you are ready to provide this child with some personal attention, you need the time to sit and talk with him. When do you do it? And where?

Yarden agreed:

In order to speak with a student we need to have a place in school where we will not be bothered every minute, and to have free time during the school day. When do I have time to speak with a student? In recess I'm too busy with other teachers, and with million other things. I end up taking students from lessons and teachers are getting angry with me, but what can I do?

Getting to know each student and providing personal attention seems to be central to teachers' understanding of their profession, therefore, they become frustrated when they do not get the proper time and space for it.

### **Caring teachers modify rules according to the needs of individual students or specific situations.**

Maya explained another form of caring--a strategy she had developed to help students overcome stress and anxiety during exams. When she sees stressed students she takes a chair, sits next to them, and helps them answer the exam questions by giving some hints and key words.

**Maya** – Without him even understanding that I am helping him, we actually do the exam together. I make him feel that he did it by himself. [I believe that] this will improve all his coming exams.

**Mairav** – It will improve his spirit!

**Maya** – All in all, what have I done? I gave up one exam. Why should I worry? I gave up one exam but the other [exams] will be different [this student will not be as stressed again].

**Vini** – I do it many times, especially for slow students. I say to myself: big deal, you gave him altogether five points and opened a whole way for him.

**Yarden** – In the final exam of grade 12, one student, a good one, could not write a single sentence. I told her to go out and get a drink of water and then I wrote the first sentence for her. The rest she did by herself.

*Everybody speaks at once.*

The teachers who participated in this conversation had many years of teaching experience. They had a developed world-view about teaching and understood caring as an extremely important part of their profession. They talked about ways to modify rules in order to create a safe and less stressful environment for their students. They were willing to set aside their immediate interest in “fair” evaluation, in order to provide care and attention to those students who needed it. These experienced teachers had learned that clever rather than rigid use of rules might help their students to achieve higher marks and to cope with stress. Interestingly, not everyone participated in this conversation. The younger, less experienced teachers in our group – Bobbey, Noy, Vered and Ya’ara – just listened. (I will return to this point later.)

### **Caring teachers make sure that the class is a safe place to ask questions and to err**

Creating a safe place for students includes the interaction between teacher and students, but also reflects the way teachers respond to exchanges between students. Caring teachers object to, and do not allow, uncivil behaviour in the classroom. Caring teachers do not keep silent when a student bullies another student or when unacceptable behaviour is manifested in their presence.

Although we had long conversations about the tension and stress students experience in exams and in war situations, we never had any conversations in our meetings about the emotional state of students in regular lessons. We never discussed their right to make mistakes, nor did we discuss erring as a legitimate way of learning. At the same time, teachers showed sensitivity to students’ social difficulties and tried to make them feel comfortable and accepted by other students.

During a conversation about the difficulty of reaching every student in the class, Karen explained how she teaches slow students in such a way that each and every student gets the needed help from her. But she manipulates the lesson in such a way that even very slow students are not embarrassed:

I start a new topic and provide a general explanation to the whole class, and of course students ask questions like in every class. Now, those who understand can start working. Those who don't [understand] get more explanations and the group gets smaller until it [the explanation] gets to be individual. I just sit next to the student [and explain] until she understands. But it is important to do it in a way that will not suggest that she is slow or not capable. Therefore, sometimes I do it differently [...]. I tell the rest of the class to keep working, and I explain the next step to the slowest student first. Then, when I explain this next step to the rest of the class, I can see her eyes sparkle (Fieldnotes, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

In a later meeting we discussed a specific teaching strategy used in grade 7 that involves learning in small groups where each student becomes an "expert" on something and teaches other students. Ya'ara described this strategy and answered our questions about it, explaining why she liked it and what was so difficult about applying it in class:

At first they had horrible fights: 'I don't want to sit next to him', 'I'm not ready to work with her', etc. It was really very complicated and I almost gave up, but in the second lesson they started to work better with each other. What I liked was that some of the very slow students—*the ones that usually need my help in answering simple questions so they wouldn't lose face*—were really involved in the learning process. [...]. But some students couldn't work together at all. I had to 'sit on their tails' so that they would not hit each other (Fieldnotes, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998, emphasis added).

Ya'ara mentions how she helps slow students avoid losing face. She tries to save these students from embarrassment in order to encourage them to participate in class discussions. She also believes that the strategy she describes helps students to learn how to work with and relate to each other better, and thus make the class a safer place.

### **Caring teachers are sensitive to students' inferred needs**

When students fail to articulate or recognise their needs it is our responsibility, as teachers and adults, to infer them. Buber (1965 a) calls these inferred needs "unasked questions" and maintains that a partner to a dialogue must be tuned, and relate to them, although they are never verbally asked. Hodes (1971), a student of Buber, describes his exciting experience of receiving answers to his unasked questions. He describes Buber's attention and caring listening, and concludes his description by saying that "dialogue is possible if the people who are genuinely trying to converse listen not only to what is said but also to what is felt without having been expressed in words" (Hodes, 1971: 11).

Noddings (1999) gives examples of students' inferred needs: the need to raise students' political consciousness and sensitivity to the underprivileged in their closer and larger societies; the need to understand why they are required to learn specific subjects; the need to connect between different subjects as well as to connect between subject matter and questions about life, its meaning, morality, death, love, and other existential questions. Students may feel but not articulate these needs, or they may be completely unaware of them; it is the task of the caring teacher to raise their awareness and help them to deal with these needs. Caring teachers are required to be able to identify and analyse students' inferred needs; they must be sensitive enough to meet these needs while not placing too much stress on them.

Although we did not directly identify students' "inferred needs" in our group, we had a few conversations relating to unexpressed needs that we should answer. An example is our students' need to know more about the political situation and the biological risks connected to the threat of being bombed by Iraqi missiles. Although students did not ask us to discuss these issues in class, some of them were quite relieved when we did so. They participated in the conversation, told the class what they heard from their parents and other family members, explained what they understood from the media, and asked many questions related to the ways in which they could save their lives in the event of a real attack. However, Noddings directs us not to over-stress inferred needs; this requires an even more delicate level of caring. Too much focus on these hazards could easily build anxiety rather than lessen it.

Students' inferred needs include the need to have a more complex understanding about the nature of knowledge: what counts as true knowledge; how one knows if knowledge is true or not; and what constitutes "true" or "false" knowledge. Although teachers and researchers might

consider these questions an important part of any discipline, they are quite often neglected in school and seldom discussed in classes. Students tend to think that if something is written in a book—especially a text-book—it is true and absolutely objective. To question this belief causes much discomfort to many students, as it shakes their naive beliefs about the nature of knowledge, objectivity, and the goals of education. As History teachers, Yarden and Vini found it extremely important to raise this issue in their classes. They kept returning to this subject in our meetings, as did Ya'ara and myself: Biology teachers who each brought stories from class discussions about science. We raised questions such as what kind of knowledge we considered scientific and what was just common belief? What was the difference between them and why was it important to know? These questions were not asked by students but rather were raised by us in science classes. Because of their importance, they could be identified as students' "inferred needs" for knowledge.

Teachers often mentioned instances of sensitivity to students' unexpressed needs. They could interpret a plea for help in students' facial expressions and would often make special efforts to help students with problems. For example, a tired student fell asleep during lessons, attracting his teacher's attention. After a short conversation she realised that he worked on the farm from 4 o'clock in the morning, because his father had been called to the military. A quick resolution was found. The family got some help and the child could sleep later in the morning and be less tired in school.

### CARING COMMUNITY

Sergiovanni (1994) believes that community is created if it has a centre of values, sentiment and beliefs. These centres are not always easily defined or identified, even by those who participate in the community. Sometimes, one needs to go through a lengthy data analysis to identify the centre of the community or to use interim terms or constructs until the right one reveals itself, as was the case in this study. However, once the construct "caring" had been realised and acknowledged as the centre of this community, it strongly influenced my interpretations of the whole venture and thus could not be denied or left out.

