School-based Professional Learning Communities:
collaboration, conversation and innovation for literacy improvement

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Abstract

This study examined the processes by which Julian State School, located in South-East Queensland, attempted to establish and develop a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to guide its efforts in improving student achievement in literacy. Utilising a case study methodology, a large qualitative data set was gathered and analysed to understand how the school's personnel engaged with each other in PLC and school improvement activities. A total of twenty-seven participants were involved in the study; 21 classroom teachers, two members of the leadership team and four university personnel. Data sources included questionnaires, semi-structured individual interviews, audio recordings and transcriptions of reflective practice conversations, focus groups, field notes, teaching and assessment artefacts. As the thesis proceeds, detailed analysis of contextual interactions and interrelationships within the developing PLC activities are presented to explore the proposition that PLC development is a multifaceted and complex process.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory was used to provide a theoretical and methodological framework for the study. This frame allowed for further examination of how, and perhaps why some PLC activities were effective while others were not. A major contribution of this study is the analytic description of the development of a PLC in a 'real' school context. Current professional literature presents PLC activity as a largely oversimplified set of steps or activities for success. This study challenges these assumptions to examine the complexity of processes and outcomes in PLC development and provides new insights for schooling improvement researchers and practitioners. For example, while some PLC activities created a space in the timetable for fostering the key characteristics of a PLC, various tensions were evident in those activities and contradictions were generated in the PLC’s activity system often resulting in less than effective participation and outcomes. More detail on this complexity is provided through in-depth CHAT analyses of two key teacher learning activities at Julian. These analyses show how contradictions can impact a school’s ability to achieve its desired PLC goals. These analyses help to explicate the relationship between the different layers of contradictions participants negotiate. They also explore the links made to the negotiated actions by teachers and leaders within their collective activity and how these actions transform the PLC system processes and outcomes.
Findings from this study suggest that attention, reflection and action are required at all levels of involvement in a PLC. The study adds depth to existing understandings about how PLCs work as change drivers. It also provides valuable information to other schools, schooling systems and professional developers, who give attention to the development of PLCs to enact whole school change. Through this work, I hope to challenge the field to rethink PLC development as a set of steps to reconsider it as a complex, socially-mediated process fraught with tensions and contradictions that can be negotiated for better or worse.
Statement of Originality

“This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.”

Signed:

Dated: February 08, 2017
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The completion of this thesis marks a long personal and professional journey. Balancing motherhood, career and study simultaneously has not been an easy feat. It has required me to push the boundaries of what I believed I was capable of accomplishing; and learning an immense amount along the way. All of this would not have been possible without the support of many.

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The following publications were completed during the period of candidature for the Doctor of Education.

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To the joys of my life, Annabella, Emmelia and Quinn- I love you to the moon and back a billion times over.
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Chapter 1: Introduction: Improving Schools to Improve Student Achievement

1.1 Introduction
To provide some context for this study, this introductory chapter will present a brief description of recent efforts to improve student achievement in schools in Australia and, more specifically, in Queensland. It will then discuss why the present study was necessary, outlining and addressing the questions that guided the research. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief overview of each of the remaining chapters.

1.2 Schooling improvement: the policy context
Over the last decade, a worldwide research agenda has explored the possibilities for improving the quality and effects of schooling and student achievement for disadvantaged communities. In Australia, schools in low socio-economic communities face significant challenges in raising and maintaining student achievement levels (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales & Tannock, 2011). Successive Australian governments have attempted to solve student under-achievement problems over many decades without a great deal of success (Lingard, 2013; McNaughton, 2011).

A review of relevant literature reveals a range of views on the approaches we might take to improving educational outcomes and offer some significant discussions of the ramifications of inequalities in schooling. In a climate of educational reform focused on closing achievement gaps, ongoing debates persist about how we can best understand and decrease educational disparities among high and low-income communities; both in schools and in life beyond them. For example, research has shown that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to leave school before graduating, to be engaged in casual, less-skilled, and low-paying jobs, and to experience extended periods of being underemployed or unemployed (Atweh, Singh, Taylor & Knight, 2006). Reports produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006; 2011) have highlighted the relationships between the economic wellbeing of communities and the educational attainments of the children within them.
In Australia, educational “results are inequitable in the sense that differences among students in their literacy levels, to a marked extent, reflect differences in their social background” (McGraw, Lynch, Koc, Budak, & Brown, 2007, p.14). Several government policies have focused on improving teaching quality and classroom instruction through external auditing processes, enhancing school leadership capacity, proposing more school autonomy, and using high-stakes national testing as a school accountability measure (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2011; 2013; 2014). Politicians, educational leaders and sociology scholars have discussed the impact of policies (Singh, Glasswell & Heimans, 2014), resourcing (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales & Tannock, 2011), social and economic disparities (Meyer & Schiller, 2013) and teacher quality (Dinham, 2013) on the outcomes of schooling, each group differentially simplifying or complexifying the work of schools and educators. Reviews on policy have been commissioned to address some of these issues. Perhaps the most discussed in recent years is that of the “Gonski Report,” outlined in the following section.

1.2.1 Giving a Gonski

The Review of School Funding: Final Report (Gonski et al., 2011) was commissioned by Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, on behalf of the Australian Government in 2010, and was undertaken from 2010 to 2012. The Gonski Report, as it has become known, contributed to the broader educational reform agenda in Australia, which included the development of the Australian Curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (Gonski et al., 2011). In 2011, Gonski et al. proposed that Australian schools needed to lift the achievement of all students, especially those living with disadvantage. As evidence, they cited reviews of international assessment data showing that Australia’s standing in education had been falling over the previous decade and that this was a cause for concern. The Gonski team proposed that further development of schooling system outcomes needed to be attended to in order to better measure school effectiveness beyond national and international assessments.

The authors (Gonski et al., 2011) argued that evidence from the National Partnership Funding (DETE, 2010) projects indicated that integrated strategies like building teacher capacity, strengthening instructional leadership and engaging parents and the community can be effective in improving outcomes for students from low socio-
economic communities. The need to be responsive and to “employ evidence-based strategies in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable manner” was also key to success according to the report (Gonski et al., 2011, p.127).

While there were many recommendations, one key recommendation of the Gonski Report is particularly relevant to this research project. Recommendation 7 (Gonski et al., 2011, p. 145) specified the elements required to develop sustained improvements in educational outcomes for all students, and included reference to the following strategies that should be implemented to ensure success:

The nation should:

- improve practices for teaching students from low socio-economic communities;
- strengthen leadership to drive school improvement
- focus on early intervention for students at risk of underperformance
- be flexible enough to address local needs
- encourage parent and community engagement
- use robust data and evidence to inform decisions about educational effectiveness and student outcomes

The reviewers also discussed how effective leadership could promote improvement in practice, including building coaching relationships for teachers; improving morale; raising expectations of student performance through high but achievable goals; and the effective use of data in schools to strengthen school improvement strategies (Gonski et al., 2011).

While it is tempting to view the Gonski Report and its recommendations as the wake-up call that Australian education needed, it was not universally accepted as a solution. Some scholars and researchers questioned the reform agenda being undertaken. Sahlberg (2012a; 2012b) and Comber (2011), for example, both raised concerns that the report included some paradoxes in reform rhetoric and what changes needed to be implemented within schools. First, Sahlberg (2012a; 2012b) argued that some of the reforms were counterproductive in producing the equity goals desired. Problems associated with the introduction of a market approach to education in the form of “school choice” were widely ignored, when Sahlberg argued, this kind of policy move develops a culture of competition whereby schools compete
for students and resources. This competition is fundamentally damaging to equity because it reduces options and funding for the students most at risk of educational failure. In reality, Sahlberg argued, only families with material and financial resources have choices about which schools to send their children to; if a child’s family lives in a remote and/or disadvantaged area, then their options are likely to be severely limited. This presents an illusion of choice where none exists for many sections of the population, particularly those who are already disadvantaged.

A further problem relates to the standardisation of educational expectations or benchmarks. In setting standards for performance and timelines for outcomes to be met, such policies ignore a very real factor associated with being human: that we are all different. Instead of education focusing on a single outcome, Sahlberg argued that we should teach to and for the diversity of outcomes.

Finally, Salhberg (2012b) argued that accountability based on test scores is narrowing curricula and resulting in the production of learning environments focused on passing tests rather than genuinely gaining an education. Regarding social justice implications, Comber (2011) argues similarly (see also Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell, Singh, & McNaughton, 2016; Minglin & Singh, 2016; Singh, Brown & Märtzin, 2012; Singh & Glasswell, 2013, 2016; Singh, Märtzin & Glasswell, 2013, 2014). She states that requiring school leaders to dedicate resources to collecting, organising and interpreting national standardised testing data takes valuable resources away from the real work of schools. In Comber’s view, counting and checking are not making schools more effective. These newly redirected resources could be used for supporting students and teachers to do quality work instead. She also raised concerns that centralising teaching resource development and curriculum initiatives contributed to a de-professionalisation of teachers, reducing the emphasis on the expertise of teachers and creating conditions that discourage them from developing innovative practices based on systematic research work in their classrooms (Glasswell, Mosert, Judd & Mayn, 2016; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2013).

The study presented in this thesis took place in the aftermath of the Gonski Report and as such had a scope that encompassed thinking about whole school reform; its constraints and affordances, and the processes by which it might be best accomplished. Of particular interest in this study was the role of Professional
Learning Communities (PLC) in school improvement models suggested (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Keating, 2008; Eaker and Many, 2006; Hord, 2007; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2013). At the time of this study, a PLC approach had been adopted by many schools in this Queensland region (DET, 2015) as a way of meeting the goals of the Gonski Report for improving outcomes in disadvantaged schools. In the following section, the project’s main aim and its research questions are outlined.

1.3 Aim of the study and the guiding research questions
The aim of this study was to explore, through the experiences of teachers and leaders, how a PLC centred on improving student outcomes in a school situated in a low socio-economic community developed over the course of a school year. The inquiry focused on the impact of a PLC’s five key characteristics: leadership and supportive and shared power; shared values, mission, vision and goals; collective inquiry and application of learning; supportive conditions (human and physical), and collaboration with colleagues (discussed further in detail in Chapter 2, p.13).

The following research questions guided this study:

- What are Julian State School\(^1\) (JSS) teachers’ and leaders’ experiences of a PLC centred on improved student achievement?
- What impact do the key characteristics of the PLC have on teaching and learning?
- How do tensions within an activity transform the activity? How might these tensions be resolved through negotiated activity?

To answer these questions, it was necessary to investigate specific activities put in place by the school to foster the development of the PLC focused on improving literacy (reading) attainment. The present study set out to explore teachers’ and leaders’ experiences of those activities as they worked towards the achievement of school goals.

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\(^1\) For the purpose of anonymity of participants in the study, the name of the school has been changed, as have the names of teachers and leaders.
1.4 Addressing the research questions

This study utilised Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999) as a conceptual framework to underpin both the research methodology and the discussion of the findings. ‘Case study’ (Neuman, 2006; Yin, 2008) methodology was considered the most suitable for this study because this would allow for reporting of dynamic events and ongoing unfolding interactions among individuals, and provides an opportunity for in-depth investigation of interactive processes.

Warranted conclusions were sought through a range of empirical investigations. In this case study, a qualitative design was necessary to identify contextual factors that contributed to and/or impeded the design, development and enactment of a PLC (see Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014). The dataset generated from the project included semi-structured interviews, reflective practice meetings, individual interviews, focus groups, artefacts and field note observations of two types of school improvement activities -- Watching Others Work (WOW) and Reflective Practice Meetings (RPM). Interaction data collected via audio recordings were analysed thematically, and themes for further qualitative investigations were identified using NVivo as a data management tool. In Chapter 4, a further in-depth account of methodology and the philosophical and educational implications of methodological choices will be discussed as well as a description of the practical implications of data collection and analysis.

1.5 Local context: Queensland

The focus of this study was a school within the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET), known locally as Education Queensland or EQ. Preceding the Gonski Report and its recommendations, EQ had led innovation at both policy and implementation levels. Queensland’s renowned New Basics Project (Education Queensland, 2000) and ‘Key Learning Areas’ (DET, 2007) were designed to support reform in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The New Basics Project took into account the recommendations made in by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Bahr, Chant & Warry, 2001), which outlined the need for the systemic establishment of PLCs in schools (Ailwood & Follers, 2002). Authors of this report argued that if, “Education Queensland is to be a central component of ‘The Smart State’ agenda, increasing support for the
development and sustenance of teacher professional learning communities is surely a vital move” (Ailwood & Follers, 2002, p. 10).

Continuing with its policy review and improvement, EQ identified areas of need within the sector and developed policies and initiatives to meet those needs. In the five years before this research began, two major relevant policy initiatives were launched in EQ schools. The first, *Literacy the Key to Learning: A Framework for Action* (DETA, 2006), involved all EQ schools in a policy rollout and an associated five-day professional learning sequence designed to up-skill teachers for meeting the literacy needs of diverse learner groups. The second was the *School Improvement and Accountability Framework: Destination 2010* (DET, 2008). These policy measures involved setting targets and plans to address student outcomes, dealing with diversity, accountability, teacher quality, teacher professional learning, curriculum planning and school culture.

In addition to these policy moves, an investment of $900 million from 2009 to 2015 was secured to impact teaching and learning for thousands of Queensland teachers and students. This investment (National Partnerships) aimed to improve educational outcomes for all students, under a joint State and Federal Partnership program that invited school principals into outcomes oriented, performance-based contracts for improving their schools (Heimans, Singh & Glasswell, 2015; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Pini, & Glasswell, 2016).

1.6 Research on schooling improvement

Interest in reducing educational disparities is not just the purview of policy makers and local educational administrators. University research teams have long been interested in the phenomenon of education inequity, especially as it relates to the provision of high-quality educational opportunities for children who live in poverty. Over several decades, schooling improvement models have been developed by university researchers collaborating closely with schools and school districts to bolster teacher professional learning, enhance school culture and collaboration, promote data inquiry around student achievement and focus on quality resourcing. Most of these projects have shared some common features. For example, *New Zealand’s Learning Schools (LM)* model (McNaughton & Lai, 2009); the *Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP)* model (Donavon, Widgor & Snow, 2003); and the *Smart Education Partnership (SEP)* model (Glasswell, Davis, Singh &
McNaughton, 2010; Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh & Glasswell, 2013;) have all outlined essential elements relating to leadership, teacher professional capacity, instruction that reflects high expectations, collaboration and shared goals and community involvement.

One of the most successful, long-standing research collaborations has been the Chicago Consortium for School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago, Illinois. The CCSR researchers have been surveying teachers in Chicago Public Schools since 1991 and principals since 1992. Over time, CCSR has developed critical frameworks for understanding the task of improving schools (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton & Luppescu, 2006). The consortium has worked closely with other research and reform organizations and the school district, to create a conceptual framework for organizing research. The ‘Essential Supports for School Improvement’ became a core component of local school improvement planning guides in the city of Chicago. Through an analysis of survey responses, CCSR could make judgments about each participating school’s status on each of five essential supports. The goal was to guide schools’ improvement efforts by giving specific feedback on each of the measures.

These Five Essential Supports for Schooling Improvement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010) were:

- Inclusive Leadership Focused on Instruction/Effective Leaders
- Professional Capacity/Collaborative Teachers
- Parent/Community Ties
- Student Centred Learning Climate/ Supportive Environment
- Ambitious Instruction.

CCSR data indicate that, in over three decades of educational reform initiatives, many schools made substantial changes in student achievement, but improvements across the 600 participating schools were less significant. Overall, there had been improvements in school leadership, professional capacity and teachers’ relationships with parents (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010), but other improvements escaped them.
More recently, CCSR researchers examined the practices of a hundred Chicago schools that made significant progress over a seven-year period and a hundred schools that did not. They found schools that were strong on at least three of the five essential supports for schooling improvement were ten times more likely to show substantial gains in both reading and math than weak schools; and thirty times less likely to stagnate compared to those performing well on only one or two strong support elements (de la Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian & Salmonowicz, 2013). While knowing, what is likely to work is useful, understanding how to help schools develop these capacities or attributes is a somewhat more challenging question. This research reported in this thesis is concerned with just this issue.

1.7 My personal interest in this project
As a primary school teacher, I became interested in how school reform efforts produce change at the classroom level. My work as a primary school teacher spanned education systems in the United States and Australia. It was evident in both education systems, that schooling improvement policies and initiatives were dominant features.