In the next section I will provide evidence for two claims. The first is that the teachers in our community learned to become more caring than they used to be. The second is that even in a caring community where caring relations play such a central role, not all relations are caring relations.

## Learning how to care for students

Caring for students, entering into relations with them, and including them while experiencing motivational displacement were topics that we kept visiting and revisiting during our meetings. Earlier I wrote about our search for various ways to help students cope with workload and exam stress. In one of these conversations at the beginning of the year (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997) Bobbey rejected the idea of letting students open their books during exams: "Students need to cope with the matriculation exams, and we have to prepare them to this moment". She argued that this should start right from grade 7, because "if you teach them [in grade 7] how to study two chapters for an exam, then in grade 12 they will be able to study three books." In our 12<sup>th</sup> meeting (March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998), we were in the middle of (yet another) discussion of the stress students experience as a result of the large amounts of material they are asked to learn for the matriculation exams. Yarden described the History exam:

Students are asked to compare between historical documents and to answer very complicated questions that require very high level of analysis. It is not for them! I don't believe it is for them. They don't have a question such as 'describe what happened' but rather questions like 'what can you understand from such and such occurrence?' They are actually asked to write 4 historical compositions.

Bobbey's reaction to this description was:

*I think that such an exam must be with open books! If they need to analyse the material, why not allow them to open the books? They need to learn all this [information] by heart and then they are asked to make the comparisons and such... this is really too much! And not all of them are bright students, we mustn't forget this! (Emphasis added).*

Bobbey's remark caused a change in the course of the conversation. I told the group about my experience with allowing students to open Biology books during the exam, teachers asked me how the students felt about it and I said that they were excited; it made them feel good and reduced their tension. Ya'ara told us that during an exam in grade 9 she allowed the students to open their "cheat sheets" – those papers on which they summarised the whole material. Bobbey got excited: "Wow, maybe tomorrow I'll let them do the exam with open books? Just for the fun of it". The next meeting (March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1998) Bobbey informed us what had happened in her History class:

I did it. I told them to open their books. At first they were stressed because they said: 'so now you expect more of us', but I told them that I'd prepared the test beforehand so there was nothing to be afraid of. At the end of the exam I asked them if the books had helped them in any way, and they said 'we didn't need them at all'. But they did open the books, at least, most of them did. They said they didn't need the books but it raised their confidence. They said they felt much better with them.

Bobbey explained that while she wanted to give a fair evaluation of each student's knowledge, she did not want to 'injure their souls' in the process. Hence, she was willing to modify the rules about exams in order to preserve students' well-being. Yet only four months earlier she had quite rigidly protected these same rules. Bobbey was not the only one influenced by our conversations. Many of us learned to be more sensitive to our students and modify the rules in order to reduce their stress.

Showing students that we care (or respect) them means paying serious attention to their work. As discussed previously, some teachers spoke about the importance of providing students with detailed feedback on their papers, and gave examples of how to acknowledge students' efforts and encourage them to keep up these efforts. Noy did not participate in the original discussion but a few weeks later she said:

I realised that it is very important to write detailed notes on students' papers. One of you said that a parent even called you at home to express satisfaction that you provided her child with such personal attention. I think it strengthens [the student] if he gets more [detailed explanations] than just a check mark or a number at the end of a paper. (Fieldnotes, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

A week later, at the end of a conversation on a different topic, Noy reminded us of our previous conversations and said:

As a result of our meetings, I went home and recorrected one of my classes' exams. This time I checked them differently, I related to them differently, and I wrote so many notes! (Fieldnotes, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

These examples suggest that participating in a caring community helped teachers learn how to care for students.



## **Caring for peers: the place of trust in the creation of the community**

Just as we do for our students, when we care for our peers we have to create a safe place to ask questions and to err, give personal attention when needed, and be sensitive to inferred needs. We may modify rules according to the needs of individual teachers or specific situations and we are likely to show respect for each other. Our community provided all these requirements and thus became a caring community. Although respect and recognition for peers is probably a precondition for the creation of any community, this characteristic is especially important in a community where trust and dialogue are the vehicles for achieving practical, professional development. The first step toward creating trust in our community was establishing respectful relationships among us. Novice teachers' respect for the more experienced among us was clearly seen in their eagerness to learn. This respectful attitude was reciprocated. Experienced teachers were interested in learning new ideas from new teachers. They were willing to listen and give advice as colleagues do with each other, opening up and telling their stories of success and – later on – stories of failure.

However, without much respect and recognition for each other, trust would not have been built. Teachers maintained that these relationships are not only essential for their learning, but also for their sense of worth and belonging. Vini with her 30 years of experience provides the following explanation:

We felt comfortable talking. No one critiqued what I said, no one stopped me, and there was no feeling of time pressure like we always have when we meet with our teams [...]. Here I got feedback and this was something very new for me, I never got any feedback on anything I did in school. I'm a different kind of a teacher, you know, I don't do whatever other teachers do, there are many things that I think should be taught differently, but I never say anything, 'cause I have some kind of "fear of the system". Here, in our group, I had the opportunity to talk and tell all of you what I do without fearing anything, and without worrying that people will criticise me. [...] I repeat, in this Hishtalmoot teachers asked each other many questions and were really interested and I felt that "I am within my people". (Vini, interview, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1998)

Mairav told me in her interview that the vice-principal had met her in the staff room hanging a poster we made together<sup>27</sup> and asked her about our group.

I told him a bit, and then he asked me if I got anything out of this Hishtalmoot. I said that I got a lot! The special openness that we had in the group was very important. This was the most special thing about the group, that someone could say truly: I didn't do it right. Not every one can say such a thing and not everyone has this trust with people. We all want people to think of us as wonderful, but here, it was really great. There was no tension, we were relaxed, [...], I felt that I belong and it gave me much confidence. The fact that a biology teacher speaks with me, relates to me, and listens to my opinion, and that I'm part of the whole group and not someone who teaches handicraft. You see I was respected both as a person and as a professional (June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

And Vered expressed her feelings in the following words:

I have found much empathy in this group. I have found that my questions and struggles were not different from others, but that we rather shared similar difficulties. This gave me much support. I will probably not remember the problems [that teachers brought to the meetings] and the ways of solving them, but what helped me most was to participate in the conversations that had evoked all sorts of other things in me. This was important for me. (Vered, Interview, June, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998)

The private, individualistic culture of teaching was broken as a result of participating in our community and teachers experienced collegial and intellectual support and emotional care. This atmosphere of care and trust was based on respect and recognition of each participant and thus encouraged us to safely converse with each other. This was deeply appreciated by all community members. Teachers protected their time together, kept coming to all the meetings, started them on time, and were alert not to "drift" to issues not connected to teaching and learning. This responsibility and determination to keep the community their own, went against everything else in these teachers' social and professional lives. One might suggest that the absence of institutional structures that help teachers get support from their peers contributed to

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27 At the end of the year we found out that two teachers could not continue with the group another year. As a result, we decided to present our community to the rest of the school and see if anybody else would like to join us. For this, some of us gathered in my home and we spent a few hours reading the excerpts and copying meaningful phrases. We then made a big poster that included these phrases and hung it in the staff room. The poster attracted much attention and curiosity.

their need for such structures and their determination to keep the group alive. Indeed, teachers said that it was important for them to have a place where it felt safe to express ideas and get help from each other, where they could reveal weakness without being harmed in any way, and admit a mistake or express a change in perspective without being judged or lose their peers' respect.