During this professional experience, I participated in reform efforts put in place to foster improvements in under-achieving schools. I saw constant changes that focused on generating opportunities for greater collaboration among teachers for the sharing of information and examples of good practice. Some of these school initiatives were established for the purpose of what was explained as creating a “professional learning community” or PLC. As teachers, we were exposed to the professional literature about PLCs, so that we could have a better sense of what to expect during this improvement journey. However, little of what I experienced had any sense of community. Decisions were often made unilaterally, with teacher involvement limited to peer or self-reflection on what to do about an already framed “problem” of practice. Later, as I joined a research team involved in a schooling improvement project (Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh, & Glasswell, 2013; Singh et al., 2013), I again saw school leadership teams referring to themselves and their teachers as a PLC. Yet there was limited evidence that these schools understood the basic tenets of the concept. This has been further problematised with the research literature providing a formulaic way of establishing a PLC. Thus, the findings of this
study align with my own professional experiences, which found that the development of a PLC is far more complex and less successful than the literature often implies.

School systems are incredibly complex systems. The introduction of a PLC further complicates these systems, with not only buy-in and good will required from a range of people working within the school; but also amendments to organisational structures (for example, class timetabling, rostering of teachers and teacher release from classroom). In relation to my particular study, it is vital that PLCs are organised around addressing a specific problem; for example, instructional innovations for improving students reading attainment. Such a focus means that different types of knowledge and expertise can be mobilised effectively around a specific problem, with a clear purpose and objective to the PLC.

1.8 Towards a better understanding PLC concepts and practices
This research was timely and necessary in an educational reform era, during which the loosely understood, but much-utilised concept of the PLC was being promoted to struggling schools as an answer to their very complex problems. This dissertation is primarily focused on the processes and interactions that occur during the development of a school’s PLC over the course of one year through the experiences of teachers and leaders. I undertook the study to better understand how PLCs form and operate as change drivers and to add to current discussion about the utility of PLC approaches and their associated activities for improving schools that face significant educational challenges.

My interest in contributing this work to the wider educational community is also driven by a need to understand how the PLC concept extends away from staffroom discussions and onto classroom floors. Many researchers argue that real improvements in educational outcomes are likely only when schools focus on change at the classroom level, with reform aimed at teaching and learning (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2009; Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour 2002; Fullan, 1992, 2000; Pascoe & Pascoe, 1998). The major vehicle for this kind of work, it is assumed, is the PLC and yet it would appear that it is a concept that is easily misunderstood especially within the practice contexts of schooling.

Researchers have also been interested in the PLC concept especially in the development of the school-based PLC (Hord, 2004), which can function as both the process and product of increased instructional capacity (Glasswell et al., 2010;
Within PLC theory, schools are seen as active designers of the change process, rectifying ongoing issues of achievement gaps, new curricula and policy. Schools must lead in this era of reform and support a paradigm shift from where schools are regarded as organisations, to where schools are viewed as learning communities (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Schmoker (2004) calls attention to a remarkable concurrence from researchers and theorists who have concluded that building the capacity of a school to function as a PLC is the “best-known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 432). And yet, we know very little about the processes of PLC development.

Fullan’s (2003) research adds some broad descriptions of the PLC development process yet still his work lacks specifics about what kinds of interactions and actions seem to matter. He argues that building capacity within a PLC is the first step in moving to ‘professionalism’ (Fullan, 2003). Within a PLC, leadership and capacity building are deemed key to successful long-term reform; this is realised through collaborative efforts within schools, and across districts/regions and governments for the purpose of learning and improved results (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Olivier (2008) concluded that critical information was still needed to help leaders in managing school change (see also Singh & Glasswell, 2016). This study was designed to look more closely at exactly the issues that schools facing the call to institute and operate as a PLC might face. It contributes a depth of understanding to the PLC process that is rarely reported.

1.9 Specific contributions of this project
A significant contribution of this study is the presentation of detailed interaction data and analytic description of those data as they relate to activities within a PLC in action. The study also builds upon the research of others who have foregrounded the value of teachers’ reflective practice interactions in PLC activities (Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2013). Such research has highlighted the utility of providing teachers with multiple opportunities for evidence-based conversations across year levels, within a trusting environment, to evoke critical reflection leading to new learning in collaboration with others. In line with other scholars (Timperley and Robinson, 2000), this project did not find such interactions to be universally
It was clear that senior management (school leaders) inadvertently created conditions which allowed teachers to continue engaging in both effective and ineffective processes.

**1.10 Organisation of the thesis**

In Chapter 1, I review past reform efforts and provide some political, local and research context for the current study. In Chapter 2, I proceed with a more detailed account of the professional literature related to the PLC concept and make the case that the field of schooling improvement needs to develop more elaborate explanations of how PLCs develop through activities and initiatives deployed by administrators, researchers and professional developers. In Chapter 3, I present a synthesis of research and theory related to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), describing its strengths and limitations as a framework for exploring the nature of PLC activities as systems.

In Chapter 4, I outline the case study methodology used in this study. I detail the data collection and analysis procedures for the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with teachers and leaders and describe the processes for observing teachers at work. In Chapter 5, I explore themes related to participants’ experiences of the development of the PLC and report on data about common tensions evident in participants’ talk as they discussed PLC foundations, activities and processes.

In Chapters 6 and 7, my goal is to build a complete account of where and why tensions in activity systems emerged and how negotiations were made by those involved in the investigation of two PLC activities – the Reflective Practice Meeting (RPM) and Watching Others Work (WOW). In Chapter 8, I argue that building a well-functioning PLC involves iterative (or ongoing) cycles of intervention, negotiation and transformation.

**1.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an outline of my doctoral research project, including a brief description of the context in which this study was conducted. I presented the research questions which guided the research, suggested why these research questions were important, and identified the specific contributions which this thesis might make to the current debate on the development of PLCs in school improvement agendas aimed at improving student learning outcomes.
Chapter 2: Literature Review: Professional Learning Communities

2.1 Introduction
This chapter outlines and describes the key characteristics of a Professional Learning Community (PLC), and presents a review of the literature concerning the PLC. The chapter will highlight the development of a PLC as a complex social entity with associated activities that reflect and construct their culture. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the phases of a PLC and the potential impact it can have on student achievement. Overall, the literature presented in this chapter suggests the necessity to develop an adequate explanation of what should, or might, occur during the development of PLCs.

2.2 Defining the Professional Learning Community
PLCs have gained importance in the school change, and improvement literature as a means to enhance student learning outcomes (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Despite the fact of recent widespread support for the concept’s central role in change processes, the definition of a PLC remained elusive and contested among scholars, researchers and educators (Tarnoczi, 2006).

In 2004, DuFour remarked that people had begun using the term “professional learning community” to label a range of situations and structures (p.6). The problem with a loose definition, DuFour argued, is that the term becomes ubiquitous and in danger of losing its meaning. It is essential to engage in a meaningful discussion about the role of PLCs in school change processes and develop a definition of what it is, is not, and might be. As is often the case, when the educational research community posits and explores a model, different researchers coin different names, each attempting to capture the nuances of difference between versions or iterations of what is fundamentally a set of similar models. For example, PLCs have also been referred to as “learning communities,” “knowledge communities,” “teacher communities,” “collaborative work cultures,” “professional communities,” an “effective professional learning community,” and more loosely “organisational communities” (DuFour, 2004). Evident in the discussions of PLCs is an assumption that the transition to the organisational
features and activities associated with PLCs are unproblematically good for both teachers and students (Tarnoczi, 2006).

Before I proceed with my discussion of this concept and its role in the process of school change in the current study, it is important to explore how this concept is defined and one or more elements are given primacy within the research literature (Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2012). For example, DuFour and Eaker (1998) define the phrase professional learning community by separating each word. A “professional” is someone who has expertise in a field, who makes findings based on collaborative investigations to achieve their goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). “Learning” as it operates within a PLC, recognises that members must attend to enduring study and regular practice that will continuously see them seek improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Building new knowledge is important to consider as teachers within a professional community are also the learners. Thus, understanding what sustains learning for teachers is imperative to the goal of improving school functioning and student achievement. “Community” is then where educators create an “environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xii).

In contrast, Hord, Roussin and Sommers (2009) propose a more traditional definition by citing a Webster’s Dictionary definition of “professional” as an individual who has “a codified knowledge base that can be increased consistently through ongoing research that seeks new means by which to expand members’ effectiveness” (p.18). According to Hord (2007), educators become professionals when they work together in a community to continuously learn as a means to enhance student achievement. Hord’s earlier work (2004) echoes this in that a PLC is not seen as an improvement plan or program, but rather, the PLC aids in the structure of a school to promote improvements for constructing “staff capacity and for learning and change” (p. 14).

For this study, the model is simply referred to as a PLC as it meets with the most consolidated description provided by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many (2006):

As educators committed to working collaboratively in the ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities
operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (p.14).

Also, the notion of teacher learning is central to my consideration of a PLC at Julian State School (JSS). Like other scholars, I will adopt the position that “an effective professional learning community can be defined as possessing the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing [student] learning” (Bolam et al., 2005, p. iii).

In the next section, I will review the research literature on the features and development processes of PLCs as key components of school change processes. Many researchers argue that real improvements in educational outcomes will be likely only when schools focus on change at the classroom level, with reform aimed at teaching and learning (Dufour et al., 2005; Eaker et al., 2002; Fullan, 1992; 2000; Pascoe & Pascoe, 1998). It will be suggested that the major vehicle for this change is the development of a PLC. It is useful, therefore, to describe and discuss how PLCs are characterised in theory and practice and to frame the concept.

2.3 Key characteristics of professional learning communities
In addition to defining PLCs, understanding the key features and conceptual models is critical to developing an in-depth understanding of a conceptual tool. In the next section, I provide an integrated review of the PLC literature, which suggests that several factors aid in the development of a PLC in a school context. It is tempting when reviewing the research and professional literature on PLCs, to draw the conclusion that the goal of education systems is to identify a structure to help teachers work together and to develop patterns of activity that can be agreed upon and replicated in multiple contexts. Critical scholars attempting to understand the complexity of actions in the context of real schools remind us, however, that this is remarkably more complex (Maloney & Konza, 2011; Riveros et al., 2012). The term “activity” in this study refers to what people do together and is modified by the context of the cultural and historical environment. This concept will be further discussed in Chapter 3.
Scholars show some consensus and some points of difference in relation to what PLCs are and what their key characteristics might be. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, educational research, addressing disadvantage and school change, is complex and challenging to conduct with an isolated focus (Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh et al., 2013; Singh, Märtsein & Glasswell, 2014). Secondly, the PLC is, by all accounts, a construct with many inter-related parts (Coburn, 2001). The common PLC characteristics, listed in Table 2.1, have been extracted from the works of Hord (2004; 2008), Thiessen (1992), Newell (1996), Levine and Marcus (2007), Shulman (2004), DuFour and Eaker (1998), and Fullan (1990), and are proposed (in some form) by all authors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2-1: Common PLC Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>PLCs are built on solid pillars of shared values, mission, vision and goals. The school community must agree upon a set of key principles for a reimageded future, which are referenced, reviewed, and referred to throughout all aspects of the school (DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour &amp; Eaker, 1998).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a PLC, there is a commitment to collective inquiry, learning and the application of learning to teaching. This requires that all staff members contribute to the process of learning new knowledge and then applying it. The community is constantly asking questions and testing methods (Thiessen, 1992; Shulman, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of a PLC experience supportive conditions for continuous improvement. This requires creating and sustaining an environment whereby all members feel safe; there is “a collegial atmosphere and collective learning” (Hord, 2004, p.7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLCs promote collaboration with colleagues for collective success. This requires trust within the school community, whereby feedback and assistance is given by staff members and leadership to support one another and the wider community in an effort for improvement and growth. Building the capacity to learn collaboratively rather than individually to complete tasks, is essential (Newell, 1996; Levine &amp; Marcus, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLCs exhibit strong leadership with supportive and shared power. This requires that the school administration drives improvement efforts through collaborating on developing shared goals and leading through alignment activities, constructive conversations and resourcing with smart tools. Leaders in a PLC share leadership, power and authority with others through encouraging collegial and facilitative participation. The staff contributes collectively to decision-making, with a commitment that their input will be valued (DuFour et al., 2006; Fullan, 1990).</td>
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In the coming sections, these key characteristics will be more thoroughly discussed.
2.3.1 Professional Learning Communities promote shared values, mission, vision and goals

Those who support the utility of PLCs in school reform stress the importance of developing a common direction for actions that includes input from all the key stakeholders (Tarnoczi, 2006). As early as 1993, Michael Fullan suggested that PLCs are built on solid pillars of shared values, mission, vision and goals and these drive learning and change. Fullan (1993) argued that, “the new problem of change...is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life” (p. 24). Fullan’s argument was that “purpose” is at the core of a successful PLC rather than procedures and templates for actions and interactions. This premise was supported by authors such as Newmann and Wehlage (1995).

Successful PLCs create and are created by, an environment by which members take ownership of the change that occurs within the community. When members feel that their voices are heard, the assumption is that reform is more likely to happen effectively and is sustainable. When frequent and regular learning occurs as a community, it allows all its members to keep on track for attaining the school’s goals and focus. Therefore, the school can more successfully move towards the goals that it has for its students.

Expanding upon these ideas, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many (2006) further unpacked the key ideas of shared mission, beliefs, values and goals as foundations of the PLC. DuFour et al. (2006), created a model which represents their views of both the fundamentals of a PLC and a process of establishing that foundation. Schools and school leaders should consider their “mission” before articulating a “vision,” espousing their “values” and making a commitment to goals. Each step in this process is elaborated with the ongoing reflection that propels the collective thinking and action forward (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker 2008; Fullan, 2001; 2007; Hord, 2004).

The notion of establishing a vision and mission based on values is not new. Dewey’s (1966) educational philosophy was powerfully concerned with reflection and how individuals adapt to a community’s shared vision and decision-making (Kilbane, 2009). According to Dewey (1966), engaging teachers to reflect upon their practices was likely to bring about benefits to the whole schooling system.
(Riveros et al., 2012). Simply put, a sharing of values, mission and collective commitments are fundamental components of PLCs and are pertinent to its success. The utility of the fundamental components is premised on the belief that such sharing allows teachers and leaders to reflect upon the shared purpose of the community. When members of the community can agree upon a mission for the school, responsibility extends to all members of that community. There is a commitment to the mission because each member has identified the values of the PLC, and thereby become accountable for its success. Mission consensus also provides a sense of commonality and open dialogue amongst community members as collective commitments have been established. Ongoing discussions allow for more direct conversations about efforts and teaching strategies that are targeted towards innovative practice and achievement for all students (Hord, 2004). Open and collaborative discussion is a complicated process which requires de-privatisation of beliefs and teaching practices.

Furthermore, Eaker and Keating (2008) built upon the premise that a common focus is essential to developing shared goals. They argue that school communities that are passionate and sincere about accepting the mission for high levels of learning for all, are then driven to pursue fundamentally different questions, solutions and work in significantly different ways. Members of successful PLCs collectively take responsibility to reflect upon how the goals of the school are being met and how both the community and its members address these challenges (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Leaders within the school play a major role in providing a common path for change.

Robinson and Timperley (2007) proposed that successful leadership practices in schools committed to reform are characterised by resilient views for collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement. While their work is concerned with leadership in schools, they argued that the values and shared commitment to a school are the most powerful tools for changing the culture of a school and the behaviour of its members. In 2007, Blanchard’s words echoed this:

Values provide guidelines on how you should proceed as you pursue your purpose and picture of the future. They need to be clearly described so that you know exactly what behaviours demonstrate that the value is being lived. Values need to be consistently acted on, or they are only good intentions (cited in Eaker & Keating, 2008, p. 17).
Eaker and Keating (2008) suggest that the collective commitments of a school are unlike the vision of a school; collective commitments are how the individual contributes with more direct focus, often the vision of a school describes an attractive future. They also suggest that the individual should use collective commitments as “if-then” statements (Eaker & Keating, 2008). For example, if we want to be a collaborative community, then we must all agree to contribute positively and accept responsibility for all our members (see also Heimans et al., 2015).

Overall, the school improvement research literature shows agreement around the importance of developing a school culture of shared positive beliefs and values around collectively making a difference to student learning attainment. It is these shared beliefs and values that hold a community together through challenging times and helps it expand throughout periods of improvement and achievement (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Individual values and histories impact the structure of a school’s culture, the confines within which all other members work. Teachers’ voices contribute to changing culture by altering patterns and decisions and working to support student achievement.

Furthermore, Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher (2005) note that shared vision and ownership of goals are created throughout the quality change process. They argue that the changes seek to establish the conditions for continuous improvement to make lasting and genuine reform (Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005). Thus, for there to be quality change, members of the PLC must continually reflect upon the agreed values on which the universal mission and collective commitments for the school are based.

### 2.3.2 Professional Learning Communities promote collaboration with colleagues for collective success

Most studies indicate the importance of collaborative efforts within a school which, in turn, contributes to the school’s overall culture (Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans et al., 2015; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Collegiality among teachers, measured by frequent constructive conversations and mutual support, were just some factors that provided a strong indication of implementation success, and “virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case” (Fullan, 2007, p. 138). Changes in school culture of greater collaboration, demonstrate that establishing a PLC contributes to a fundamental shift in how
teachers and leaders perceive their roles in the change process (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). All members of the community have to be actively involved and go “beyond the historical perceptions and traditional structures within education to significantly impact the teaching and learning process” in reform (Hord, 2004, p. 57). Piggot-Irvine (2012) further describes dialogue, inquiry and reflection as strongly favoured collaborative norms, “with the attendant processes and intended outcomes of respect for diversity of opinion, openness and ultimately trust” (p. 92).

Collaboration and school culture create elements of human interaction that underpins a PLC. In studies conducted by Supovitz (2002) and Supovitz and Chrisman (2003), researchers found that it was essential to focus on teachers’ collaborative actions when looking at changes in culture within schools. These works highlighted the fact that teachers who participated in teams or small communities that concentrated on instructional practices, also reported a change in the instructional culture. Teachers in other schools, who admitted that they did not use designated meeting times to focus on their teaching methods or strategies, did not see changes in the instructional culture of the school. However, Supovitz (2002) found that there was “strong and persistent evidence” that those team-based teachers “felt more involved in a variety of school-related decisions” than teachers in the non-team based schools (p. 164). Overall, there is a significant agreement in the literature that collaboration and reflection, support authentic and enduring learning (see Glasswell et al., 2016). In turn, it is posited, opportunities are created for participants to feel a sense of accomplishment in their success (Shulman, 2004; Wynn, Carboni & Patall, 2007).

### 2.3.3 Professional Learning Communities have a commitment to collective inquiry, learning and the application of learning to teaching

Ongoing collaborative teacher learning focused on current student learning is supported by many scholars (Darling-Hammond, 2005; DuFour et al., 2006; Graham, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Singh et al., 2013; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Märtisn & Glasswell, 2014). Darling-Hammond (2005) evidenced this in schools where teachers work in a collaborative setting to reflect on teaching and effective instructional practices. They found student academic results improved more quickly than those schools that were not functioning in a collaborative setting. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) stated that “teachers’ responses to today’s students and notions of good teaching practices are heavily mediated by the
character of the PLCs in which they work” (p. 8). Furthermore, studies of teachers where there was a focus on student learning and achievement within their communities, found that the collaborative efforts were more focused on meeting the needs of their students (Bolam et al., 2005; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

This notion that the focus of change is not of the school, but on the actions of the teachers in classrooms, was evident in a study conducted by Andrews and Lewis (2002). The study was of a secondary school in Queensland, Australia, involved in the reform called Innovation Design for Enhancing Achievement in Schools (IDEAS). The study found that shared understanding developed through professional learning could have an impact on action taken in the classroom, and potentially create a PLC. The researchers noted that continuation of action for change would be largely dependent on whether the wider school community could create a “broader understanding of these new relationships and new understanding about the image of teacher, student and their workplace” (p. 251).

This line of inquiry, by which teachers continuously reflect upon their professional capacity and need for new learning, also requires teachers to examine their theories of action (Robinson, 2014). Teachers must be willing to engage in inquiry, not just about student learning, but about their belief systems and values to resolve tensions related to their daily professional lives. Swart and Oswald’s 2008 study provides more insight, by way of studying five primary school teachers as they navigated their learning experiences when developing inclusive learning communities. The researchers presented two main findings: (a) that experienced teachers become apprentices in learning how to accommodate the dynamic, diverse learning needs of the children in their classrooms and (b) that teachers’ personal theories and moral fibre propel them to learn how to be inclusive (p. 96). Teachers were regularly engaged in inquiry that involved negotiating between their personal and professional identities and their beliefs about learning and caring.

As evidenced in the literature, it is clear that successful PLCs have a continual collaborative focus on meeting the learning needs of students (Bolam et al., 2005; Lee & Smith, 1996) and that communities of teachers play a role in improving professional practice (Lee & Smith, 1996; Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, 2001). Studies examining the PLC activities had the potential to link significant improvements in correlation with teaching effectiveness. These
improvements were dependent upon such factors as leadership and organisational practices, details of PLC activity meetings and the development of the community (Bolam et al., 2005; Graham, 2007).

However, creating opportunities for teams to work together for more effective practice is no guarantee of a PLC’s success. Graham (2007) found that even with the use of the PLC model in schools, there was no certainty that this would lead to exceptional teacher improvement. A school’s use of the PLC model can encourage and support teachers to de-privatise their practice and collaborate through discussion (Earl & Timperley, 2009), affecting the shift from a traditional structure to greater collaboration is the core of a PLC.

In short, schools that allow time for collaborative teacher activities, shared planning and relevant professional development activities, are more likely to be successful in meeting the needs of diverse students (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Studies that link the work of PLCs to improved student achievement have demonstrated that collaboration must focus continuously on student data (see also Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2013; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2014). Student learning is the primary concern of people operating in PLCs and “the more developed a PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with two key measures of effectiveness: pupil achievement and professional learning” (Bolam et al., 2005, p.146). The caveat remains however that working collaboratively within a PLC is part of the process and not the goal. Simply put, the goal must be to improve student achievement (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

2.3.4 Professional Learning Communities exhibit strong leadership and supportive and shared power

Leadership plays a significant role in creating and sustaining school culture (DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2008; Fullan, 2005; 2007; Wynn et al., 2007). In conceptualising how the leadership within a school can contribute to establishing and sustaining a PLC, there is a need to focus on shared power and a sense of common purpose (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). Researchers such as Speck (1999) and Roberts and Pruitt (2003) suggest that when developing genuine trust, those in leadership positions must create conditions for open and engaging dialogue with a variety of PLC members.
Furthermore, those in leadership positions must constantly “model trust-building behaviours”, be prepared to create change and provide a template for achievement (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p.40). Leadership also plays a significant role in de-privatising teacher practice, so that it can be observed and discussed. Comfortable collegiality and norms of autonomy are replaced with norms that support collective analysis, accountability (Robinson & Timperley, 2007) and professional growth for student improvement.

Leaders who implement key elements into school reform play a significant role in supporting the creation of an effective and sustained PLC (Bolam et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Wiley, 2001). A study conducted by Zepeda (2004) found that “one of the most critical aspects of discovering how schools become learning communities for adults is in understanding the vital role of the principal” (p. 150). Hayes, Mills, Mills and Lingard (2004) argue that the leadership style of a principal was less important compared to the willingness of the principal to contribute to the larger school community (Singh & Glasswell, 2016). The data from their study revealed that the principal is critical in establishing the conditions necessary for building an effective PLC.

Furthermore, due to the positional authority that the principal of a school has over staff and school resources, they consequently have the potential to inhibit or promote the growth of the school community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Studies of teachers at work in schooling contexts suggest that teachers react positively when they have the opportunity to contribute to the shared decision-making that will inevitably affect their everyday work and long-term goals (Hord, 2004). The converse is also true. Attempts to build an effective professional community to raise student achievement are weakened by the lack of knowledge of the behaviours and strategies needed for effective leadership and teaching (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009).

Wiley (2001) found that individual student achievement in maths increased where teachers experienced above average transformational leadership; while the effects were strongest in lower socio-economic schools. This study also found the effects of transformational leadership and professional communities to be interdependent; as leaders who understood the complexities of functioning as part of a PLC can provide educational direction (Wiley, 2001). Moreover, principals should be viewed as “leaders of leaders rather than sole leaders” (Crow, Matthews & McCleary,
1996, p. 44). Teachers and other key stakeholders often need to feel that they are a part of the larger solution and that more importantly their experiences and ideas are valued.

According to Sullivan and Glanz (2006), the type of old industrial leadership, where principals were the “management” and the workforce had to “obey” with the orders given from above, is destructive to the culture of the school community. Leaders who have too tight a hold on the decision-making in schools and those who are too loose with their decisions are thought to be equally ineffective (DuFour et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007).

Leadership within the school community at multiple levels establishes that the power of change does not sit solely with those in the front office. It is widely perceived that relying on one person to alter the system in isolated decision-making and policy reform is potentially destructive to the school’s structure as a learning community (Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Hayes et al. (2004) similarly argue that the style of a school leader is much less important than what is shaped from leadership in “both academic and social outcomes through a focus on pedagogy, a culture of care and related organisational process” (p. 520). Direction and goal setting are perceived to be at their most powerful when it comes from those who are trying to attain the goal; and creates an environment by which members feel congruence and worth (Latham & Locke, 2006).

The principal should be willing to empower individuals and share key leadership roles, or lasting reform will not be achieved. When collective commitments exist among the community, the administration’s role then becomes that of protector and promoter of the shared vision of the school (Singh & Glasswell, 2016). Fullan (2005) argues convincingly that effective leadership must spread throughout the educational community and be taken up by those who have vested interest or expertise in the given area.

Each time teachers are included in decision-making processes, they are reminded of their commitment to the PLC’s shared vision, rather than being asked to refer to the organisational chart or policy manual (Eaker & Keating, 2008). When teachers feel, empowered and are involved in the leadership of their school, they can make a change not only in their own classrooms, but can influence the larger
educational context (Nelson & Slavit, 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Leaders who have the opportunity to encourage leadership within others continuously are then effectively changing the knowledge of a critical mass (Fullan et al., 2005), thus signifying a sustainable and inclusive re-culturing process (Nelson & Slavit, 2008; Singh & Glasswell, 2016).

2.3.5 Professional Learning Communities promote supportive conditions for continuous learning

A supportive environment frequently reflects on the agreed upon mission, values, and collective commitments of a PLC. Members of a collaborative culture should be adept at disclosing their feelings and expressing their ideas and positions. The community should be a safe place in which members can contribute without fear of shame. When supportive conditions exist, and collaboration and sharing are positively supported, trust among the PLC members develops over time (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005; Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

Relationships are then critical elements for a functioning PLC. Building productive relationships requires balancing trust and challenge. In effective PLCs, participants show respect by taking the time to understand each other’s viewpoints. More importantly, they trust that they can probe meaning together and “challenge each other’s interpretations of the evidence and the reasoning on which the different viewpoints are based” (Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.10). Teachers are more likely to engage in the change process and participate in inquiry with others in a PLC when they feel respected and that their own lived experiences and theories of action are valued as unique (Earl & Timperley, 2009).

It is important to note here that supportive PLCs are not just about keeping everyone comfortable or happy. A supportive, respectful environment is as much about the challenge and developing trust; it is about advancing opportunities that intentionally and uniquely help to enhance teacher capacity for continuous improvement in a safe, professional way (L’Allier, Elish, Piper, & Bean, 2010). Teachers engage in “serious conversations” with colleagues and school leaders who seek new knowledge for new understandings (Feldman, 1999). There is a continual focus on substantive issues that align with the goals and objectives of the PLC, and teachers are given encouragement to reflect upon the role that they play and their responsibilities as professional educators. This supportive environment conveys a sense of greater purpose in their everyday work and
provides a safe environment whereby colleagues and leaders act consistently, all of which takes the time to establish and mature (Danielson, 2009). The next section will discuss the various phase of development, as described by researchers in the field.

2.4 Professional Learning Communities: phases of development and the development process

Advocates of PLCs say that they take time to grow. Their development may or may not be planned; they may vary in their make-up, or they may be successful only partially in pockets in schools (Eaker et al., 2002; Reilly, 2000).

An early contributor to this idea was Fullan (2007) who described a school change model characterising the process as having levels through which innovation progresses. According to this early work, schools adopted an idea of innovation and decided to initiate change. They operationalised the change, and a process of continual reflection and improvement follow. Figure 2.1 depicts the evolutionary phases of the PLC as it is initiated, implemented and finally institutionalised.

![Diagram of the process of change according to Fullan (2007)](image)

**Figure 2-1:** The process of change according to Fullan (2007) as depicted by Glasswell, Mostert, Judd & Mayn (2016)

At the bottom step of the staircase, leaders cultivate their ideas about a PLC that they want to develop within the school community. Many schools adopt the idea of innovation and decide to initiate change within the school. The difficulty is in addressing the details that accompany change. The school community may need to collectively decide how, when and why these innovations are occurring.
As the PLC develops, more people will have a clear vision of change, and ongoing inquiry will address questions and concerns of the community. Furthermore, the development of the PLC will promote implementation for a more sustained agenda built on the vision and informed by an iterative cycle of evidence. For further development, a critical mass of the school community, not just the leaders, must be committed to the ongoing change process so that the momentum does not diminish.

The institutionalisation stage exhibits a fully functioning PLC that is inclusive, collaborative and shares collective responsibility. A critical mass within the PLC engages in a cycle of improvement that is now the centre of the school’s ethos, organisation and decision-making. Fullan (1985) observed that schools rarely moved on from the implementation stage of the reform process to that of institutionalisation. That is, schools, rather than becoming self-reflexive, problem-solving entities, became entrenched in simply operationalizing change.

Some twenty years later, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggested a similar development trajectory. They identified three different stages of development of PLCs that schools attain: Typical, Strong Traditional and Learning Communities. In the Typical (weak) Community, there is a tradition of autonomy in teaching that works against the formation of a shared technical culture. The next stage is a Strong Traditional Community where teachers coordinate their work around student assessments and decisions about student placements in classes and groups. In the final and most sophisticated model, the Learning Community, teachers function as a team, authentically collaborating to identify collective goals and develop strategies for achieving them. Student achievement is at the forefront of decisions that the leadership and teachers make. Teachers are continually inquiring about teaching and learning the process and are supported by leadership in the shared vision for student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

These models provide some useful ways of conceptualising PLCs at various phases of development, but there is still much to be understood about how a PLC moves through the process of “becoming”. We might also ask how and why parts of a school function more collectively and efficiently than others. The proposed models provide a basis for understanding the complexities of a change process that is as much about the “human aspects” – the people – as it is about structures.
Studies from the 1980s and 1990s agree that factors such as “financing, time availability, initial training, leadership, participation and degree of support impacted on innovation success in schools” (Perillo, 2007). The tensions that exist within a school at various levels often play a huge role in whether or not a PLC will develop and be sustained within the school.

2.5 The evidence of impact of professional learning communities on student learning

Given the enthusiastic acceptance of the concept of the PLC in educational systems and their policies, we might reasonably ask what evidence there is to support the advocacy of a PLC approach to school change. Studies indicate positive effects on student learning, but few can attribute gains in student performance to any one factor in a school (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas., 2006; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Wiley, 2001). Identifying key factors affecting positive effects on learning is limited, because factors may be interrelated, influencing the performance of students in school, and may exist outside of a school’s control (Hattie, 2009). Consequently, unless carefully designed and rigorously monitored studies are put in place, the benefits of any PLC may be difficult to measure objectively and reliably (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

Some studies, however, have reported relationships between teacher participation in PLCs and the improvement of student achievement (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998). This is unsurprising if we consider the assertion by Bolam et al., (2005) that in effective PLCs, “pupil learning was the foremost concern” (p. 146). These scholars suggest that PLCs, at a more mature level of development, demonstrated a stronger correlation between student achievement and teacher professional learning. Indeed, teachers evidenced clear connections between their professional learning within the PLC and the changes they made to their practice, thereby impacting the learning of their students.

Correlations with student achievement rising to higher levels with positive professional communities have been evidenced in a range of studies (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1996; Stoll et al., 2006; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Wiley, 2001). Research conducted by Phillips (2003)
reported a focus on high-quality professional development, research-based literature, shared leadership, collaborative process and context; taken together impacted the achievement scores over a three-year time span (p.257).

Contributing to these findings, the school also saw an increase of ratings on a state-wide standardised test from 50 percent of students passing the subject areas of math, science, reading, social studies and science in 1999-2000, to over 90 percent of students passing in each subject area in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (Phillips, 2003).

Less compelling results were evidenced by a study conducted in the Netherlands (Visscher & Witziera, 2004). It was concluded that while shared goals, joint decision-making, shared responsibilities, consultation, and advice were important criteria within a school, they were insufficient to improve educational practice and student achievement (Visscher & Witziera, 2004). Critics of this study explain that the criteria were limited and included only minimal facets of “authentic” PLC characteristics as described earlier. However, this study does highlight the argument that more empirical research must be conducted to understand the effects of a PLC on student achievement, and whether specific elements of a PLC are more vital than others in creating change to support student achievement.

While there is hope that teachers working collaboratively in a PLC will significantly transform schools and student outcomes, some authors raise concerns about how they might do this. Riveros et al. (2012) and Tarnoczi’i (2006) sociological analyses call into question the notion of teacher commitment in PLCs, likening the pressure more to coercive conformity to group norms than to genuine collaborative commitment. The work of Maloney and Konza (2011) highlighted the difficulties associated with developing the social cohesion and professional commitment required to claim the existence of a PLC. They cited problems with teacher attendance at meetings, reticence to voice dissent and the perceived value of group learning as reasons for an ebb and flow of engagement, collaboration and participation within the PLC (Maloney & Konza, 2011).