Deciding that a specific environment is safe is not an easy decision. It takes a long time. Such a decision means that teachers, who for many years wore the mask of "everything is fine", would be able to strip off this mask and reveal difficulties and imperfections without being threatened. "Safety" is a very fluid state; however, our group sustained such an atmosphere throughout the whole year. Vered, for example, felt safe enough to say, at the third meeting, that she felt like a beginner and knew she had a long way to go before she would be considered a good teacher:

I know I'm not really a good teacher yet, I'm still learning much from my students. But there were times that I felt guilty. I was not prepared to teach. I knew English, but I didn't learn how to teach it, and I was taken to the most difficult groups of students. (Fieldnotes, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997)

By starting with "I know I'm not really a good teacher yet" Vered revealed much trust. This attitude proved to be useful, as teachers were eager to provide her with all the help she needed, whenever she asked for it. Attaining such trust within a community of teachers takes time and experience, but once it is reached, it is worth a lot for each participant. In her second interview (June 18<sup>th</sup> 1998) Vered says:

You see, suddenly you sit with teachers, not only English teachers [...] and you see a teacher with 20 years of experience, who is known to be a very good teacher, and you realise that she has the same difficulties that you have. Do you understand? This was good.

Vered explains how our open conversations had assured her that she was not alone with her difficulties as a teacher. The "everything is fine" mask, which we all wear at school, could be thrown away for a short, but meaningful time. However, the group was not always successful in providing the necessary attention and care that was demanded. The following section presents two examples of such failure.

*(a) Failure to care: the case of Vered*

Earlier in the year Vered shared with us her concerns with the meaning that students might give to the concept of caring. She told us that she and one of her English classes had watched the video of "To Sir with Love" together. She did not explain why she had chosen this film and before anyone could ask, she told us what had happened once the film ended:

I asked them why they thought that the teacher [the hero of the film] was such a special teacher. [And they explained that] he gave all his life for his students; he visited their houses, helped them find work, and was totally involved in their lives. Then I asked them if they want to have such a teacher. They said that [...] they wished they had such a teacher. I became very frustrated, because if to be a good teacher means to be totally involved in students' lives, I'll never be able to do it. I know that I'll never be able to give so much of myself, it is not for me, and it is not... (Fieldnotes, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

The kind of caring relations between teachers and students presented in this film represent high ideals. They require total devotion from the teacher leaving no time or energy for personal life; as Vered explained: "he gave all his life for his class". The students liked the idea of being cared for in such a manner and of being the centre of their teacher's universe. Their approval of the film expresses their need to be important for someone, especially their own teacher. Like her students, Vered conflated caring relations with total devotion, and therefore became frustrated because she was unwilling and unable to meet such unrealistic demands. Her understanding of her role as teacher became blurred with the ideal, unrealistic role presented in the film.

The group listened to her story, some teachers smiled, but the conversation continued without any of us relating to Vered's concerns. Later, while analysing this group meeting, it became clear to me that Vered had been in a difficult situation and needed our help and support. As a novice teacher she needed to be assured that this presentation of teacher-students relations was not realistic, and that she could be a good teacher without the total devotion that she was so afraid of. However, during the meeting, no one in the group took note of her need, and thus Vered received no help from the group.

I want to suggest three possible explanations for our lack of response to Vered. First, it could be that we did not 'hear' Vered's request for further deliberation, because we assumed she knew the difference between fantasy (film) and reality (school). Second, because teachers were unwilling to provide this 'ideal' level of care perhaps we found discussion irrelevant. A third reason might be that teachers thought that this is a worthy ideal but were embarrassed to admit that they themselves did not strive for it, and never reached it.

A few months later I asked Vered about her feelings toward that event. She did not remember it at all, and when reminded of it, did not interpret it as a non-caring behaviour. In her interview she talked about her learning experience within this group, without mentioning any kind of hurt or dissatisfaction.

I think that these meetings helped me a lot [...] [They] were the only chance for me to look at my work from a different perspective. There we had the chance to think on what we were doing. Metacognition. Do you understand? I got a different perspective on what I'm doing and how. [...] I think that it helped me to draw a map [that shows] where the students are and where we, the teachers, are. Where are the boundaries between us, and where am I in the big map of the teachers [...]. I have not been teaching for very long, you know, so I feel that I don't have my own way, I'm still constructing it ... and these meetings helped me a lot [...] (June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

Although Vered insisted that she was not hurt, and that participating in our community helped her understand her position in class, I still believe that all of us could profit had we were more sensitive to her unasked question. The next example (the case of Ya'ara), explores another such behaviour of our community and its impact on our conversations.

*(b) Revisiting teacher-student relationships: The case of Ya'ara*

Our community enjoyed talking about caring relations but the reality of schooling is too complex to be boxed in, summarised, or expressed by a single concept, even one as humanistic and well appreciated as caring. Many teachers believe that the teacher and the act of teaching are actualised in the relationships between teacher and students. These relationships provide much of the meaning that teachers give to the teaching experience, and when meaningful relationships are not established, teachers express discontent. Many of us had experienced less-

than-ideal relations with students: hostile, cold, disconnected, distrustful, and lacking real attention. Such experiences can cause much pain to both students and teachers, and need to be addressed when the issue of teacher-student relations is being discussed. Relationships with students were discussed frequently during the first few meetings but these conversations had a very limited scope. Most times teachers presented themselves as successful professionals who managed to establish caring relations with their students. They did not mention the messiness, complexity and discontent that are connected to the teaching profession and take so much of our energy. However, from time to time teachers told stories that revealed some kind of difficulty or less-than-perfect relations with their students. Such stories were for me signs of the trust that teachers felt within our community.

Most of us understand, so I believe, that much of what we know about teaching comes from those moments where we encounter our foibles, failures and fears. However, those moments are usually kept from the eyes of both strangers and colleagues. The difficulty conveying the complexity of what goes on in teaching prevents us from trying to reveal such moments to strangers, and the culture of silence about what goes on in our classrooms prevents us from sharing these moments with colleagues. Thus, we miss opportunities of gaining deeper understanding about our own profession. It is only under special circumstances or with very few trusted colleagues or friends that we are willing (sometimes) to share those moments. Such special circumstances were a factor of our community. But even in the safe, trustful atmosphere of our weekly meetings it was not until later in the year that teachers were willing to touch these issues. The reasons for this were the norms and codes of behaviour that prevail in schools, the unspoken agreement to keep the silence, and the unspoken expectation that all teachers are competent. When someone breaks that silence and talks about failures, we don't know how to react because we don't have conventions for responding in helpful ways. Instead of engaging ourselves in such "forbidden" conversations, when someone breaks the silence we often make a joke out of it or ignore it all together. The following is an example of this behaviour.

Toward the end of our first meeting, after a long conversation during which all the older, more experienced teachers talked about the power that teachers have over their students, and warned us against the abuse of this power, Ya'ara, a novice teacher said:

You used here the word "power" and you were referring to the power that teachers have, but don't forget that kids have power too. I say 'kids' because

even in grade 10 they are still kids, but they are aware of their power and they can use it in a way that we will be hurt. What kind of power do I have? I ask a student to get out of the class and he says 'I won't go', I can't argue with him. I threaten him that if he does not get out right now, I will deal with him later and it will be a big issue, and assure him that if he gets out now, he can return in a few minutes and everything will be forgotten, we'll start fresh. I tell him that if he does not want [to get out] I accept it, but he will be responsible for whatever happens as a result of it. I don't get into argument, you see, I don't want to argue with him as if we are on the same level, as if there is no hierarchy at all (Fieldnotes, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997).

Ya'ara talked about a situation that almost every teacher has experienced, but no one chose to reveal. We all have difficult moments when we try to exercise our authority in class against a disobedient student. Each of us had experienced frustration and powerlessness when one student chooses to defy us. We all have our share of having difficulties but we do not know how to talk about them. Once Ya'ara ended her story we continued talking about other matters; it was as if she had said nothing at all. Our behaviour signalled to novice teachers what kinds of stories were allowed in this community (those that show our caring relations with students) and what stories were not to be told here (those that show the limits to our authority). As this event was part of our first meeting, it probably set the tone for the next few meetings.

Unsatisfactory relationships with students were mentioned mostly when teachers chose to speak about their own lives as students and their relations with their teachers rather than present an unpleasant picture of themselves as teachers. Some stories (such as Maya's story of the teacher who said that her head was only good for a hat) were told with humour; however, all of them were quite emotional and illustrated the extent of the power teachers have over their students. The (relative) silence about such an important topic reveals how problematic it is. Although the atmosphere in the group was open, teachers needed time before they felt comfortable revealing their "naked belly" – difficulties in controlling students' behaviour – even (or, particularly) to their own colleagues.