2.6 Conclusion
This chapter has argued that PLCs are complex social entities with associated activities that reflect and construct their cultures. Supporters argue PLCs are integral to successful change processes and acknowledge the potential of PLCs to move schools forward and to create new ways of interacting to create new futures.
The literature presented in this chapter suggests that problematic within these views is finding sufficient explanation of how, what should, or might happen during the PLC development. This thesis is concerned with just this issue.

In the next chapter, I will explore Activity Theory, namely Cultural Activity Theory (CHAT), as a theoretical and methodological tool that can assist in understanding the processes of actions and interactions that create changes in school cultures. I will argue that CHAT can provide a means, or conceptualisation, by which we can examine a PLC as an evolving activity system.
Chapter 3: Activity Theory: Concepts for Understanding Complex Actions in Context

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that little is known about the processes by which PLCs form and grow in schools and schooling systems, and little is known about the complex social interactions through which teachers and leaders engage throughout the evolving PLC process (as discussed in Chapter 2 and shown in Table 2.1, p. 16). This set of elements and the interactions among and between them need to be understood through conceptual premises. In turn, more could be known about how these elements coalesce (Larkin, 2011) to develop a PLC focused on student achievement.

This study was designed to investigate the complexities of actions and interactions as a state primary school embarked on a journey to become a PLC focused on raising reading achievement. The aim of this study was to develop new understandings about how aspects of the PLC in the school are perceived and negotiated by participants. The analysis was conducted of the complex, highly contextualized and mediated nature of teachers’ ideas and practices as they worked together to establish, and act on a common goal.

As indicated in Chapter 1, Activity Theory (AT) is the conceptual and methodological framework underpinning this study. This chapter engages with academic literature that pertains to the historical and theoretical development of AT, particularly the tools used and the place of human agency in socio-cultural theory. I will briefly trace the historical and theoretical development of AT over time to distinguish among the generations of AT, broadly delineated by the work of Vygotsky (1978), Leont’ev (1978) and Engeström (1987). The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the usefulness of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a conceptual framework and methodological tool suitable for research in an educational context, specifically when exploring how a school’s PLC develops.
CHAT provides further value in describing and discussing the tensions and transformations that occurred as this school endeavours to adopt characteristics of a PLC. In this current study, transformations are understood to cause the activity to manifest into an alternative version of the activity from which was initially instituted.

### 3.2 Activity in a social context

Previous researchers have drawn on AT (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1978) and CHAT (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999) as theoretical concepts to help illuminate the complexity of educational research, specifically classroom teaching and learning (Gutierrez, et al., 2001; Moll, 2001). Throughout the conceptual development of AT over time (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999; Leont'ev, 1978), it remains a useful tool for analysis of the complexity of social interaction. In this study, I explore how participants engage in goal-oriented activities which impact upon the PLC.

Using AT as a conceptual framework and a methodological tool to study the subjects (people involved in an action), objects (subjects acting on an object to achieve some outcome) and artefacts (anything that scaffolds the process of the subject-object activity) through the interaction between them. These interactions were viewed as inter-dependent and culturally bound parts of a larger system (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Furthermore, from an AT perspective, an activity involves doing something that is motivated by a biological need or by a culturally constructed need (Gavelek & Bresnahan, 2009). An illustrative example includes the need to teach teachers to become more aware of cultural learning needs (Bourke & McGee, 2012). According to Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014), in AT the “the relationship between the subject (human doer) and object (the thing being done) forms the core of activity” (p. 9). Thought and action, therefore, are understood as the products of humans engaging in goal-oriented activities that are mediated by a variety of cultural tools or artefacts. The learning that takes place is mediated in complex ways by the development of conceptual tools (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 1997).

In educational contexts, AT provides a model for understanding the dynamic nature of mediated relationships between subjects (teachers and/or coaches/researchers),
objects (tasks/goals), and artefacts (language, texts, school policy, etc.). Such social settings thereby mediate cognitive activity, or learning and development. These settings, or sites for social interaction, are characterised by the presence of six basic dimensions; i.e. subjects, mediating artefacts, objects, rules, community and division of labour (Cole & Engeström, 1993). These aspects explored in further detail later in this chapter, work in concert to form predictable or identifiable kinds of activities. In this way, AT provided this present study with opportunities to compare professional learning activities (or tasks) by documenting how these dimensions change from one context to another. By tracking the development enacted in particular activities, I was able to explore and better understand the tensions that existed in the change process within the activity systems, to develop a deeper understanding of how a school develops as a PLC.

3.3 Activity Theory: generative ideas in context

It is useful to view AT as a framework of connecting principles, as it adds to our conceptual understanding of the value of AT and its use in this study (Larkin, 2011). In the following section, I will elaborate more on the changes in AT over time. Activity theory is based on “socio-cultural and cultural-historical epistemologies which suggest that humans live in an environment where the objective features of their responses/actions in the environment are culturally and historically shaped” (Larkin, 2011, p. 45). As a way of organising, I will use the meditational triangle as a metaphor for explaining the complexities of a school developing a PLC. Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis (2007) consider the triangle as a useful theoretical metaphor designed to shift theoretical thinking away from binary representation to triadic, mediated accounts of human actions and development. The triangle is one of the most persistent metaphors in developmental, cultural and social psychology. Furthermore, Zittoun et al. (2007) find “this peculiar geometric metaphor has been used to articulate the relationship of a subject with another person and the world (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002); the relationship between three persons (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 2001); and the relationship between a person, ideas, and concrete objects (Carpendale & Müller, 2004)” (p. 208).

On the following pages, I briefly explore the genesis of AT from its first generation to its third. Further description will be provided concerning the underpinnings scholars
used to modify the theoretical model over time. Subsequent generations of AT have come to place increasing emphasis on the cultural and historical contexts in which learning and development are situated. Further, these generations are not meant to be pejorative but should be taken as existing in their own right (Larkin, 2011).

3.3.1 Historical origins of Activity Theory
Social cultural theories are strongly influenced by Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), who found that constructivism identifies learning as the process of making sense of information within a learner’s authentic context and experiences. Vygotsky (in Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p.2) offers a social theory of learning with core assertions (see Table 3.1).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3-1: Vygotsky’s Social Learning Core Assertions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Learning is mediated first on the inter-psychological plane between a person and other people and their cultural artefacts and then appropriated by individuals on the intra-psychological plane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning involves mentoring provided by more experienced and knowledgeable persons, and this meaning is constructed through joint activity rather than being transmitted from teachers to learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The concepts, content knowledge, strategies and technologies that are, the meditational tools or artefacts which are constructed historically and culturally and used in the activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning takes place in the zone of proximal development where context and capacity are intertwined. Teaching should extend the student beyond what he or she can do without assistance, but not beyond the links of what the student already knows</td>
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Though there are conceptual variations among theorists, a shared emergent theme was their focus “to seek to analyse the development of consciousness within practical and social activity setting” where their “emphasis is on the psychological impacts of the organised activity and the social conditions and systems which are produced in and through the activity” (Daniels, 2007, p. 189). Exploring participant-mediated action, interactions between the member of the system and the changing tools and social others (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) is significant in trying to understand this social learning. The impact of the activity on the PLC, and consequently the participant, is analysed through their active involvement in making meaning of the ever-changing environment.
Vygotsky (1978) began with a more simplistic view. Vygotsky claimed that “human learning took place in the form of interactions among signs, mediating artefact/tools and the individual” (Yamagata-Lynch & Haundenschild, 2009, p. 508) leading to an outcome (Nussbaumer, 2011). The process is represented in the basic mediation triangle in Figure 3.1 below.

The basic mediation triangle was Vygotsky’s attempt to explain human development which was not dependent on the “dualistic stimulus-response association” (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009, p. 508). In Figure 3.1, the ‘subject’ in the mediation triangle refers to the individual or persons who are engaged in the activity. The ‘mediating artefacts,’ also often referred to as tools; can include others materials physical and non-material (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The ‘object’ is essential to the goal of the activity. Kozulin (1996) recognises that the interactions among the subjects, tools, and object are the means of interpersonal communication that helps them make new meaning from the world around them.

The central concept and basic activity depicted by Vygotsky, who had originally emphasised the individual; was eventually expanded by A.N. Leont’ev, a student of Vygotsky. Leont’ev (1981) incorporated the societal, cultural and historical dimensions, accounting for human functioning, still grounded in Marxism. For
Leont'ev (1981), “The human individual’s activity is a system of social relations and does not exist without those social relations” (p.46-47) and the individual is emphasised in the activity. By expanding on the work of Vygotsky, Leont’ev included *community* and *division of labour* which went beyond the individual to the collective activity moving it towards a systems approach. This model recognised both the historical-cultural traditions and experiences and the cognitive and physical processes (Nussbaumer, 2011).

Leont’ev made his object-practical activity the cornerstone of the unit analysis and the “explanatory principle that determines the genesis, structure, and contents of the human mind” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189). Unlike Vygotsky and other theorists, Leont’ev never expanded the graphic representation of the model although Engeström (1999) has provided his conceptual depiction of what Leont’ev’s basic model of activity might have looked like (Figure 3.2 below).

![Figure 3-2: Leont’ev’s basic model of activity (Engeström, 1999, p. 30)](image)

**3.3.2 Third generation Activity Theory: Cultural Historical Activity Theory**

Expanding on Leont'ev's theoretical model enabled Engeström to analyse the complex interactions and inter-relationships which could explain the social and collaborative nature of actions; emphasising the individual within the activity system
Activity theory evolved to its third generation which is drawn on for this study (Engeström, 1999, 2007).

This theoretical iteration came to be known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory or CHAT (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999; Wells, 2002). Cole (1996) maintained that in CHAT, learning and knowing the cognitive activity was extended to include a more holistic view of the activity, incorporating the mediating of artefacts, communities and their ideas and the different roles and interaction of those involved (Mada, 2010; Hutchins, 1995; Lave, 1988). CHAT, therefore, takes into account not only how signs and tools mediate how humans act in the world, but also how the world works upon them. From a CHAT perspective, activity systems have their historical trajectories rooted in cultural practices. CHAT is useful as a theoretical framework for this study because it includes both human subjects and socially derived tools. These tools can include routine collaborative activities which offer ways to explore how teachers and leaders engage and learn in developing a PLC focused on improved student achievement.

As applied to this study, the theoretical socio-cultural concepts are used in the construction of this research design. This is evidenced through providing participants with the opportunity to respond and interact with others in this study. Further, participants’ views on their experiences are explored to provide new understandings about how aspects of the PLC, including professional learning, were perceived and negotiated by participants within the activity system (Creswell, 2009).

Moreover, the triangular model further developed by Engeström (1987), is used in activity system analysis. Figure 3.3 (see page 38) then depicts the third generation of the mediation triangle highlighting the interaction between the six inter-connected elements that encompass every activity system. As previously stated, all activity systems comprise of these six components: subjects, objects, mediating tools/instruments, rules, community and division of labour (Engeström, 1987).
It is how these six components interact that makes up the activity system as a whole. In CHAT, the *subject* refers to the people engaged in the action; the *object/outcome* relates to how the subjects act on an object to achieve some result; the *tools/instruments* refer to anything that scaffolds the process of the subject-object activity; the *community* is those who share the purpose of the activity; the *division of labour* is the way the roles, functions, and tasks are identified and distributed; and the *rules* regulate the activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

To recognise how these components are connected, I will provide a simple example. Julian State School (JSS) is the subject engaged in a goal-directed behaviour of supporting students in the class who sought to improve their reading fluency. The ‘subject-object’ relationship is mediated by the ‘tools/instruments’ which can be both ideational and material. For example, the teacher’s current goal-directed action is mediated by knowledge of the students’ ability levels, as well as the fluency practices to implement in the classroom; (among others) are tools/instruments. Subjects (people engaged in an action) are governed by rules (explicit and implicit), which guide them through the decision-making that accompanies the activity. It is a clear expectation from JSS leaders that teachers will modify practices in their classrooms to meet the needs of all learners and improve student achievement.
Also, in engaging in fluency practices, there are explicit guidelines for what students should be doing while involved in these practices which must be tightly adhered to for students to benefit from the practice. The *community* in this example includes the students of the class and other teachers who participate in supporting this program. The “who” and “what” in the activity refers to the *division of labour*. In this example, the teacher would be the most active to model and organise the fluency practices. The Year Level Coordinator (YLC) (the role of the YLC is further outlined in Appendix A, p. 186), would assist teachers in better meeting the needs of students and provide current feedback on student achievement data.

Activity systems analysis examines the contradictions that exist within the system that is contextual and systematic; and the individual tensions that arise as a component of the activity. There are many individuals (other cohort teachers and leaders) who contribute to the activity at various levels and often this can become a point of tension within the activity system. According to Engeström (1993), this human activity can produce tension within the activity systems which are caused by ‘contradictions.’ When these contradictions occur, conditions of an activity put the subject in adverse situations that become secondary to achieving the object (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Yamagata-Lynch (2010) explains that these contradictions/tensions can affect the subjects’ ability to attain the object. For example, in theory, a new teacher to the school is informed by a peer that she must use fluency practices in her classroom to close the gap of struggling readers and enhance student achievement. However, this teacher is unfamiliar with fluency practices and which of the available practices she should implement given the varied needs of students in her classroom. Consequently, it is difficult for her to attain the goal of improving fluency for struggling readers, causing a contradiction in the system.

The application of CHAT is also used as a way to describe the role of the investigator, often acting as the participant and interventionist (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This allows the researcher to explore the participants’ activity and to assist in effecting change within the system (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). At JSS, participation in the Smart Education Partnership (SEP) (Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans, Singh & Glasswell, 2015; Singh, & Glasswell, 2016; Singh et al., 2012;
Singh & Harris, 2010; Singh et al., 2016; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Märtins & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013), funded under the Australian Research Council Linkage scheme, meant my role as a researcher was complicated by the aims and the goals of my study; as I was also employed as a School Based Researcher on the SEP project. My Education Doctorate was a component of the SEP project, however the research design for the SEP project did not include the in-depth study of the actions and interactions of the PLC at any schools. The present study provided further analysis of the impact of the SEP activity on a case study school’s PLC. My role within the present study will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

Other researchers have expanded on Engeström’s notion, using CHAT and activity systems analysis in a variety of contexts and purposes (Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire, & Keatin, 2002; Bourke & McGee, 2012; Douglas & Ellis, 2011; Orland-Barak & Becher, 2011; Tsui & Law, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The following sections will discuss the influences that contradictions in the activity have on the larger system.

3.4 Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a tool for analysis

More recent developments in AT have come to place increasing emphasis on the cultural and historical contexts in which learning and development are situated (Madda, 2010). CHAT proponents assert that activity systems have their historical trajectories rooted in cultural practices (e.g. Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999; Wells, 2002). Learning and development, therefore, come into being through social settings that include the mediating artefacts existing as an element of cultural practice. In CHAT, cognitive activity—learning and knowing—is extended to include a more holistic view of the activity, including the mediating artefacts, the communities and their values, and the different roles and interaction of those involved (Cole, 1996; Hutchins, 1995; Lave, 1988). By deploying CHAT as an analytic tool, I can better understand the interplay of individuals’ goal-directed actions and the multi-layered contexts in which they occur (Cole, 1996).

My use of the CHAT framework as a meditational tool in this thesis is predicated on two broad assumptions about its use. First, the activities I examine serve as the core
unit for analysis. I am interested in whether teachers come to adopt or reject suggested innovations in practice and concerned about how these decisions are made and what influences them. Investigation in this manner was a departure from the psychological training of my undergraduate years when I focused mostly on individual human actions as the unit for analysis.

In this current work, my goal is to contribute understanding to the “how” of PLCs, and the processes by which examined innovations to improve practice, are reconstructed by teachers and come alive in classrooms. The PLC literature creates a picture of a largely unproblematic innovation process that is more or less developed on a continuum of becoming, limited by strong theoretical concepts or evidence of effectiveness (see Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002; Fullan, 2007). Other scholars, interested in the situated nature of human actions, recognise that the complexity of educational innovations in institutional activity systems, such as schools, results in new, perhaps unplanned forms of activity (Engeström, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). At the time the present study was undertaken, few studies had provided theoretically driven accounts of the tensions inherent in PLC processes and the interplay among them.

As Bourke and McGee (2012) note that in the school change process, the introduction and implementation of an innovation can be “unpredictable and challenging” (p. 217). It may also be fraught with technical and emotional challenges related to the change process. They argue further that “part of this complexity lies in the unpredictable directions that innovations can take in diverse contexts, which not only make the implementation challenging but also how to analyse the process” (p. 218). Bourke and McGee’s (2012) use of CHAT as a methodological tool has, they claim, superior utility in practice contexts. This is because of its potential to provide researchers with opportunities to examine “the closely related nature of many features of cultural innovations and it allows them to unravel and investigate the tensions between the many interwoven threads” (p.218); like that akin in the present study.

The second assumption is related to understanding individuals and individuals’ actions, which are always situated within a context. It can be argued that individuals
are impossible to figure out without attending to that context. Therefore, any analysis of human actions, such as teacher learning and instructional innovation, must also attend to contextual features of the activity in which those actions occur. In the confines of this study, contextual features refer to the culturally and linguistically diverse student population, whose low student achievement and attendance influenced the learning and teaching that occurred at JSS. JSS teachers faced challenges of meeting the needs of their students due these related features; inevitably impacting the development of the PLC. Funding provided from the federal government provided opportunity for schools, like that of JSS, to allocate further support to address key areas of concern.

Selecting CHAT as a tool for analysis in this work was a purposeful action, driven as much by my goals as the context in which the research was undertaken. As Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis (2007) state,

The metaphors which we use in science are not mere communicative tools facilitating the communication of complex ideas. Rather, they are constitutive of those ideas (Leary, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Complex ideas, including scientific theories, are not ‘mirrors of nature’ (Rorty, 1979), but semiotic artefacts which mediate researchers’ relation to a given object of study. In other words, theories are part of the researcher’s apparatus or tool kit (Mead, 1936, p. 351). (cited in Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis, 2007, p. 209)

In summary, the power of socio-cultural theories is that they allow researchers to acknowledge “the complexities involved in human activity in natural settings” (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009, p. 508). In understanding schools undergoing the development of PLCs, the analytic stance afforded by such theories can help researchers understand the knowledge that participants construct, encounter and attain as they engage in complex actions in a social context (Creswell, 2009).

3.5 Contradictions and transformations
CHAT as a theoretical and analytical framework allows for examination of activity as complex; and further investigation of disruptions in the system, known contradictions,
can occur. Contradictions, when considered within the process of creating and understanding change, are revealing (Bourke & McGee, 2012). The notion of contradictions within an activity is among Engeström’s (2008) contributions to the advancement of AT.

Contradictions are usually identified as two or more components of the system (Engeström, 2008) and arise when there are tensions on an activity which affect the interactions between its parts. Inner contradictions occur when one of the elements of the system changes or develops, causing tensions with other elements due to interaction with, and influences from, other activity systems. The activity system is constantly working through the contradictions which then become a point of transformation within it.

Table 3.2 (on the next page) describes the four levels of contradictions that Engeström (1987) identified as sources of tension. These four levels allowed researchers to gain a better understanding of the inner contradictions that impose tensions on the participants’ work environment; and assist them in the identification of these tensions to overcome them (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). In activity systems, these contradictions are conscious and result in new forms of the activity emerging as solutions to the contradictions which occurred (Roth & Lee, 2007).
Table 3-2: Four levels of contradictions in activity systems

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contradiction Level</th>
<th>Engeström’s Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 1: Primary Contradiction</td>
<td>When participants encounter more than one value system attached to an element within an activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: Secondary Contradiction</td>
<td>When an activity participant encounters a new element of an activity and the process assimilating the new element in the activity brings about the conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: Tertiary Contradiction</td>
<td>When activity participants face conflicting situations by adopting what is believed to be a newly advanced method for achieving the object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4: Quaternary Contradiction</td>
<td>When activity participants encounter changes to an activity that result in creating conflicts with adjacent activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The primary contradiction may be internal to the central entity, where the inner contradictions of an object may eventuate in the “different symptomatic ways which the individual may experience and understand it” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 203). For example, in theory, a teacher undertakes professional development to build capacity around teaching literacy effectively. However, when implementing the new strategy, the teacher finds that it is not an effective approach for the students. The inner contradictions of some object may express itself in the different symptomatic ways. The teacher, achieving an increase in literacy scores on formal assessment data, is a primary contradiction that often “uneasily mediates between learning for learning’s sake or for earning (future) rewards” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p.203).

Secondary contradictions may exist between two essential things. For example, the demand for teachers to collaborate with colleagues across year levels (object) ignores the rule of using every minute of teaching and learning time in the classroom to improve student achievement.

At the tertiary contradiction level, the contradiction may exist between the primary object (motive) and the object of a culturally more developed form of the activity (Roth & Lee, 2007). For example, in theory, there is a difference in the object, or the motive, of the group of Year 10 teachers who attend voluntary professional
development newly introduced. The processes of assimilating this new aspect into some group’s daily activity create tensions. Consequently, the cohort of Year 7 teachers realised that sending a representative to the professional development to report back to the group would provide more time for them to manage daily work-related expectations and requirements at the school. The Year 7 teachers tried to implement a newly advanced method of achieving the object, however, without having attended the professional development themselves, curtailed their effectiveness to transcend the new strategies into the classroom.

At a quaternary contradictions level, there may be tensions that exist between the central activity and other related activities (Roth & Lee, 2007). An example, of this is a new graduate from a teacher education program (System 1) who is hired to teach Year 3 (a critical formative testing year in Australia) at a school using a set of exemplar school curriculum plans across three subject areas called “Curriculum into the Classroom” (C2C) (System 2). The new teacher is required to teach but is unprepared to teach using this exemplar. When tested, students in this classroom performed at a lower level than other like students in all three subject areas. The analysis of “inner contradictions can gain insights into how larger socio-political and economics struggles mediate local practices, subjectivities and therefore learning among children and adults” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p 204). The identification of the inner contradictions of the activity system provides insight into the disturbances within the activity and potential innovations as an emerging zone of proximal development of the interacting activity system (Engeström, 2008; Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978).

### 3.6 Interacting Activity Systems

As previously discussed, Engeström (1996) recognises the importance of attempting to understand the interactions among joint activities and their outcomes to resolve contradictions which created the joint activities (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009).

Figure 3.4 (on the next page) depicts two interacting activities initiated by different subjects (Subject 1 and Subject 2), but are bounded by the activities’ shared objects (Object 3). Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild (2009) propose that a chain reaction
from these joint activities can lead to contradictions for both the individual and the joint activity.

Figure 3-4: Interacting activity systems in CHAT (adapted from Engeström, 1996; Yamagata-Lynch & Haundenschild, 2009)

Activity systems analysis, as discussed earlier, allows for the analysis of a unit at various levels of the activity system for systematic relations between the activities and other activity systems. Figure 3.5 (see page 47) shows a simplistic example of how leaders’ activity, teachers’ activity, and students’ activity are all inter-related.
Figure 3-5: Systemic relations between sample activities

For example, the leaders make budget cutbacks for materials (paint, books, crafts, etc.) for a teacher to use in her classroom at her discretion every school year. The influence of the leadership's activities directly impacts the tools that the teachers use in the activity which inevitably affects the access to tools that the students might use. Barab et al. (2002) demonstrate two levels of units of analysis; the first unit was a series of goal-directed actions. The second unit was the larger object-oriented activities. Barab et al. (2002) refer to a nested system, where a component of one activity system is included into another new activity system. The nested system is useful because it captures how a previous or concurrent activity can affect another activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2011, p. 50). This analysis is valuable to consider when following team relations within a participatory learning setting, much like in this study (Yamagata-Lynch, 2011). Activity systems analysis allows for each activity unit to be identified, analysed and used as a reference point for further systemic analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2011). It is through this systemic analysis that researchers are able to greater understand contextual influences (Yamagata-Lynch, 2011).
3.7 Appropriateness of CHAT to conceptualise Professional Learning Community development

CHAT provides a coherent, yet fluid theoretical framework with a range of practical research tools that can be used to investigate complex sites within a school. In the present study, CHAT was used as the conceptual framework and the methodological paradigm to understand the PLC context better during and after the introduction of new ‘tools.’

As has been argued here, Activity Theory, and more specifically CHAT, can be usefully employed as to understand the complex factors which influence how schools develop as PLCs. The following questions are used to direct the research:

- What are JSS teachers’ and leaders’ experiences of the PLCs centred on improved student achievement?
- What impact do the key characteristics of the PLC have on teaching and learning?
- How do tensions in activity transform the activity? How might these tensions be resolved through negotiated activity?

In exploring these research questions, activity theory affords opportunities to examine PLC activities (or tasks) by documenting how these dimensions change from one context to another as interacting activity system; thereby tracking the development enacted in particular activity settings. These trajectories will include WOW (peer observation experiences), Reflective Practice Meetings (RPMs), professional development, year level meetings and increased use of literacy innovations in the classroom. These activities will be examined to provide new understandings about how aspects of the PLC at JSS are perceived and negotiated by participants.

It is proposed that Activity Theory offers a range of conceptual tools which are utilised to understand problems which were identified in Chapter 2. These problems included a gap in the understanding of how the development of a PLC looks in the context of a ‘real’ school environment and the experiences of the teacher’s and leader’s engagement in the process. In this study, “the constructed teacher conversation”
captured and represented the tensions within the activity system (Smitt, Fritz & Mabalane, 2010). Throughout the chapter, I argue that CHAT, as an analytical framework, provides further insight into how teachers and the leaders within JSS see themselves as professionals, and their roles within the workplace (activity systems) through such construction (Engeström, 1991).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter started with a review of the conceptual development of AT over time and discussed both the appropriateness of using CHAT as a framework and activity systems analysis as a conceptual premise for understanding the contradictions and tensions that influence the development of a PLC within a school. In this chapter, I discussed how I sought to analyse the development of negotiation and change within the context of the social activity settings; with “emphasis on psychological impacts of organised activity and social conditions and systems which are produced in and through such activity” (Daniels, 2001, p. 84). The dynamic relationships that exist between these dimensions can also be explored to reveal contradictions that exist and thereby precipitate change or development within the PLC activity system. The affordances of AT as a tool for investigating PLCs are discussed in Chapter 4, where the methodology and procedures used to explore the research questions are further presented.
Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Introduction
This chapter explains the rationale behind this study and the guiding research questions which has been sought to address. The chapter outlines the context of this present study, the various data collection methods deployed as well as the description of two PLC activities which have been explored. The objective is to more carefully examine the complex social actions in developing a PLC, through the lens of a school referred to as Julian State School (JSS). This chapter will also discuss the methods used in analysing the data and provides a theoretical account of the methodology in this study. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations deemed relevant for this research and indicates how issues of reliability were overcome.

4.2 Research aims
In Chapter 2, I described how advocates of PLCs often make bold claims about the value and utility of PLCs in school change initiatives. For example:

The use of PLCs is the best, least expensive; most professionally rewarding way to improve schools. In both education and industry, there has been a prolonged, collective cry for such collaborative communities for more than a generation now. Such communities hold immense, unprecedented hope for schools and the improvement of teaching (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2005, p. 128).

Such claims are often at the root of system-wide movements for the adoption of PLCs as a change strategy. Consequently, what is problematic is when researchers make claims that schools are PLCs or when districts write development goals for all schools to become PLCs, without consideration about what these claims means in practice (Tarnoczi, 2006).

While the concept is heralded as providing “unprecedented hope,” there is insufficient evidence to posit that all successful schools exhibit core concepts and practices of a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Dufour, Dufour &
Eaker, 2008; Hord, 2007; Thiessen, 1992; Shulman, 2004). In addition, researchers know little about the processes by which PLCs form and grow in the “real worlds” of schools and schooling systems (Fullan, 2000; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2012) and how they might impact student learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

This current study was designed to investigate how PLCs develop and their consequent effects on student learning. Taking a case study approach to one Australian primary school, I describe the ways in which it engaged with the PLC concept. This study draws on the available research and professional literature as a way of identifying the accepted five characteristics of PLCs, which were described in Chapter 2, and displayed in Table 2.1 (p. 16): leadership and supportive and shared power; shared values, mission, vision and goals; collective inquiry and application of learning; supportive conditions (human and physical); and collaboration with colleagues (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1990; Hord, 2004; Shulman, 2004; Thiessen 1992). I also describe and discuss the tensions and transformations that occurred as this school adopted the PLC approach.

As discussed in Chapter 1, my aim of this study was to explore how a PLC, centred on improving student learning achievement, developed through the experiences of teachers and leaders, as I followed them for one school year. This chapter explains the methods used to generate and analyse qualitative data used to answer the following research questions:

- What are JSS teachers’ and leaders’ experiences of the PLCs centred on improved student achievement?
- What impact do the key characteristics of the PLC have on teaching and learning?
- How do tensions in activity transform the activity? How might these tensions be resolved through negotiated activity?

Specifically, the project analysed the interactions of members of the school, as they worked together on these shared goals, for the development of the PLC.

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4.3 Smart Education Partnership research design

This current research was undertaken within the context of a larger study, the “Smart Education Partnership Project” (SEP). In the next section, I will briefly describe the nature of the SEP methodological approach and SEP research phases in a school setting. These sections are followed by a description of this study’s methodological approach in order to outline the broader context and the contribution of this case study to the larger SEP project.

4.3.1 The Smart Education Partnerships (SEP) project methodology: co-inquiry and design-based research

The SEP project was a federally-funded (through the Australian Research Council linkage scheme) research and development partnership for district/school level reform. The SEP initiative, known locally as “Literacy Lessons for Logan Learners,” was designed to foster a shared commitment between the local university and a cluster of 12 schools to enhance the literacy (reading) development of students and improve teaching quality in a low socio-economic region in the state of Queensland. It also aimed to provide specific support for students from disadvantaged areas (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2009). It harnessed funds from the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Initiative and the Australian Research Council (receiving $877,631, plus industry contribution, $447,855 cash, and $744,483 in kind, over three years) to develop a problem-solving, collaboration focused on literacy improvement. National Partnership funding (DETE, 2010) supported a range of school-level and broader reforms that addressed: improvement in low socio-economic status schools; schools performing poorly in the areas of numeracy and literacy; and schools that identified as both poor performing and in low socio-economic areas. For three and a half years, SEP team members worked with 12 low socio-economic schools, including over 290 teachers who taught in excess of 3,500 school students (Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans et al., 2015; Singh, Brown & Märtsin, 2012; Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Singh & Harris, 2010; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Pini & Glasswell, 2016).
The SEP project's design drew from the two key goals of the Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). First, to address practical and theoretical problems in pursuit of solutions; and second, do this within the educational context with the ability to test interventions addressing concerns in an iterative and adaptive manner (Glasswell et al., 2016). The SEP study used mixed methods centred on collaboration between researchers and practitioners developing, testing and refining innovations (Glasswell et al., 2016).

The SEP project’s aim was to measure the outcomes and document processes of change as a result of engaging in this change process at four levels: student, teacher, leader and school levels. At each of these levels, there was a focus on measurement of outcomes as well as on the processes that took place to achieve those results. As part of an iterative design process, achievement data was used to inform decision-making in schools and was the focus of teacher learning for the PLC. As such, the qualitative data collection and analysis was focused on documenting and describing engagement in the processes of change at the student, teacher, leader and school levels.

Furthermore, SEP’s methods incorporated data from two overlapping phases: collection and analysis/inquiry. Four categories of qualitative data were collected and analysed in the SEP project, these included: 1) focus groups; 2) one-on-one interviews; 3) field notes of professional development workshops; and; 4) collection of literacy curriculum resources (Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell et al., 2010; Heimans et al., 2015; Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Singh et al., 2012; Singh & Harris, 2010; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2016; Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh, Märtins & Glasswell, 2014).

The SEP project drew upon Hattie & Timperley’s (2009) three questions:

Where am I going?: framed explicitly in terms of state/national literacy standards
How am I going?: framed regarding effectiveness of teaching in achieving above
Where to next?: framed as knowledge of curriculum content and student progressions.
Quantitative data were collected at nine-time points over three years (beginning, middle, and end of each year). This collection allowed for the outcome and change process data to exist as nested repeated structures. Hence, sophisticated multivariate correlational techniques suitable for embedded and longitudinal data (e.g., Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM), Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)) were used to test hypotheses, particularly in terms of the impact of innovations on outcomes at a student level from the following ongoing collection of multiple repeated measures over time (Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell et al., 2010; Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans et al., 2015; Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Singh et al., 2012; Singh & Harris, 2010; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh et al., 2016; Singh, Märtsein & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013):

- **NAPLAN** (The National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy) is a standardised national measure of three areas of literacy – language conventions, reading and writing – for the full cohort of students in grades 3, 5, 7 and 9.
- **TORCH** (Tests of Reading Comprehension) (ACER, 2003) measures the reading comprehension achievement of students from Years 3 to 10. This was administered by the partnership three times each project year (February, July and November). Data were used to track student growth trajectories over time and for comparative analysis of the NAPLAN data.

The data provided by these assessment tools were used to engage researchers, teachers, school leaders and district administrators in analysis, investigation, and decision-making within and across school sites (Exley & Singh, 2011; Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans et al., 2015; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Singh et al., 2012; Singh & Harris, 2010; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2016; Singh, Märtsein & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013).