Although not always open and revealing, still teacher-students relations were discussed in almost every meeting, and thus impressed each one of us. The novice teachers were most impressed. In the next section, I elaborate on the bearings of these conversations on Vered's teaching perspectives.

## Teaching Perspectives

In her interview I asked Vered to elaborate on the changes she experienced in her teaching during the last year. Her answer centred on what it meant for her to 'grow up' as a teacher:

The part of being stressed about the stuff that I'll be teaching is getting smaller, while the part that considers the students and gets to know them is getting bigger. Do you understand? I want to know them better. I want to know what kind of support these students need. One student wants me to give him many compliments for the work he has done, the other needs a different type of enhancement, and the third needs to be scolded and sometimes I must even fight with her to show her that she knows. You see, each student has a different need. Now I know it. (June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

Vered stressed the shift from having the subject matter at the centre of the teaching experience, to having teacher-student relations as the most important factor. This shift suggests changes in her teaching perspectives. Teaching perspectives, say Pratt (1998), are the "inter-related set of beliefs and intentions which give meaning and justification for our actions" (p. 33). Having the subject at the centre of the teaching experience is a characteristic of the Transmission Perspective (Pratt and Associates, 1998). This perspective puts much emphasis on the content to be learned and on the teacher whose job is to "accurately represent this content and productively manage learning" (Pratt, 1998: 218). The dominant belief in the Transmission Perspective is that effective teaching depends on the teachers' content expertise. Vered's words suggest that she has shifted from this teaching perspective: "the part of being stressed about the stuff that I'll be teaching is getting smaller". Now she has the relationships with students as the dominant element of her teaching: "the part that considers the students and getting to know them is getting bigger". Among the five perspectives suggested by Pratt and Associates (1998), the Nurturing Perspective is the one that puts the relations between teacher and students at the centre of the teaching experience. Vered seems to have moved from the Transmission Perspective to the Nurturing Perspective.

However, these changes in Vered's beliefs about the role of the teacher do not imply a total change in her perspectives of teaching. It could be that with time Vered became more experienced and her competence grew. As that happened, she would have worried less about lesson plans and teaching materials and would have been able to focus more on pedagogy and



relationships. This need not lead to the conclusion that her teaching perspective had changed. To determine someone's teaching perspective is a complex exercise, requiring more vigorous inquiry than has been done in this case.

Note that a change of perspective does not necessarily indicate a development in the teacher's perspective on teaching. I agree with Pratt (1998) who maintains that one teaching perspective is not necessarily better or more developed than another is; perspectives are simply different ways of understanding teaching, which are embedded in teachers' intentions, beliefs and actions. Each perspective then, presents a legitimate view of teaching and there is no intention to privilege one over another. In indicating that Vered may have changed perspectives, I do not mean to judge that she moved to a better or more developed perspective. It is up to teachers themselves to decide if a change is a move towards a more developed perspective, and if this change is (or is not) an indication of growth. These cautions should be kept in mind while reading the ongoing analysis of the changes Vered experienced.

Within the relational aspect, Vered moved from centring on hierarchical relationships where the teacher's authority drives the relationships to centring on caring relationships, where the students' needs are the driver. She also learned the limits of these caring relations and the boundaries she needs to draw when establishing caring relations with her students:

But I also know that there are a few students in each class that I can never reach. I don't have the emotional and physical energy to reach them. I have a student who has many problems and I try to help him, as long as it is in the framework of the lesson I try, but I do not come on my day off to talk to him. I have limits. (June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1998).

Vered came to understand that students do not require her total devotion in order to learn better, nor is this what she needs to provide in order to become a good teacher. Nevertheless, she constructed and established an understanding that caring relations are a necessity in the context of school.

Vered's change as a teacher shifts her focus from herself as an authority that should be respected, to the students who need to be cared for. At the beginning of the year Vered was occupied with the hierarchical relations that she believed were most important for the process of teaching and learning. Reading her words at the end of the year reveals that she is now

occupied with quite a different understanding. The boundaries between teachers and students now seem clearer "I think that it [our group] helped me to draw a map [that shows] where the students are and where we, the teachers, are". The focus of Vered's words turns to the teacher-students' relationships ("I want to know them better. I want to know what kind of support these students need"), rather than the positionality of each in terms of authority.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I propose that this group of teachers had moved to form a community and that trust and genuine dialogue allowed the development of the caring relationships that characterise this community. Caring relationships then are seen here as the pillar on which this community is built. I have demonstrated that in our community we developed caring relations with each other while conversing about caring and less-than-caring relations with our students. As we investigated our practice we were engaged in on-going conversations, which were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and care and permitted the development of dialogue. All these are important characteristics of a caring community. Over time, the ten teachers who came to the first meeting formed a community of peers who not only discuss their practice, but also develop the safe environment within which caring relationships can prosper. This kind of learning would not have happened unless we were ready to take the risk and "open the closed doors of our classrooms" to the understanding eyes of our colleagues. Such exposure requires the courage to risk the (false) feeling of safety that we have behind these closed doors. Most of us who took such risks had also experienced the kind of empathic response which encouraged and assured us that our stories would not turn into an embarrassment, but rather would be accepted with much attention and care. We did not give each other quick solutions, nor did we purposely dismiss any issue that was raised in the meetings. We rather took (almost) each story with much respect and provided the teller the care and attention that she needed.

Even in those times that we failed to provide each other with the care and attention that was needed, we did not intend to cause harm. Such events were rather a result of misunderstanding or inattentive moments. Our relations with students, as well as our relations with our colleagues are never perfect. Sometimes we reach deeper, more meaningful relations with our students, other times we fail to achieve such relations and it causes us frustration and discontent. The same applies to the collegial relations in this community. Creating a caring community does not mean that all our encounters are caring encounters. Rather, although we sometimes fail, we aspire to the kind of caring relations that make us feel safe, close to each

other, and less lonely. This level of care enhanced our ability to learn from our encounters and helped us develop awareness of the importance of such relations within the educational context.

The next and last chapter concludes this discussion on caring relationships by relating it to earlier discussions on community and on teacher professional development.

## CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I use the findings presented and analysed in previous chapters to offer some conclusions from which the reader can draw naturalistic generalisations (Stake, 1995). The following sections (a) draw conclusions from the study; (b) examine the theoretical and conceptual tools of the study, questioning their relevance and usefulness and point to their limitations; and (c) suggest a framework for better understanding of teachers' community. A critique of the study, directions for further research, and concluding answers to the research questions follow this section. The chapter ends with an afterward.

### CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE STUDY

Four conclusions can be drawn from this study: (a) Teachers' communities in different contexts share similarities; (b) caring is an essential feature of community; (c) collaborative reflections on practice are effective tools for reducing teachers' isolation and increasing their learning; and (d) participating in teachers' communities can result in school change. I will now briefly elaborate on each assertion in turn.

#### **Teachers' communities in different contexts share similarities**

How does social context influence the process and substance of teachers' community? This research question attracted my attention to the place of context in teachers' communities. Even within the same culture and country high schools differ along many dimensions, and differences accumulate as the national context shifts. The Israeli context is markedly different from other countries where communities of teachers have been constructed and documented (e.g. USA, Canada or Australia). One might assume, therefore, that an Israeli high school would yield a community of teachers quite different from those constructed in other countries, but this was not the case.

Despite differences in culture, language, atmosphere, and environment that impact the nature of relationships and norms of behaviour, the teachers' community described in this study shares interesting similarities with communities of teachers elsewhere, such as in Canada (Brandes, 1994, 1995a; Brandes and Erickson 1998), Australia (Baird and Mitchell, 1987; Baird and

Northfield, 1992), and the USA (Duckworth and the Experienced Teachers Group, Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001; 1997; and Hollingsworth, 1992). For example, most of these communities were long-term, self directed and multi-disciplinary. In each of these communities participants developed a sense of responsibility towards the group, reflected on practice and developed closer relationships. Although there were some differences –no university professors attended our meetings, for example, and no educational theory or defined objective guided our conversations—a strong sense of similarity pervades all these descriptions of teachers' communities.