In cycles of inquiry over three years, the partners engaged in professional learning conversations (RPMs) which examined the student data and its implications for the classroom, school and cluster. The goal was to use information about student learning and reflections on current teaching practice to engage in collaborative
problem-solving and instructional innovation. The second type of meeting was designed to foster collaboration and to solidify the foundations of each school’s developing PLC. In these school-wide meetings, held three times a year, a data visualisation tool called a ‘Data Wall’ was used (Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013).

The research reported in this thesis was designed to examine how a critical part of the SEP study functioned using a case study approach. This current research, situated within the context of a larger co-inquiry, deployed a Design-based research (DBR) methodology aimed at addressing chronic issues in low socio-economic schools. The research design for SEP did not include the in-depth study of the actions and interactions of the PLC at JSS, or at any other schools. The present study provided further analysis of the impact of the SEP activity on the JSS PLC.

4.4 Case study methodology

The present study utilises case study methodology. Much like ethnography, case study methodology allows for the close investigation of meaning-making embedded in a particular context. A case study can be defined as a “bounded system” that is in itself specific, complex, and creates limits around what is being studied (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Creswell, 2002). Yin (2008) further describes the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Neuman's (2006) concept of a descriptive case study is also relevant to the work undertaken in this study because the process, rather than the outcome, is deemed most significant.

Intertwined in a case study approach are description and analysis. As Dyson and Genishi, (2005) asserted:

In all qualitative case studies, the researcher’s purpose is not merely to organise data but to try to identify and gain analytic insight into the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomenon being studied. That is, the end goal is to understand how the phenomenon matters from the perspectives of participants in the ‘case’ (p. 81).
Using case study methodology allows for considerate and thought-provoking reporting of dynamic events and ongoing unfolding interactions among humans, and provides an opportunity for in-depth investigation. A key strength of case study methodology is that researchers “observe effects in real context, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.181). The purpose of undertaking case studies is not to generalise to the larger population, but to instead examine the meaning of some phenomenon as it is socially negotiated within a particular instance. The case study offers the education community insights into authentic experiences and the dynamics of people and situations.

4.5 Research site
One south-east metropolitan Queensland state school participated in this study. At the time of this study, JSS was receiving funding from the Australian federal government, under the Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National Partnership scheme (DETE, 2010). This Prep to Year 7 school was co-educational and had approximately 745 students and 61 teachers. The student population included students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with 11% of students identified as Indigenous. The urban school had scores of students who had been migrants and refugees, whose community experienced high unemployment and who lived in low-cost housing. The school was part of a cluster of schools identified by the local education office as in need of support for student achievement and attendance.

JSS became a SEP school in January 2011. I approached the school leadership and teachers in late 2010 to ask if they would also consider being a part of an additional, project designed to focus the on how a PLC grows and develops in a school undertaking an educational improvement agenda. My Education Doctorate (EdD) project and the SEP project at JSS began at the same time and were run concurrently. During this time, I had overlapping roles as school-based researcher (SBR) on the SEP project (Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Glasswell et al., 2010); and as a researcher collecting data for this current project.
As a National Partnership School, a (four-year) strategic plan was developed by JSS. This plan was developed by partnership obligations outlining key commitments, allocation of funding and explanation of innovations determined to occur over the 2010 to 2013 period. Within the Strategic Plan key priorities were clearly outlined that aligned with National Partnership goals (DETE, 2010) (see Appendix B, p. 187). These priorities, taken directly from JSS National Partnership Strategic Plan (2010-2013), were to:

- improve student literacy and numeracy results across all year levels;
- improve attendance and punctuality;
- improve community engagement;
- close the gap for students in all target groups; and,
- improve staff morale.

The Strategic Plan also outlined outcomes taken from the State Implementation Plan (see Appendix C, p. 188) and the National Partnership Key Areas of Reform (DETE, 2010) (see Appendix D, p. 189).

In addition to goals outlined in the Strategic Plan, JSS introduced other activities and programs. For example, a poster “Every Child, Everyday Learning and Achieving” delineates four categories with associated JSS activities that occurred in line with the vision of the school, was distributed to staff and posted around the school. These categories were: Improve Literacy and Numeracy; Build Capacity; Attendance and Punctuality; and; Community Engagement. The areas of particular focus in this study are Improved Literacy and Numeracy and Building Capacity, which closely align to the key characteristics of a PLC, though other activities that fall under Attendance and Punctuality and Community Engagement were also considered. The programs or activities indicated on this poster were modified from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year (see Appendix E, p. 190).

The JSS PLC Framework posters reinforced activities focused on improving literacy and numeracy and building teacher capacity (i.e. involvement with SEP
project; WOW peer observations; Developing Performance Plan (see section 7.6, p. 154); optional professional learning, which had been implemented throughout the school.

4.5.1 Research participant sampling

Prospective participants, included leaders and teachers from Years 4 to 7 who were also participants in the larger SEP project, were identified and approached to participate in this study during 2011. Teachers and leaders were identified as prospective participants because they were currently involved in literacy innovations (i.e. professional development) and an inquiry cycle for student improvement (i.e. Reflective Practice Meetings), introduced by the SEP project in partnership with the JSS school.

Initially written information was provided to the principal regarding the study; followed by written information supplied to the teachers about the study. I met with potential participants and explained what participation entailed through guided discussion.

Teacher participant time commitment was described as: (1) participation in two focus group interviews; (2) involvement in an individual end of study interview; (3) attendance at three individual RPMs; (4) attendance at three Data Wall meetings for the PLC’s inquiry and; (5) administration of formal assessment of students as per existing school guidelines. School commitments were outlined as: (1) participating in individual interviews at the beginning, middle and conclusion of the study; (2) provision and discussion of educational policy documents in informal sharing sessions as needed; and (3) attendance at three Data Wall meetings for the PLC’s ongoing inquiry. These teachers and leaders were invited to contact me to learn more about the study or ask further questions. Teachers and leaders who agreed to be a part of the study received a Participant Information Sheet and a Participant Consent Form, which they returned to indicate informed consent to be part of the study (see Appendix F, p. 191 and Appendix G, p. 196, for Information Sheet and Consent Form). Furthermore, ethical clearance was obtained for this current study from the university and the school; and the Department of Education (through the SEP project). Such ethical clearance necessitates statements about the time involvement of school leaders and teachers in the current study. In addition, through the SEP
project, some funds were made available for teacher release from classroom teaching practices, which meant that participation in the research was not always during after school hours. Still, teachers were invited to attend voluntary professional development at the school provided by the SEP project. In addition, participation in the project was considered to be part of the professional development component of teachers’ work.

However, as discussed earlier, prospective participants were made aware of their time commitment to the study upfront (through discussions and the informed consent) so they could make an informed decision about whether they wanted to be a participant. At no time was there pressure nor an expectation, from myself, SEP or JSS that teachers or leaders would participate in this study. If they decided to participate, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendices F, p.191).

The target group consisted of 25 participants including classroom teachers, the principal and the Lead Literacy Teacher (LLT). The participants in this research comprised of both women and men of varying levels of teaching experience. Initially, 25 teachers were approached to participate in this study, but with staffing changes and four teachers declining the invitation to participate, 21 classroom teachers were involved at the commencement of the study. During the year, more teachers left and new teachers joined the school, therefore the informed consent procedures were repeated. The final participant numbers are listed in Table 4.1 (on page 60), showing actual participants by year level team and the staffing stability for each year level team. As illustrated in Table 4.1, Team C and A had a retention rate of 100 percent of participant teachers from the being of the study to end of the study. In contrast, Team B and Team D had a retention rate of between 33 percent to 75 percent of participant teachers, from the beginning to end of the study. For ethical reasons, I am unable to identify the year levels the teams represented.
Table 4-1: Study Participation Information by Year Level Teams at JSS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Level Teams</th>
<th>% Staffing Stability</th>
<th><em>Consistency of staffing from Term 1 (January 2011) to Term 4 (December 2011)</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team A</td>
<td>100% of participant teachers (N=3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team B</td>
<td>75% of participant teachers (N=4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team C</td>
<td>100% of participant teacher (N=5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team D</td>
<td>33% of participant teachers (N=9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This case study of JSS was undertaken using a variety of measures including focus group semi-structured interviews, individual semi-structured interviews and the collection of field notes. Varied accounts (teachers and leadership reported perceptions) are used to create a rich picture of JSS’s developing PLC.

As the analyses proceeded, CHAT is used to explain the complex actions and interactions that took place in JSS and which led to transformations of activities within the PLC. I argued in Chapter 3 that the use of CHAT as an analytic tool allowed for deeper consideration of the processes at work in JSS as the PLC activities were pursued. Explanation of how this analysis was conducted will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.6 My Role as a researcher

Over the year in which JSS teachers and leaders participated in this study, I visited JSS in two capacities: firstly as a researcher, working on the study reported here and; secondly as a member of a SEP school-based research team (SBR) that serviced the school, assisting with data collection and analysis and in providing professional learning sessions for teachers.

As exemplified in Activity Theory, the role of the researcher is to learn about the participant’s experiences by becoming highly adaptable in the individuals’ setting. This assists the researcher in gaining an insider perspective, or an outsider viewpoint for contextualising observed activities within a greater context (Fetterman, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch, 2011). Using AT allowed me to consider my role as the researcher in the field. In Figure 4.1 (on the following page), Glesne (2005) used a continuum to represent how the researcher may travel throughout the investigation phase.
According to Glesne (2005), the observer is placed at one end, with the full participant at the other, thus representing the two extremes. The ‘Observer’ is perceived to be a more traditional researcher collecting data – observing without interfering in the participants’ activities. On the continuum, the ‘Participant Observer’ assumes the role of regularly interacting with participants, yet still maintaining the role of researcher through observing the participants’ community (Yamagata-Lynch, 2011). Finally, a researcher who assumes the ‘Full Participant’ role becomes, or is already, a member of the community. The Full Participant currently gains the role of the researcher. In some instances, it was evident from interviews, the participant group perceived of me as the researcher. However, over time this shifted to that of a community member, conducting a study as a collaborative partner.

**4.7 Data collection procedures**

In the present study, data collection was designed to document and describe the PLC activities at the school site and the teachers’ and leaders’ perceptions of what was occurring as the PLC took shape and developed. Further, I examined previous studies and the professional literature on PLCs and designed tools which, when used together, would provide a rich array of qualitative data (see Table 4.2 on page 62).
Table 4-2: Tools used for collection of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools used for data collection</th>
<th>Participants involved</th>
<th>Data collection intervals 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Individual Interviews</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Term 4 (November)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Interviews</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Term 1 (April), Term 3 (September)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Individual Interviews</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>Term 1 (March and April), Term 3 (September), Term 4 (November)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Practice Meeting (RPM) Interviews</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Term 1 (February), Term 2 (June), Term 4 (November)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Others Work (WOW) Observations</td>
<td>Teachers and Leaders</td>
<td>Term 2 (June), Term 3 (August)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 indicates the methods used to collect information. The fieldwork for this research took place in Terms 1 (January) to Term 4 (December) of 2011. Priority was given to gathering information from all participants regarding their experiences throughout the process, rather than specific events.

At times, some teachers were released from class to participate. Others participated in meetings or donated their own time to take part in activities. These obligations influenced the attendance at focus groups as some teachers were unavailable due to other commitments.

4.7.1 Individual interviews

The qualitative interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest (Kvale, 1996, p.2). The semi-structuring of individual interviews allows for respondents to explore their thinking in connected discourse, while allowing the researcher to probe responses at a deeper level. This flexibility allows for a greater understanding of participants’ experiences and their interpretations of those experiences.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher and leader (see Appendices H, p. 199, for interview schedule). The duration of participant interview times ranged from 35 minutes to one hour in length. A semi-structured interview protocol was implemented incorporating twenty pre-determined questions regarding specific aspects of the PLC (e.g., collaboration with colleagues, leadership within the school, professional development, using data to inform teaching), along with
questions that arose organically due to the nature of the discussion (see Table 4.3, below, for the list of pre-determined questions asked in interviews). Data collected during the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed, to ensure accuracy and avoid researcher bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). These semi-structured interviews allowed for conversational sharing of experiences and perceptions of teachers and researchers (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). It should be noted that in the discussion of the findings throughout this thesis, ‘some’ refers to one to two teachers or leaders and ‘few’ refers to three or more teachers.

### Table 4-3: Examples of individual semi-structured interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of individual semi-structured teacher interview questions</th>
<th>In what ways do year-level meetings provide opportunities for quality collaborative reflections? What evidence is there that this school was classified as a PLC?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples of individual semi-structured leader interview questions</td>
<td>In what ways, have you seen the staff more focused on student learning or student achievement this year? What indication do you have that the teachers are linking the data to teaching practices? Is there any indication that more teachers are choosing to engage in collaboration with peers?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.7.2 Reflective Practice Meetings

The RPMs, unlike the traditional semi-structured individual interviews, had a clear protocol as shown in Table 4.4 (on page 64). However, the discussions with teachers varied based on their class’s student achievement data and their capacity to meet the current needs of students. In Chapter 6 an in-depth analysis was conducted focusing on the RPM activity of one teacher over the year. I collected all the data from this one teacher, and was the school-based researcher working intensely with this particular teacher. By contrast, other teachers involved in the larger SEP project worked not only with me, but other school-based researchers attached to the project. As stated previously, schools serving high poverty communities have high teacher turn-over. This means that it is difficult to collect data from any one teacher over a long duration of time. Data from the one teacher, over a period of one year, meant that I could trace the development of our professional learning conversations over time.
In RPMs, all teachers first discussed the student data and diagnostic information that related to student performance. Teachers and researchers then considered what current practices were working well and what challenges they faced. These discussions led to problem-solving around possible ways of enhancing learning in the classroom for all students. Researchers supported teachers in suggesting strategies and practices that were research-based, flexible and student-centred. Researchers offered teachers opportunities to ask questions to clarify misunderstandings and made suggestions concerning professional learning that may be of interest.

Table 4-4: Examples of Reflective Practice Meeting semi-structured topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of topics discussed:</th>
<th>Student performance on TORCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnostic information for literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy strategies and skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher learning and interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Together, the teachers and I discussed the student data, current practices and challenges in the classroom. As a researcher, I facilitated, observed and participated in the RPM activity. As a result of my involvement in the RPM activity, my role developed as a participant-observer. According to Yamagata-Lynch (2011), researchers who assume the role of participant-observers can “acquire rich data about the participant’s actions related to the object-oriented activity” (p.67). There were difficulties involved in doing research in schools and supporting teachers with the aim of improving literacy practices. However, the study used a design-based methodology which meant that the researcher could not objectively stand apart from the researched. Within a design-based research methodology the researcher and researched collaboratively work together to address a practical problem. In the case of this school, the problem was related to the low literacy attainment of students and teachers’ professional capacity to design literacy pedagogy and curriculum that could lead to student learning improvements.

This data is useful as it provides more clarification regarding how the researcher perceives their involvement within the participant activity, which may impact on the analysis of the activity.
4.7.3 Focus groups
Focus groups were conducted with each year level team to better understand the participants' perspectives. Teachers were able to voice concerns or discuss issues beyond the selected questions of the focus group (see Table 4.5 below). The focus groups provided a significant amount of information. The goal here was to obtain responses relating to the participants' points of view concerning aspects of the JSS PLC.

The focus groups of the year level teams were conducted in conversation and discussion style (Greenbaum, 1998). This method enabled me to explore participants' views and to respect the way the participants chose to respond. Hence, participants were co-constructors of the last interview, expanding and adding to existing topics and questions as needed. Focus groups also allowed for teachers within their year level teams to elaborate on themes (see Appendices I on page 200 and Appendix J on page 203).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-5: Examples of focus group semi-structured questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of questions:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What opportunity is there for you to collaborate and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem solve with other colleagues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does student data inform your teaching? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.7.4 Watching Others Work (WOW)
In 2011, ‘Watching Others Work’ (WOW) was introduced as a collaborative learning activity at JSS. It was designed by the leadership team to promote peer-to-peer learning (through observations) and to share and celebrate good teaching practice at the school. This innovation was rooted in larger policy and funding decisions within the school region. During the implementation of this activity, my role was as an ‘observer’, due to my restricted interaction with participants during the activity. A limited amount of field notes were undertaken to provide observed accounts of what occurred during the WOW sessions. However, the majority of the data collected about the WOW activity occurred through focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with the participants.
4.7.5 Field notes
Field notes can provide a more accurate account of an observation that may be vague in a researcher’s mind. As McKernan (2013, p. 93) states, “Field notes often provide clues to fundamental issues of importance…instruments such as questionnaires…may not be sensitive enough to these underlying and subtle themes.”