For example, across communities the content of conversations relates almost exclusively to learning and teaching. Most studies note the hesitation in revealing teaching difficulties to the group; the slow unfolding towards the end of the first year; the way teachers pay attention and listen to each other; the interest they take in students' learning; their curiosity about new teaching strategies; and their desire to guard their time together for professional development and growth. These common issues and interests of teachers seem to cross continents and cultures.

### **Caring is an essential feature of community**

One feature neglected in other studies is that caring is an essential feature of community. All participants in the current study considered the caring relationships that developed in our community to be its most important outcome. Caring relationships are based on trust and openness. Trusting one another, being open and sincere, and caring for each other, is essential for the development of genuine dialogue, which in turn allows the development of community. I am not suggesting that caring relations developed only in our community, but that this study shed light on caring while other studies focused elsewhere. Even so, such relationships reveal themselves in the literature when one is tuned to look for them. My claim<sup>28</sup> is that the move from “a group of teachers sitting in a room” (Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001) to community, is likely to include a certain level of caring relationships.

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28 Which partially answers the second research question: What are the defining attributes that made this community of teachers more than a group of colleagues?

## **Collaborative reflections are effective tools for reducing isolation and increasing learning**

The development of a group of teachers into a community took a long time of collaborative reflections on practice. While constructing an atmosphere of trust and caring, teachers slowly began to share difficulties and learn from each other's experience. As this process<sup>29</sup> continued over time, teachers started to note that participation in the community reduces their professional isolation. Isolation prevents teachers from learning through each other's experience, and detaches them from the potential support of peers familiar with the context of school and who understand the complexity of teaching. While professional isolation limits teachers' intellectual and professional development and their social and emotional growth, participating in a community has the reverse effect. Karen's gratitude for having the chance to share her professional difficulties with understanding peers; Vini's critique of being "a lonely wolf" and Mairav's excitement of the new experience of participating in a supportive group of peers, are clear evidence of teachers' need to break the walls of isolation.

Grounded in social constructivism, my belief is that professional knowledge is constructed not only when people engage in practice, but also when they collaboratively reflect on it. This study suggests that teachers construct knowledge and deepen their understanding of issues at the centre of their profession when they discuss learning, teaching, and schooling. An example of such learning is the learning of Yael's technique (described in chapter 8). Engaging with professional issues, sharing experience, and reflecting on difficulties and successes in practice, are essential factors in the process of collaborative learning.

## **Participating in teachers' communities can result in school change**

This study suggests that when teachers reflect on and learn from their practice, their understanding of practice is changed and this may result in change in the school. The study shows that teachers who participate in a community are able to critique the curriculum, develop ideas for assessing students' needs, and devise creative strategies for teaching and evaluating students' learning. Participation in a community moved some teachers to change their understandings of learning and teaching, become aware of the complexity of the teaching profession, and gain the confidence to change their own teaching and suggest changes for the school as a whole. Evidence for this claim comes from Vered and Bobbey's words that reveal

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<sup>29</sup> This is a concise answer to the first research question: What is the process by which a small group of teachers became a community of teachers?

the marked change and development they experienced throughout the year. Yarden was impressed by the influence of our conversations on her ability to change her teaching and to fight for changes in her subject group.

#### **RELEVANCE, USEFULNESS AND LIMITATIONS OF THEORIES USED**

While social constructivism provided the background for the study, I used theories of community to explain the nature of our group and the way it differed from simply a collection of individuals. The theory of caring deepens understanding of the relational aspects of community and explains caring's relation to teaching. I will review the relevance, usefulness, and limitations of each theory in turn.

The social constructivist group of theories understands learning as a process by which people construct knowledge and meaning while relating to and communicating with each other. Within models of teacher professional development, Collaborative-Professional-Dialogue (CPD) is grounded in these theories. CPD suggests that in order to change teachers should first reflect, as a group, on their personal and practical knowledge of teaching. Reflection can change beliefs and, thereafter, behaviour. When teachers reflect collaboratively on their practice they construct a kind of knowledge which cannot be constructed individually, and open up new perspectives on their profession. CPD helps teachers change their practice: it allows them to be more involved in the curriculum they teach, informs them about the experiences of their students, and empowers them to develop their own teaching theories.

The concept of collaborative dialogue was highly relevant to this study as it helped me realise how important it is for teachers to participate in conversations on practice. By locating collaborative dialogue at the centre of professional development, CPD sheds light on the possibilities hidden in breaking a culture of professional isolation. This concept helps link teachers' isolation and stasis in the educational system as a whole. It is important for understanding features such as collaboration, reflection, and teachers' ownership of their professional development that emerged during this study. However, CPD is not very useful in interpreting this specific group of teachers, or the special relationships, commitments, and shared ideas and ideals that were identified during the study. Nor does it provide a vehicle for understanding the influence of the Israeli context on the whole venture. To address these dimensions, I employed theories of community and caring.

My understanding of community is based on Tonnies' (1887/1957) theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Sergiovanni's (1994) application of Tonnies to the educational system. My understanding of caring is based on the work of Nel Noddings' (1984, 1992, and 1999). Both theories helped me make sense of what happened in this study, though each carried a different weight. Tonnies' theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Sergiovanni's interpretation thereof, helped me situate community in the social world in general, and in the educational world in particular. *Gesellschaft* relationships are disconnected, contractual, formal, and distant relationships that characterise modern organisations, including schools. These relationships are usually built on prescribed roles and responsibilities. Rules and protocols provide criteria for evaluation. Emotional, psychological, and cultural ramifications accompany these relationships, in the form of feelings of alienation. In schools, relationships among teachers are characterised in the literature as competitive (see Hargreaves, 1992; Kainan, 1996 b; and Westheimer, 1998), and student-teacher relationships are based on rules and protocols. An example of the competition among teachers could easily be noticed in Yarden's criticism of her peer, who rather than asking her students to read the textbook handed them summaries of this textbook. In this case teachers were competing for gaining students' love and appreciation at the expense of what they considered good teaching.

While explaining the dangers of extreme individuality, this theory gives reasons for bringing community values and relationships into the school. These reasons go beyond the intuitive moral sense that building community is a good thing to do. Bringing *Gemeinschaft* relationships into the *Gesellschaft* world of schools is essential for teachers' (and students') sense of belonging and well being. It brings hope that teachers will take this experience of participating in community, and apply it in their classes. Thus, by participating in communities teachers are not only more inclined to growth and development, but also more inclined to share this experience with their students. However, this theory cannot explain or predict what might happen when teachers attempt to create a community, or what attributes are needed to transform an association of individuals into a community. This theory is also of limited help in interpreting the influence of the Israeli context. For these I turned to Nel Noddings' theory of caring.

Noddings' theory of caring sheds light on the unique relationships that were developed within our community. This illumination made it crystal clear that caring relationships were crucial in transforming this association of teachers into a community. Following her ideas, I was able to identify and provide evidence of caring relations within our community and to show that, as a



result of experiencing mutual care, some teachers learned to become more-caring teachers. This theory helped me move one step further to suggest that the experience and development of caring relations is a *professional need* for teachers, and it should *be learned and exercised in the school context*.

Noddings (1999) herself claims that caring is a prerequisite for competence, but she fails to explain *how* teachers might develop the aptitude for care. This study argues that it is not enough to demand that teachers care for their students. Rather, they need to learn what it means to care: what kind of behaviour is expected from them, and why caring relations are important. They are likely to benefit from experiencing how caring relations can enhance one's learning, how it feels to be cared-for, what such relationships demand from the one-caring as well as from the cared-for. Teachers need to experience, think, discuss and reflect on caring, so they will better understand the centrality of these relations in teacher-student encounters. This study also argues that teachers ought to experience caring relations *within schools*, as these are the institutions in which they are expected to develop such relations with students. If we want the learning (to care) to be of practical use rather than theoretical interest, it is important to situate it in the actual context where it to be implemented. Learning to create caring relationships with students is especially important in the Israeli context where much tension is experienced on a daily basis, and the need for caring relations is vital.