Consistent with good practice, field notes were used to document observations of behaviour and interactions and were written at the site throughout the data collection process (Patton, 2002; Wolfinger, 2002). These took the form of my narrative recording, as I reflected on the activities observed or interviews conducted. Field notes completed after meetings enabled me to reflect on the discussions and how participants reacted. Field note descriptions included: level of current knowledge about a topic; level of engagement in the process; ability to collaborate with others around teaching and learning; current professional interest; resources required; and, finally, interactions that took place between participants, participants and peers and participant and researcher. Field notes served to support the audio recording of interviews and focus groups. All audio material was transcribed for analysis. All files were destroyed in line with the University’s ethical guidelines.

4.7.6 Additional Data Collection: Artefacts
JSS artefacts were collected and proved to be important sources for understanding the context through which teachers and leaders at JSS operated.

Examples can be found in Table 4.6 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-6: Examples of artefacts collected at JSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Partnership Strategic School Plan (2010-2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Vision document: Clear articulated vision and high expectation for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Others Work (WOW) schedules, forms and guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian State School’s Professional Learning Community Framework (2011) (plans for professional learning and discussion each term) (see Appendix E, p. 190)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.8 Qualitative data analysis

Different types of analysis were conducted for various kinds of data. Initially, this was accomplished by the deductive coding of the data according to the five characteristics of PLC practices (see Figure 4.2 on page 69). Then through inductive coding, exploring tensions around the PLC characteristics and identifying thematic sub-categories (see Figure 4.2 on page 69). The CHAT concepts provided further analysis of the data sets. During the analysis phase, data were applied to the constant comparative method. The following sections will further discuss this analysis and may include some discussion of findings to illustrate how the analytic process occurred. Furthermore, some findings were included to assist the reader to anticipate the themes from the data that will be discussed in coming chapters. Moreover, these finding will also aid in understanding the research problem, thereby, allowing the reader to critically evaluate a study’s overall validity and reliability.

4.8.1 Thematic analysis process of interviews

In the course of this study, I analysed transcripts of close to twenty-seven hours of interviews, focus groups and RPM interviews. I identified “tensions” that appeared to exist around aspects of the PLC activities in JSS. As part of a school change project, the teachers at JSS dealt with new procedures for gathering and reflecting on data, professional learning aimed at enhancing their performance and leadership demands for more collaboration and teamwork as well as improved student learning. At times, the new practices and activities conflicted with teachers’ beliefs concerning what constituted a good use of their time, how they might work together effectively and what were appropriate goals for the children of JSS. Robinson (2014), might say that their theories of action and those of the school leadership and the University research project team were different. As Madda (2010) noted in her study of tensions experienced by teachers in bilingual classrooms in Chicago, it was these differences or conflicting ideas that resulted in tensions impacting teachers’ everyday lives. In this study, exploring these tensions, provided new understandings about how aspects of activities, designed to develop the PLC further, often hindered it and created opportunities for members of the school to re-construct activities in ways that contradicted their original goals.
4.8.2 Identifying tensions
While using NVivo to deductively code for major PLC characteristics, sub-category tensions were also identified and coded to provide further insight. This analytic process was used to examine the networks and cross talk among the identified major themes of a PLC and exploring tensions. This “drilling down” enabled me to see how themes around the key characteristics of a PLC initially were created as nodes, which had new sub-category tensions that were related to them (see Figure 4.2 on page 69 and further discussed in Chapter 5). I looked for examples of when teachers identified a conflict, tension, or contradiction in their work in the school and their dealings with the leadership or the research project team. Sometimes, these were easily identified as teachers used words or phrases such as “the problem here is,” “it’s difficult,” or “it’s hard for us.” Tensions related more directly to leadership mandates were often discussed through the use of phrases such as “we’re supposed to,” or “they want us to.” At other times teachers were subtler in expressing their concerns. The more the analysis progressed, the more I was able to get a clearer sense of tensions as mediating factors in the development of JSS’s PLC.

In RPMs, tensions were sometimes revealed through the way participants placed ideas in opposition to each other. For example, “I have always done reading groups and this year I am not doing reading groups” (Mike, 15/11/11, Interview). Sometimes the use of pronouns (e.g. she, we, us, they, them) signaled alignment or opposition. Sometimes teachers, such as Mason (Focus Group Interview, 7/09/11) positioned themselves as passive recipients of others’ actions;

*The data that was collected when [YLC] was here, she collected all that but she actually never because we ran out of time, we never really sat down and actually analysed that data. Because she collected it and it looks great. I've got it all on my USB, but I can't actually interpret it sometimes because I'm not sure how it's been put together.*

---

68
Figure 4-2: Identified major themes and subthemes
In this approach, data analysis has close ties to the theoretical interests that guided the research questions. Attride-Stirling (2001, p.360-394) and Braun & Clarke (2006, p.87) highlight steps in this analytic process (see Table 4.7 below),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Steps in the analytic process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>Familiarising with the data, reading and re-reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Initial coding the material; breaking down the text into meaningful text segments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>Searching and identifying the themes; themes are extracted from the coded text segments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>Reviewing themes and constructing networks; assembling themes derived from the text into similar coherent groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>Describing or naming and exploring thematic networks; themes are investigated to identify patterns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **6** | Producing the report  
  o Summarising the thematic networks; a summary of the main themes and patterns that characterise them are revealed  
  o Interpreting the patterns; amalgamation of each thematic network is achieved in relation to the original questions and theories grounded in the research |

Table 4-7: Steps in the analytic process  
(Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 360-394; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Thematic coding was applied in the manner described above, for interviews and focus groups analysis. After initial familiarisation, I began identifying themes aligned to the characteristics of a PLC. I examined each transcript and compared each with the relevant sections of other participant transcripts. In so doing, these relevant examples were included in the coding and misfit sections were excluded or moved into another coding category. This validation was done to was to ensure that consistency of coding occurred through the process. Definitions were generated to make sure that coherence of the interpretation of each code can be cross-checked and authentically maintained.
This thematic analysis allowed me to identify and describe the tensions that existed for teachers. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I will map these tensions against negotiating practices that the teachers and leaders engaged with in the various contexts or literacy instruction. Extracts of the data were included throughout this thesis and were identified through thematic coding. Teacher and leader perspectives from focus groups and interview data were chosen based on whether the extracts illustrated the given tension or themes discussed. In the next chapter, I will summarise the data and discuss the sub-themes related to the major themes. The interpretation of patterns and the amalgamation of each thematic network contributed to the descriptive narrative of the complex activities that exist within the system and the theories grounded in the research.

4.9 CHAT: a tool for analysis

Activity Theory in this study has been used as a methodological tool and a theoretical lens through which to explore how the JSS school developed as a PLC. Transcription and thematic coding of tensions related to the PLC provided “language for analysis” (Douglas & Ellis, 2011, p. 207). Using a theoretical lens to examine the data generated, enabled me to view a large amount of data involving multiple sources. The goal was not to examine CHAT concepts themselves, but to use these concepts as a way to explain and describe the differences in teachers’ perceptions of PLC activities when introduced into the JSS activity system, and to provide the possible reasons as to why tensions were created (Douglas & Ellis, 2011).

AT provided the framework for identifying the object-oriented activities, goal-directed actions observed and how tensions in the system created an opportunity for negotiations and often transformations of the activity. The following section will discuss further the process of identifying the CHAT concepts of the mediating tool including: subject, object, division of labour, community and outcomes.

4.9.1 Methodological approaches in activity systems analysis

After the initial thematic analysis had been completed, the next step was to analyse how these tensions and negotiations within the system impacted the PLC. The Eight-Step Model (Mwanza, 2002) was deployed to assist me in translating data into the mediation triangle, creating further data to reflect upon. The questions in the Eight-
Step Model outlined in Table 4.8, provided justification of the conceptualisation of the tensions and transformations that occurred over time within the system. Table 4.8 (below) provides examples of analysis of the JSS case study data using the Eight-Step Model to assisting in conceptualising activities within the JSS PLC. This analysis was discussed and validated by a colleague who has expertise with the use of CHAT as a theoretical lens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify the ...</th>
<th>Mediation Triangle Component</th>
<th>Question to ask</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>What sort of activity am I interested in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Why is this activity taking place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td>Who is involved in carrying out this activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Mediating Tools/Artefacts</td>
<td>By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Rules and regulations</td>
<td>Are there any cultural norms, rules, and regulation governing the performance of the activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Division of Labour</td>
<td>Who is responsible for what when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organised?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>What is the environment in which the activity is carried out?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>What is the desired outcome from this activity?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inter-connection of the themes of tension was established which constructed a story line. Emerging from the rich narrative of participants’ experiences, I began to focus on the analysis to identify the participant tensions within activities which were essential and relevant to this research study. Table 4.9, on page 73, provides an example of how CHAT analysis was conducted using real case study examples.
### Table 4-9: JSS case-study examples of the use of CHAT
(adapted from Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Case Study Example 1</th>
<th>Case Study Example 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>The people engaged in the action</td>
<td>JSS teachers</td>
<td>JSS teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object and Outcome</td>
<td>Subjects act on an object to achieve some outcome</td>
<td>Develop a team of adaptive experts who use collective inquiry impact student learning</td>
<td>More collaboration on improved student achievement amongst teachers across and within year-levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating Tool/Artefact</td>
<td>Anything that scaffolds the process of subject-object activity</td>
<td>Reflective Practice Meeting Process School Based Researcher expertise TORCH student data NAPLAN data</td>
<td>In-house professional development, outsider expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Those who share the object of the activity.</td>
<td>JSS Leadership, Department of Education Partnership, Smart Education Partnership Researchers</td>
<td>JSS Leadership, Smart Education Partnership Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of Labour</td>
<td>The way roles, functions and tasks are identified and distributed.</td>
<td>Leadership: provide further resources and support for using data Smart Education Partnership Researchers: build teacher capacity for literacy and data use Participant: uses the data to inform teaching and learning in their classroom</td>
<td>Outside expert: acts as facilitator during feedback sessions (revoices, clarifies, expands on teacher’s remarks) Teachers: share, discuss and problem solve around new strategies to support student learning Leadership: provides funding and time for authentic collaboration to occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Regulate the activity</td>
<td>Smart Education Partnership agreement expectations National Partnership Agreement expectations JSS Leadership expectations</td>
<td>Attend provided in-house professional development and implement innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAT was a useful approach in exploring the highly-contextualised nature of decision-making and innovation and the range of negotiations that took place across, and within, activity systems to resolve tensions in the developing PLC system.

Tsui and Law (2007) describe the nested nature of activities within the system and illuminate the importance of analysing the activities:

Activities are seen as embedded in activity systems. For example, the activity of learning vocabulary is embedded in the activity system of classroom learning, and the activity of an inter-class speech contest is embedded in the activity system of a school. Activity systems can also be embedded in one another. A classroom can be an activity system, and several activity systems can be embedded in a classroom, for example, group work and whole–class teaching. It is in these activity systems that participants engage in common social processes through which meanings are developed, and cultural life is propagated. (p. 1291)

By enacting an ongoing process of design, I identified episodes within activities. I then went back and forth between the narrative and the mediation triangle models of the activity systems. In addition, the narrative comprises of visual tables, figures and analysis of the data to add to the discussion (Hord, 2004; Creswell, 2009). A report of findings was compiled and revisited further in Chapter 8.

4.10 Coding reliability procedures
Data entry and the validation of coding categories were completed by four researchers: myself, a research assistant (RA), a Senior Research Assistant (SRA) and my principal supervisor (Glasswell). The SRA and RA were both employed on the larger SEP project. First, the RA checked qualitative data that I entered into spreadsheets. Secondly, my supervisor provided discussions around the interpretation of themes to check for consistency and reliability of my data analyses. My supervisor would identify any need of refinement to the coding categories and the descriptions throughout the thematic analysis process. Thirdly, the SRA re-coded transcripts, initially coded by me, to ensure that there was a high level of agreement. This SRA was a veteran teacher with extensive teacher coaching experience. She had a Master’s degree and was working as part of the SEP research team examining
teacher learning and student outcomes. Overall there was 96.76 per cent congruence between my coding and that of the SRA.

Coding was an ongoing and defined process, as described earlier. Table 4.10 on page 76, shows the major themes and the sub-themes of tensions teachers discussed as operating within the PLC and the definition used as a reference for thematic coding of the transcripts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>PLC Tensions Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme: Collaboration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>PLC Tensions Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising for effective</td>
<td>Collaboration is limited to a small group or pairs of individuals within a cohort. There is limited time to collaborate about teaching and learning. Scheduled time to collaborate often has competing agendas. The location of teachers and their ability to physically meet with other teachers (i.e. on other campus) hinders the opportunity for teachers to meet over lunch or at other times. When time is scheduled, getting over to the other campus also impedes on the actual amount of time available to collaborate. Several teachers socially isolate in both meetings and classroom practice (e.g. more teachers are doing their own thing or are new and not yet included).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity of collaboration</td>
<td>Collaboration occurs through resource sharing and matters of house-keeping. Less collaboration occurs around teaching and learning strategies or inquiry into student data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme: Collective Inquiry</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>PLC Tensions Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Data that is collected but not used, or not used appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Informed inquiry and</td>
<td>Teachers who are focused on their own classroom’s performance vs the collective. Teachers have no time to interpret the data as it relates to teaching and learning. Teachers are not using data to inform teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvement cycle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme: Supportive conditions for learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>PLC Tensions Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Information distributed within or across cohorts is sometimes not clear. There are mixed messages about expectations for teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring Process</td>
<td>New or inexperienced teachers feel that they are left to figure out school and year level goals. Further professional support by a nominated individual in the school would provide further guidance. New or inexperienced teachers work in isolation from others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Limited opportunities to attend professional learning that builds specific capacity for individuals. Limited time to follow up with colleagues and discuss new knowledge. Limited opportunity to build on new knowledge in following sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-10 Defined themes relating to tension in the PLC (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Theme: Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and support for problem solving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Theme: Shared values, mission and goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enactment of goals/mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus on valued outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reliability checking with others provided ongoing assurance that the thematic analysis of the data conducted during this study was reliable and valid. Any disagreements about definitions or refinements were resolved through discussion and constant reference to the current research and literature to reach a consensus.

**4.11 Ethical considerations in a schooling environment**

The conduct of this research involved the collection, access and use of identified personal information. The information collected was confidential and was not disclosed to third parties without participants’ consent. De-identified copies of this data were utilised for the purpose of writing this dissertation. Audio recordings made during this research were erased following transcription of the data, and each transcript item was de-identified.
4.11.1 University research ethics
Permissions were sought from participants to conduct the research at JSS (see Appendix K on page 204). The principal of the school granted permission for the research to be carried out at JSS after reading information about the study’s goals and processes. Informed consent for the principal as a participant was also granted (see Appendix G on page 196). Teacher participation in this project was entirely voluntary. The ethical approval from Griffith University required confidentiality of both school and participants (see Appendix K on page 204). The data appearing in this thesis have been presented in a way as to ensure anonymity. Participants in this study were free to withdraw from the research at any time, without comment or penalty.

4.12 Conclusion
This chapter outlined the design of my research study and argued that its success depended on high levels of internal consistency between the research questions outlined and the theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted to address these research questions. Also crucial to its success was the choice of procedures. For example, the data collection, data analysis tools and validation were complemented by these perspectives. Any educational project involves a series of practical activities in ‘real’ world observation, analysis and reporting, and then a consolidation and refinement of these moments into a reported form. The challenge with this research (and most research) is to ensure that this narrative does not confuse the findings from the original aim and in so doing render the conclusions unwarrantable (Freebody, 2003; Larkin, 2011).

Chapters 3 and 4 have therefore established the theoretical framework of this project. The remainder of this thesis will present and explain the meaning of the findings and then conclude with its conceptual, methodological and practical contributions.
Chapter 5: Julian State School: Tensions in Action

5.1 Introduction
This study was designed to investigate the complexities of actions and interactions of a state primary school embarking on a journey to becoming a PLC focused on raising reading achievement. This study gathered qualitative data including discussions with teachers and leaders, and an array of artefacts. The aim of this study was to provide new understandings about how aspects of the PLC in the school are perceived and negotiated by participants through the analysis of the complex, highly contextualised and mediated nature of teachers’ ideas and practices as they worked together to establish and act on a common goal.

This chapter will present a discussion of JSS as it engaged in the process of developing a PLC over the course of a school year. The aim of this chapter is to explore the tensions around the five dimensions of PLCs presented in Chapter 2 within a school context. Mediation triangles will be presented to highlight the core tensions that emerged as a result of the PLC, and illustrative quotes from participant interviews will provide further evidence of the tensions that emerged. This chapter will provide an analysis regarding the complexity of the change process.