Theories of community and caring are mutually informing as both relate to human interactions. The theory of community examines human society from a distance. To understand how people interact, it presents two *ideal forms* of society, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, through which to interpret and potentially improve modern society. Noddings' theory of caring takes a closer look at the human condition. It concentrates on the actual encounter between the carer and the cared-for. In so doing, it provides a thorough analysis of this encounter and proposes that caring is not only an ethical action, but also a requirement that should be learned and exercised by the educational system. To position both theories in the context of schooling, it is useful to use Bereiter's and Scardamalia's theory of building teachers' communities in schools. This last theory which specifies attributes of teachers' communities, not only strengthens the previous theories of community and caring but also gives them concrete context where they can be applied.

## TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHERS' COMMUNITY

This study contributes to a better understanding of teachers' community, and strengthens some claims about teachers' communities being developed by several researchers (see for example Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001). Grossman et al. provide us with an emerging theory of teachers' community which suggests that communities (a) support teachers by enhancing dialogue among them; (b) contribute to social change within the limited context of the school; and (c) add to the construction of knowledge about teaching, learning, and schooling. In this respect, the phenomenon of teachers' communities might reculturate schools by creating a space where teachers can share ideas that matter to them, and work together toward a common goal. The outcomes of this study support all three of the above claims. Participating in our community supported teachers in developing dialogue among them and enhanced their knowledge construction. The growing responsibility of participants to the whole group rather than to their own learning, and the suggestions for changing at the school level rather than at their own classrooms, are examples of the social changes that were developed as a result of participating in the group.

Grossman et al. (2001) shed light on two challenges to teachers' community: the first is the tension between teachers' need to learn new pedagogical practices and to deepen their knowledge in the subject matter they teach. This tension, they say, is inherent to all teachers' communities therefore in any successful attempt to create and sustain teachers' community in the workplace these two facets of TPD should be attended. The second is the diverse perspectives within the social group and the norms of communicating within the school, which threaten the pursuit of community. The multidisciplinary nature of the community described in this study sifted out the first challenge. In a multidisciplinary group teachers do not expect to deepen their subject matter knowledge; they are rather expected to learn new pedagogical practices and to create a space for conversation on teaching and learning. However, the wish to form communities where teachers might deepen their subject-matter knowledge was expressed a few times in our meetings as well as in teachers' interviews. This same nature of our community helped us (see chapter 7) in facing the second challenge – overcoming school's norms of behaviour – to permit the formation of teachers' community.

Another imperative for constructing and cultivating teachers' communities is their contribution to the notion of democracy. In a democratic society individual voices and perspectives are important but are surpassed by the voice and wisdom of the collective (Grossman, Wineburg

and Woolworth, 2001). To balance individual and collective needs, certain social connections among individuals are necessary. This need for developing closer, less contrived relationships within schools is echoed in Sergiovanni's (1994) call "to build *Gemeinschaft* within *Gesellschaft*" (p. 15). Grossman et al. (2001) suggest that balance can be enhanced by cultivating communities where teachers can disagree with, rather than disregard each other, where diverse voices are recognised rather than silenced, and differences are appreciated rather than erased. In these ways, teachers' communities can serve as a model for civil, democratic relationships. This study strengthens this claim. Participation in a community where they felt at ease to disagree with each other, examine and compare beliefs of teaching, learning, and schooling, and talk about discomfort and unsuccessful lessons rather than silence these experiences, encouraged teachers to search for and express their individual voices.

Within a theory of teachers' community, there is a place for the type of caring community discussed here. This study suggests that teachers might learn how to become caring teachers by exercising caring relations within teachers' communities. This is not to say that teachers do not construct caring relations with students in the absence of such communities; many teachers do so in spite of the difficulties which hamper such relations in schools. Rather, I argue that within such communities teachers learn not only to refine caring actions but also to recognise the centrality of caring relations for students' lives and to sustain caring relations whenever they happen.

This study suggests that given the right conditions (such as self-selecting their own participation in the community and self-directing the content of their meetings) to create their own caring communities in schools, teachers would learn much about the role played by community and caring relations in learning processes. It might be fair to speculate that teachers would eventually bring these new understandings back to their classrooms to enhance the creation of caring relations with students. In the stressful atmosphere of today's high schools, where care is conspicuously lacking, there is thus an inherent need for caring communities of teachers. It is important to note that without some kind of caring relations, no group can develop into a community. In other words, while participants or outsiders might not identify caring as the main principle at work, no community can be formed in its absence.

The need for bringing community values into schools can be argued on the basis of the aims of schooling (Grossman et al., 2001). As was argued (see chapter 9), if schools are to educate students for recognition of diverse voices, then it is important for teachers to participate in

conversations where pluralistic voices are heard. If schools are to educate students for civil relationships where people strive to care for and understand rather than dismiss each other, then teachers need to experience caring relationships so they might bring them into their classrooms. The most viable space for learning these behaviours is within teachers' communities. This study, then, gives strength to arguing for the pursuit of communities in school. Though it still needs further support and development, the emerging theory of teachers' community might encourage those who are willing to bring some *Gemeinschaft* values into the educational system.

### CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

In the following section I critically examine four choices I made in this study and reflect on whether I would make the same choices again. I critique my data collection methods and suggest changes I would make with the benefit of hindsight. The first choice relates to site: the decision to conduct this study in a high school rather than a professional development centre.

Teacher professional development (TPD) is an ongoing process connected both to practice and the act of reflecting on it. Rather than a project undertaken in the summer holidays and off-site (e.g. in university courses or in professional development centres), TPD is a continuous venture that is tightly connected to the work place. The act of conducting TPD on-site turns the school into a learning-place for teachers as well as students. In addition, because teachers in the same school already have much in common there is a greater chance of creating a community where they can work together to develop curricula and special projects, observe each other's classes and co-teach courses. They can experiment together with ideas and discuss their experimentations with the group. In our community we developed a strong sense of collegiality because we had so much in common, not only as high school teachers, but also as teachers in *this* specific high school. Two other advantages to the choice of this site were: (1) as a teacher at the same school, I was perceived as an insider rather than a researcher; and (2) meetings were held right after the school day and required no commuting time. Although this last may seem a minor logistical consideration, it affected teachers' ability to attend and thus made an impression on the research itself.

But choosing my own school as the site for this study had some disadvantages. First, since all participants were from the same school, we lacked the opportunity to learn from different school cultures. This insularity limited our learning abilities and constrained the diffusion of

ideas among schools. Second, constructing a community in the workplace can perpetuate existing power differentials. In our group, although the power differentials were not too pronounced, they were maintained in spite of the caring relationships that developed. In retrospect, while I believe the choice of school rather than professional development centre was correct, using *my* own school as a site for my research proved problematic. As I explored in Chapter 3, the disadvantages of conducting research in one's own backyard offset the advantages.

The second choice relates to the interdisciplinary nature of our group. Had the community grown out of a single discipline, its development would have been quite different. We would have focused more deeply on questions of curriculum-development, teaching strategies, and related professional issues. I believe that a disciplinary community would encourage teachers to develop their understanding of their discipline and of the nature of teaching and learning. I see much potential benefit for teachers and schools in creating disciplinary as well as multidisciplinary communities of teachers.

The third 'choice' was, in fact, a limitation imposed by school authorities. In allowing me to conduct my research at the school they required me to refrain from 'manipulating group dynamics' and confine the group's deliberations to professional issues. As a result, my account of teachers' relationships and interactions attempts to avoid discussion of the "less acceptable" feelings that inevitably surface in such a group but that are usually camouflaged in every-day workplace relationships. Grossman et al. (2001) warn researchers to be mindful that such feelings might arise simply because teachers are not used to having the time and place to discuss professional issues. No longer culturally isolated, they may be tempted to use the opportunity not only for learning, but also for power games and unfinished business in ways that threaten the delicate stability of workplace relationships. I believe that future researchers should be aware that new social forms like these can have overpowering effects on their participants. This is one reason I agreed to the limitation imposed by the authorities. Such groups have the potential to lead participants to expose feelings and thoughts that they may later regret. In a school, where people are likely to work together for many years, one must be cautious about such matters. I took it as my ethical responsibility as the group's initiator to make sure that no one, including myself, attempted to manipulate the group's dynamics.

The final choice was whether to give the power of leading the group to the participants or facilitate and direct the conversations myself. The nature of conversations is that they do not

develop in any pre-determined direction that might meet a facilitator's understanding, nor do they develop according to pre-arranged subjects that might limit participation. A conversation waxes and wanes and even when restricted to a specific topic, it will spontaneously develop in unanticipated directions. It was tempting to facilitate the group, to give directions and decide the topic of conversation. This was true especially at the beginning of the year, when teachers kept asking for "a directive hand" (see Chapter 6) and expressed their impatience with the slow pace and the lack of structure that characterised our meetings. However, I strongly believe that insisting on allowing free conversations rather than taking the lead and directing the group was probably one of the main factors that enhanced the development of community. By searching for their own ways and directions teachers had to determine what was most important for them. Giving away my power as a facilitator forced teachers to exercise their responsibility and concerns for each other and for the community, and to develop interdependence.

The absence of a formal leader, the collective responsibility to attend and keep both the community and the conversations alive, and the lack of a pre-conceived agenda are key attributes of this study and each was supported by a rationale. But the value and use of these features deserve further research. It might be interesting to inquire into the type of community that emerges under a formal leader and a pre-conceived agenda.

Finally, I relied on ethnographic methods of data collection such as long-term participant observation and open interviews. These methods yielded hundreds of pages of notes and transcripts from group conversations (20 meetings, 2 hours long each), three sets of interviews (27 interviews, about one hour long each), telephone conversations, correspondence from teachers ("letters to Tami") and entries from my reflective journal. This wealth of material provided a rich data set that could be analysed in light of the bodies of literature that framed the study. Relying on qualitative evidence allowed me to support my claims that this group of teachers moved toward a caring community. By so doing I also follow many others (e.g. Brandes, 1994, 1995a; Duckworth et al. 1997; Grossman et al. 2001; Hollingsworth, 1992; Little, 2001) who adopt ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis to learn how a community manifests itself in speech and action.

However, there are practical challenges inherent in using these methods. As a participant observer I was often so engaged by the content of the conversations, that my observations were not always as accurate and detailed as I wished them to be. Too many things happened at the same time, taxing my ability to follow and record all the threads. If I had given someone else

the responsibility to observe and keep notes, I might have derived finer-grained insights and deeper understandings of the whole endeavour.

A last point of reflection: Early in the year I asked the teachers to spend a few minutes on written evaluations at the end of each meeting. While not objecting to this request, they never actually undertook it. In retrospect, I should have insisted. Had the group devoted 5-10 minutes of each meeting to reflection and evaluation, the outcome could have changed the course of our conversations, helping us find direction and easing the discomfort and lack of structure we suffered at the beginning of the year. Such reflections could also have guided the process of data analysis. They would have shed light on the place of reflection in the learning process and, as reflections on meetings that were themselves reflecting on practice, we would have had direct experience with a process of metacognition. I believe that such an experience could have advanced our learning.

#### **DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH: UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

A number of questions arose during the study that could not be answered within its limits. These unanswered questions suggest directions for future research. Four are presented below: (1) what was the impact of the learning experience within the community on teachers' practice? (2) What was the impact of the community on other teachers who did not participate in it? (3) What was the impact of participation in the community on participants' perspectives on teaching? And (4) what was the impact of participating in the community on the pace and processes of integrating new teachers into the general teachers' community in schools?

#### **What was the impact of the learning experience within the community, on teachers' practice?**

Teachers reported that as a result of participating in our community they had made changes in their teaching. They indicated their use of a variety of teaching strategies that enhance students' active learning and provide better evaluation of students' achievements. As a result of the learning experience in our community, teachers reached some common understandings on the nature of learning. Among these were that learning (whether students' or teachers') is likely to occur when people are active in the process of learning, and that it is tightly connected to social interactions. Teachers came to believe that knowledge can be constructed and understanding changed in the process of interacting with others, and that learning takes place when people

converse about thoughts, opinions, and interpretations, or express and analyse feelings. However these claims for change were never directly examined. Although teachers reported changes in practice as a result, this study did not pursue participants into the classroom to witness impacts. Did teachers allow students to interact among themselves in class? Did they encourage their students to explain, think aloud, or describe their understandings and feelings? Such questions were not addressed in this study.

As well, although teachers spoke about the importance of group conversations to their process of learning, some of them seemed reluctant to use unplanned conversations as a learning tool in class. Why would this be? What can we learn from teachers' reluctance to cede control of the flow of the lessons? Our experience suggests that research into the use of free conversation as a tool for enhancing students' learning might be productive.

Overall, it might prove interesting to study the changes that teachers who participate in such groups go through. Further research involving peers' observations of lessons and interviews with students could deepen our understanding of the impact of learning and experience in communities on teachers' practice. The learning that took place in the community described in this study might suggest also a further research into the use of free conversation as a tool for enhancing students' learning.

### **What was the impact of our community on other teachers in the school?**

This study focused on the creation and development of a community of ten teachers within a high school of about 120 teachers. It was beyond its scope to investigate the community's impact on other teachers in the school. However, there were indications that our community impressed (unintentionally) some of the other teachers. This impression was quite evident in the "grand meeting" described earlier, but there were other indications right from the beginning of the year. Members of our community were frequently approached by other teachers who asked them about our meetings; some expressed interest in joining the group; others simply wanted to know more about it or to express support for the endeavour.

Nevertheless, some teachers probably did not endorse the initiative. The fact that a community of teachers had been formed in the school might well make other teachers feel like outsiders in their own workplace, thereby damaging already fragile staff-room relationships. The fact that we established closer relationships among ourselves might set up resistance among other



teachers. Teachers outside of the community could change their attitude to us over time without our knowledge in which directions and on the basis of what evidence. When planning this study, I was not aware of the possibility that our teachers' community would have any impact on other teachers in the school. However, in retrospect I maintain that researchers should expect that changes within the school (such as constructing teachers' community) are likely to effect all the teachers who work in it, therefore, all these are issues worth studying if a serious attempt to create teacher's communities within schools is planned.

### **What was the impact of participation on teaching perspectives and students' learning?**

A teaching perspective, says Pratt (1998), is "an expression of personal beliefs and values related to learning and teaching" (p. xii); perspectives flow from, and modify, teaching practice. While this study did not investigate the community's impact on participants' teaching perspectives, the issue was raised both in the meetings and the interviews. Teachers said that participating in our community impacted their understanding of learning, teaching and educational goals. However, the degree of that impact remains unclear, as does the extent and nature of the changes themselves.

In order to develop a broad picture of changes in teaching perspectives and impact on learning one would have to turn to the students. Student interviews could identify new, more attractive or more exciting learning experiences. These could be compared with strategies discussed in the group and their effectiveness with students evaluated. By including student voices—traditionally not heard in studies of schools, teaching and learning—such studies could enrich our understanding.

### **What was the impact of our community on the overall integration of novice teachers?**

New teachers suffer more than experienced teachers do from the conventional culture of isolation. Not only do they need to adjust to being "on the other side of the teacher's table"; they also have to adjust to the "strange" culture of high school teachers. They need to learn the codes of discourse and conduct what can be said and what is to be silenced, which questions to ask and which to avoid, what sort of help they might get from colleagues and administration, and what such requests for help might cost them. There are many unwritten and unspoken conventions within every culture and the best way for newcomers to learn them is by participating and experiencing, by actually "getting their hands wet". In this respect, a

community of teachers that consists of a mixture of novice and experienced teachers, is a place where newcomers might freely exercise "active, social and authentic participation [and] gradually acquire identities and perform in roles which are regarded and essential in the practice" (Johnson and Pratt, 1998: 90).

In our community, novice teachers received much support and caring attention from more experienced teachers, and were welcome to use our meetings for gaining confidence in the practice of teaching. However, it is possible that even in this relatively safe environment, there were times when some new teachers felt too uncomfortable to express their feelings or ask questions that would reveal their inexperience in teaching. Communities that consist exclusively of new teachers (1-3 years of experience) could be helpful in this regard. Belonging to such a community, might help new teachers adjust to school culture, and also to feel free to critique or even work to change it. As a group of people not yet accustomed to the system, new teachers bring a fresh perspective to bear and are in a unique position to promote productive change.

Nevertheless, a community consisting exclusively of new teachers may waste time on problems that are easily solved by more experienced teachers, and end up "reinventing the wheel" or finding solutions inappropriate for the school or its ideology. Such communities may also tend to constrain the integration of new teachers into the larger community. Helping novice teachers to integrate is an important issue and these questions indicate the need for further research.

To conclude, the issues presented above were either beyond the scope of this study, or outside the limits of its methodology, but require addressing in future research. Such research might deepen our as-yet under-developed understanding of the phenomenon and theory of teachers' communities in schools.

In conclusion, to revisit the research questions originally postulated, I offer the following responses: First, what is the process by which a small group of teachers became a community of teachers? A group of teachers became a community by spending together long chunks of time and working as a group over a sufficient period of time while being engaged in professional discussions. In these discussions teachers shared their knowledge, supported one another in knowledge construction, and demonstrated respect and recognition for peers. A central element in the process of becoming a community was the development of teachers' responsibility not only to their own learning but also to the "life" of the community; they

guarded their time together for professional discussions and kept the continuity of meetings and the time schedules. This responsibility was developed as a result of the self-directed approach which took into consideration three overlapping dimensions: (1) motivation (teachers were the ones who decided to enter the group and it was their responsibility to remain active participants); (2) self-management (teachers were responsible for the content of their conversations), and (3) self monitoring (teachers were responsible for constructing their personal meanings) (see Garrison, 1997). However, without a certain amount of trust and openness no group is likely to become a community. Therefore, the process of creating teachers' community was strongly connected to the relational aspect and the atmosphere that was created in the group.

Second, what are the defining attributes that made this community of teachers more than a group of colleagues? The defining attributes of this community that made it more than a group of colleagues were caring relations, trust and openness, dialogue, and passion. All four attributes were strongly connected to each other and the development of each depended on the others. Trust was slowly built in the community as teachers realised that exposure of less-than-perfect pictures of themselves was rewarded with similar exposures by their colleagues, their will to open their classroom doors was well received, and their requests for help were answered with appreciation and enthusiasm. The trust and openness allowed the development of dialogue in which teachers were free to agree as well as to disagree with each other without risking their membership in the community. The slowly developed caring relations in the community attested teachers that trusting their colleagues and participating in dialogue would not risk them professionally or socially. The first three attributes - caring relations, trust and openness, and dialogue - stress the centrality of the relational aspect of community that might not be so central for a group of teachers. The fourth feature of this community that contributed to the making of the community is the passion and enthusiasm that teachers exhibited while participating in professional conversations. Teachers' passion for the subject matter they teach, their relations with students and for other educational matters acted as a bonding force for the development of community. This passion, however, when disciplined by caring relations, leads participants to discipline their desires for the sake of maintaining the community.

Finally, how does social context influence the process and substance of such a community?

Social context influences community by impacting the content of the conversations as well as their fashion or style. The context of school impacted the content of our conversations so that they centered on learning, teaching, evaluating, teacher-student' relationships and other

educational matters. This context also impressed the process of our community's development as reflected in our conversations. The school's beginning of the year, mid-year, and end of the year were mirrored in participants' relationships, their membership and engagement in conversations, and their evaluation of the community. The larger social/cultural context of Israel impacted both the content of our conversations (e.g. conversations about holidays, historical events, and the stress connected to life in Israel), and the way we conversed (e.g. passionate, enthusiastic conversations, participants completing each other's sentences and talking all at once). I believe that the tendency of this group of teachers to form the kind of close relationships that moved it from a group into a community was highly impressed by these social/cultural contexts. In a school culture of professional isolation and stress, as well as in the Israeli culture of tension and stress, participating in a community of colleagues is more than a good idea: it is a necessity.

#### **AFTERWARD/ AFTERWORD**

The 'year of the study' ended in the summer of 1997, but the community continued to meet for another academic year (1997-1998). We had three new members that year, all experienced teachers, who took the places of Vini and Mairav, who retired, and Bobbey, whose teaching schedule did not permit consistent participation<sup>30</sup>. At the end of that year, teachers spontaneously decided they wanted to try and produce some "real products" to be used in their everyday teaching. Three small groups were created and each worked on a different project. One group developed a curriculum for alternative lessons in Hebrew grammar, another looked at teaching strategies using their understanding of constructivism, and the third concentrated on creative writing.

Just before we ended our meetings in the summer of 1998, I announced that I would not be able to participate in the 1999-2000 academic year. Some teachers said that they wanted to continue meeting while others said they might take a year off. When the academic year began, nobody took the initiative and the group did not recommence. At the end of that year our short reunion at the "grand end-of-the-year teachers meeting" (described in chapter 9) reinforced how strong and meaningful the connections we formed had been. As a result of this meeting, the school principal approached me and requested that I lead a group of new teachers as part of my

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30 Bobbey came to a few meetings whenever she could, and expressed her wish to be "one of the group". Teachers told her that she is "one of us" whether she comes or not, as we keep thinking and guessing what she would have said had she heard the conversation.

teaching schedule. Two groups were formed in the 2000-2001 academic year and two more in the following year (2001-2002).

Participating in communities of teachers seems to be increasingly natural in my school. Some participants of the original group now have managerial duties and are responsible for leading different kinds of teachers' groups. Department heads approach me from time to time to get an advice of how to conduct "their" groups, and teachers consistently express their willingness to participate in different kinds of communities. I have been invited to several schools to share my experience with and understandings of teachers' communities and to enhance the creation of these communities in schools.

The community that is at the centre of this study succeeded in becoming a source of support and growth for its participants. In concluding this study, it is important to stress that there were many reasons for this success: the strong belief in teachers' ability to conduct their own professional development; the fact that it was long-term; the atmosphere of trust that was developed and the caring relationships that were established, all contributed to this success. However, it is also possible that similar conditions would have yielded different results. Overcoming the culture of competition and contrived collaborations that pervade in schools is not an easy task. Teachers might not believe in the merit gained by revealing their professional difficulties to other teachers nor in the advantage of openly disagreeing with peers. This could be too risky for many teachers who cherish the safety of the culture of isolation. Therefore, it is important to be mindful, attentive to people's needs and wants, and extremely sensitive when planning attempts to create teacher's communities within schools.

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## APPENDIX IV: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS<sup>31</sup>

### Background questions:

1. What are the reasons you chose to participate in this professional development?
2. What topics would you like to discuss in the meetings?
3. What structure of professional development suites you best?
4. What strategies would you expect to be used in the meetings and why?

### Teacher's actions:

5. How do you routinely start or end a lesson?
6. Do you have any preferred method?
7. How do you describe yourself as a teacher?
8. What kinds of activities are likely to be conducted in your class?

### Teacher's intentions:

9. Do you have an agenda or mission that guides your teaching?
10. What is your purpose in teaching this subject (e.g. History, Biology, etc.)?
11. Are you passionate about your teaching? If you are, in what way?

### Teacher's beliefs:

12. What is the most important aspect of the content you teach?
13. How do you see yourself as an educator? What does it mean "to learn"?
14. How do you know if a student has learned?
15. Do you have any particular belief(s) that guide you in your teaching?

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<sup>31</sup> The questions are based on Pratt (1998) pp. 12-28