5.2 Tensions within a PLC
Studies from the 1980s and 1990s concluded that factors such as “financing, time availability, initial training, leadership, participation and degree of support impacted on innovation success in schools” (Perillo, 2007, p. 622). Schools grapple with past and present tensions, such as: policies that have been mandated for implementation; lack of funding; pressures internal to the school (e.g. parents, students, administration, teachers, and federal/regional) and time constraints. These tensions are negotiated in highly contextualised ways within school sites.

Tensions can be productive. For example, some tensions that occur in schooling sites can be negotiated in ways that develop the community in that site. While externally-driven school reform efforts may be seen as a significant tension in teachers’ lives. In Phillip’s (2003) study, interviews with teachers in a middle school
found that funding from reform initiatives allowed the teachers to collaborate more than before (i.e. similar to WOW at JSS, as described in Chapter 4). Teachers in Phillip’s study were now able to: observe their colleagues, videotape lessons and then review them; inquire about their teaching methods collectively and develop action plans. Teachers also participated in critical friend groups and established a literature circle network. The tension of external reform efforts in the school system helped to resolve another pressing tension in this study site, that of under-resourcing. This tension was negotiated to improve the quality of teacher collaboration.

5.3 Voices from within a PLC
The following section uses qualitative data from focus group interviews across all four year level teams and with teachers who were willing and available to participate in the semi-structured interview during two time periods (Term 1 [April], Term 3 [September]). As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, leadership interviews from two participants were taken over three time periods (Term 1 [March and April], Term 3 [September], Term 4 [November]). Figure 5.1 (on the following page) provides an overview of teachers’ and leaders’ discussions during interviews which focused on common PLC themes and major tensions, as previously discussed in Chapter 4.
Figure 5-1: Identified major PLC themes and sub-themes
5.4 Collaboration

A basic premise of engaging in a PLC is that it promotes collaboration with colleagues for collective success (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008). This requires mutual trust and support amongst community members to contribute to the fundamental shifts required in the change process (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). It is widely held by PLC advocates that collaboration allows individuals to learn from each other to complete important tasks. Authentic collaboration requires teachers to move away from talk-around administrative matters and “housekeeping” to that of teaching and learning (Timperley & Parr, 2010).

At JSS, PLC activities (i.e. WOW and Year Level/staff meetings) were introduced to foster greater collaboration within the school and to develop a team of adaptive experts who authentically collaborated to transform student learning. There were many expectations of collaboration at JSS, and there were tensions around it too. In Chapter 7, I will examine more closely the tensions that arose in “Watching Others Work” an activity implemented by the JSS Leadership to promote collaboration across and within JSS teacher groups.

5.4.1 Major tensions of collaboration at JSS

At JSS, perhaps the lack of teacher collaboration was a cause of major tensions in the PLC. For example, teachers were expected to work together to plan and development effective teaching approaches. Key tensions that emerged as a result of PLC development concerned time-management, and the distance between the JSS school sites as depicted in Figure 5.2 (on the following page), Tensions A and B.
Other resultant tensions concerned teacher beliefs about good teaching, reflection and peer feedback (see Figure 5.2, Tension C, above).

Two themes emerged from the focus group and interview data in relation to collaboration (see Figure 5.3, on the following page). The first emergent theme concerned how JSS was organised for effective collaboration and the focus was on pragmatic issues (see Figure 5.2, Tension A & B). The second issue raised was the authenticity of collaboration or quality of collaboration among teachers (see Figure 5.3).
5.2, Tension C, on page 83). For example, some teachers experienced tensions in expectations and actions and felt unable to offer anything to the collaborative process; others felt that opportunities to collaborate were not authentic so they engaged in them in routine ways with follow-ups rare and brief. Several teachers left early, watched distractedly or simply asked for resources.

5.4.2 Organising for effective collaboration

The extent to which teachers at JSS collaborated with others was often limited due to time constraints, physical proximity or availability of others to engage in the process. The pragmatic elements of the collaborative experience were difficult for teachers and leaders to manage. Often the purpose of collaboration is to promote new thinking and to build teacher capacity through collective problem-solving.

JSS teachers participated in activities, outlined in the JSS term schedule, which was designed to provide opportunities to facilitate a level of collaboration among teachers. Year level team meetings were part of teachers’ regular weekly schedules. During year level meeting time, one aim was for teachers to collaborate and share information about teaching and learning (see Figure 5.2, Tension C, on page 83). Tensions arose around the teachers’ preparedness and availability to collaborate with other teachers.

The researcher asked Team A teachers if they collaborated and two of them indicated “not really” (Focus Group Interview, 05/04/11, Term 1, Team A). Teachers
were asked about what the challenges were concerning collaboration, with several teachers indicating a lack of time to authentically collaborate with peers. One teacher referred to the year level meetings activity as a space to share due to the lack of time to collaborate within their teacher activity, saying: “That's basically when we get to share because everyone, as we know, is really busy and when you're teaching there's not a lot of time to say, ‘oh look I've just found this and it's excellent.’ So hopefully you remember when we come to year level meetings to say, ‘oh gee, I need to show the team this sometimes’” (Tiffany, Focus Group Interview, 05/04/11, Term 1, Team A). A clear tension was evidenced between the teachers (subject) and maximising opportunities to collaborate (mediating tools), due to time pressures created by other activities in the system. Tiffany's response further highlights how collaboration was interpreted as an opportunity to share resources versus solve problem with peers. This tension of authenticity of collaboration will be discussed further in Section 5.4.3.

Other tensions related to organising across the two campuses. Teachers were expected to collaborate in a whole school approach, yet they were in different locations and found it difficult to collaborate (see Figure 5.2, Tension B, on page 83); which related to the issue of time constraints for teachers across year levels (see Figure 5.2, Tension A, on page 83). This was explained in one focus group interview with several teachers as they explained how they “stick to ourselves” (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D). One teacher further underlined this tension of isolation of the campuses, when discussing how teachers from the other campus did not know the newest teacher in their team, saying, “…when I called up a teacher, and I heard in the background, ‘Who’s Michelle?’ The teacher goes, ‘Oh, she's the [Team D] teacher’. So they don't even know us…” (Sarah, Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D). Thus, tensions dealing with proximity, often limiting the opportunity for teachers to work together, were evidenced between teachers (subject) and the building of collaborative relationships with others (community).

5.4.3 Authenticity of collaboration
Knowledge sharing and active problem-solving of teachers promotes authentic collaboration and capacity building. They rarely develop from discussions that focus on administrative matters or the management of student behaviours issues. At JSS,
tensions around authentic collaboration was frequent and widespread. Teachers indicated that the nature of their planned “collaborative conversations” consisted of largely “housekeeping” matters. For example, Bre (JSS teacher) indicated the lack of necessity to meet during the prior week, describing what matters were discussed during her team’s most recent year level meeting:

Last week, we didn't have a need to meet. So, anything that had arisen, we discussed during the week. So, the meeting is on a needs basis …. The last one, we talked about report cards and what we're going to be collecting and assessing from now until the end of next term for report cards, and the numeracy test and any issues we were having within our classes.

(Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Term 1, Team C)

The above quote highlights the notion that when teachers met together it was not necessarily for the purpose of collaborating but for information or resource exchange.

In addition, three teachers specified that the depth of collaboration with new staff to JSS might be dependent on whether they felt comfortable and confident in their own teacher practice in order to support other teachers. These teachers also indicated that reflective two-way type dialogue and feedback about practice was perceived to be limited to more experienced teachers or only with those with whom they directly taught with (Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C). Dan, for example:

...I mean, they might have been teaching for 10 years. So me as a second year out, I'm not going to tell somebody how to do their job. But it might be something more that the year level co-ordinators could have a role in, having that collaboration.

(Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C)

Finally, there was tension between the teachers’ perceptions (subject) about the purpose of the activity, their role in the activity, and the leaders’ expectations (rules) that the time would be used as an opportunity for all teachers to collaborate through reflective dialogue and problem-solving about current issues.
5.5 Collective inquiry

A PLC requires that all members contribute to the process of capacity building and applying new knowledge in their classrooms. This process is part of the inquiry cycle in which questions are constantly asked about teaching methods and student learning in an effort to support students more effectively.

In Chapter 6, I will examine more closely the tensions that arose in Reflective Practice Meetings (RPMs). The RPM was an activity implemented by the SEP project to promote collective inquiry, share mission, values and goals and provide supportive conditions for learning within JSS cohorts.

5.5.1 Major tensions of collective inquiry at JSS

Collective inquiry was a site of major tension in the PLC, especially concerning data collection and use. For example, some JSS teachers experienced tension in attempting to use student data to inform their teaching practice (see Figure 5.4, Tensions A and C, on page 88), whilst attempting to meet the often unclear systemic expectations around the purpose and use of data (see Figure 5.4, Tension B, on page 88).
These tensions made teachers unsure about what assessment to collect and for what purpose. For example, teachers (subject) knew there was an expectation that data must be collected (rule) but were unsure about how much (mediating tools) and what to do with it (object). Teachers’ interpretations (subject) of the data to inform teaching and learning were also complicated by the role of the Year Level Coordinator (YLC) who was responsible for collecting, analysing, goal setting and tracking student achievement data (division of labour) (see Figure 5.4, Tension A, above). Some teachers indicated that they did not have as much ownership of the
inquiry involved and ultimately found interpreting the data challenging (Mason, Team D, Interview 25/11/11; Interview, Teacher Mike, 21/11/11, Team D; (see Figure 5.4, Tension A, on page 88). In the end, some teachers made minimal adjustments to their practice based on data, if any at all. Others found more purpose for data collection if it was used to inform teaching and learning (Mason, Team D, Interview, 25/11/11; Mike, Rolling Meeting Interview 3, 15/11/11; Focus Group, 06/04/11, Term 3, Team D) (see Figure 5.4, Tension B, on page 88). The outcome of the activity resulted in more knowledge about student data to inform teaching and learning (Sammy, Rolling Meeting Interview 3, 08/11/11; Maggie, Rolling Meeting Interview 3, 08/11/11; Bre, Interview, 25/11/11, Team C; Lucy, Interview, 25/11/11, Team D).

Furthermore, two themes emerged from the interview data, in regard to collective inquiry and learning (see Figure 5.5 below). The first related to data use to inform teaching and learning (Tension A). The second tension concerned data collection and ensuring it was consistent across the school (Tension B).

5.5.2 Collective inquiry: data collection

![Figure 5-5: Themes of collective inquiry emerging from participants' interview responses](image)

How teachers obtained data/information about their students in order to better inform their teaching within the school was a source of many tensions. Some teachers’ responses indicated confusion over what types of data should be collected and their purpose (see Figure 5.4, Tension B, on page 88). In the following Focus Group Interview extract (08/04/11, Team C) teachers expressed frustration about the
amount of data collection they had to complete. Tensions for them existed between the need to collect data and a feeling that they were over-testing (“They’re smashed”). Other teachers questioned the use of student data for meaningful purposes to inform teaching and learning (“what’s going to help me?”). Some teachers felt that they were asked to assess students frequently without sufficient information about what to extrapolate from the data and how to then purposefully apply the information. Teacher Bre explains this concern of how the data is used to inform teaching and learning:

… I think, because we’re not given a strict guideline of what data to collect and what data to use, it’s like, ‘well, do I need to keep this or don’t I?’ For me, because I’m the one that has to collect the data, what do we need? … What’s going to – out of all of this –, what’s going to help me? What’s going to inform it?

(Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Term 1, Team C)

Similarly, Mason, a teacher from Team D, expressed concerns that existed in using TORCH data (assessment data discussed during the RPMs with teachers and researchers) versus other assessment data:

…I think the TORCH data that we’ve got shows us that we’re doing well and that we’re going to continue doing that but that’s really the only data that we use. We looked at the NAPLAN data but we didn’t really take anything from it. We don’t use some of these assessments very much to inform teaching that way.

(Interview, 25/11/11)

The leadership team at JSS recognised these tensions, but regarded the problem as a misunderstanding about the development of the PLC process. In a Leaders’ interview during Term 3, Luke reflected on his perceptions of teacher data collection and use stating:
So I think they [teachers] have got better at only collating data that is to inform their teaching or for assessment. Whereas I think when we first started collecting data, they were collecting everything and it felt like you were assessing all term. If we just get a whole heap of numbers up on the wall, it would be all good but no one looked at them. So I think they’re getting better at deciding what’s valued to collect and what informs their teaching or informs their assessment. So I think they’ve got a lot better at that.

(Interview, Leader Luke, 09/09/11)

The seemingly simple task of gathering data to track student learning and reflect on teaching (rule) – a task central to the work of a PLC – saw tensions arise for the teachers (subjects) involved, subverting the efforts of the school leaders and university research team to establish a culture of collective inquiry beyond the RPMs.

5.5.3 Collective inquiry: data informed inquiry and improvement cycle

Attending to the inquiry cycle allows teachers to meet the needs of their students in real time (Timperley & Parr, 2010). Key catalysts for tensions at JSS included infrequent reflection on data and (occasionally) allowing long periods to elapse between data collection and reflection. Hence, outdated data was difficult to use to inform teaching and learning.

In Team D, core tensions concerned staffing changes, specifically the high turn-over of teaching staff, was especially a concern for the YLC of this group. As discussed earlier, the role of the YLC, was to encourage collaborative planning for quality teaching and enhanced student progress through data analysis.

Teacher Tom indicated his group experienced difficulty in knowing how to use student data (as this was an expectation within JSS), that had been analysed by the YLC:

…and what the school expects and -- the high results and the large turnover of improvement in data – being able to do that, you need to
know the kids, and you need to know basically how it's going to work.
As a year level, we haven't had the opportunity to do that.

(Focus Group, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D)

As the YLC role was to analyse student data, teachers had little opportunity to interpret it for themselves and take that knowledge to inform their teaching practice. As a result, in the absence of the YLC, teachers were not sure how to utilise the student data effectively even though the expectation within the school was to use it to improve student achievement.

Moreover, when the focus group was asked if they felt that their data inquiry skills had improved, the conversation revealed concerns around leadership demands, the practical arrangements made for teaching spaces and the tensions related to staff changes. Teachers were expected to develop their abilities to analyse and use the data diagnostically to support students effectively but their efforts were constrained by these factors.

Mason: We haven't collected any data this term [Term 3]. Our data walls have been removed from the middle room, because that's become a SEP [Special Education Program] room, so we don't even know where they are. We wouldn't -- I wouldn't -- have a clue where our kids are.

Sue: The data that was collected when Monica [YLC] was here, she collected all that but she actually never -- because we ran out of time -- we never really sat down and actually analysed that data. Because she collected it and it looks great. I've got it all on my USB but I can't actually interpret it sometimes, because I'm not sure how it's been put together.

(Focus Group, 06/04/11, Term 3, Team D)
School leaders also acknowledged this tension at the beginning of the school year. In addition to whether teachers knew what to do with the data, one leader said:

They'd know from the data what to do with it? No. No, because I think – no…That's bad, isn't it? But I don't think that's just here. I think I could blanket-statement that, that's very stereotypical. But having worked in multiple schools, I think, no. I don't think teachers interpret the data effectively to then inform their practice or group students effectively.

(Interview, Haylie, 25/03/11, Term 1)

Furthermore, one teacher identified this tension in discussing his difficulty of addressing the results of multiple data sets to inform new teaching and learning practices in the classroom when he said:

Yeah … I'm getting there. I don't think I'm using it [data] as fully as I could. I don't know if it's… you do all this teaching and learning and then you do a TORCH test. So through all the teaching you're getting understandings, and then the TORCH test tells you something, but you're already going with this other stuff. It's like you want to see that through if they're on certain reading goals and then is saying something different. It's like, “do I just stop this straight away and start this?” Sometimes I find that difficult.

(Interview, Teacher Mike, 21/11/11, Team D)

The RPM activity, discussed in Chapter 1, provided an opportunity for teachers to analyse the TORCH student data diagnostically to then inform their practice in targeted ways, within a supportive environment. However, teacher’s capabilities to implement these new innovations within their classrooms (as described by Mike), became another source of secondary contradiction and tension (see Chapter 6).
5.6 Supportive conditions for learning

A well-functioning PLC requires an environment where all staff members feel safe and a culture of supportive learning exists throughout the school (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). At JSS, the extent to which supportive conditions existed varied across year levels. Transcripts were examined to reveal tensions, with three sub-themes being identified in teachers’ and leaders’ talk about support for learning.

5.6.1 Major tensions of supportive conditions for learning at JSS

Teachers at JSS were offered support through professional learning activities. However, teachers also identified tensions in the system around new programs and opportunities for professional learning and mentoring, that existed in the system. For example, guidance was required from the leaders about how programs were implemented and their relevance in enhancing teaching and learning in classrooms (see Figure 5.6 on the next page, Tension A). Teachers were expected to attend professional learning sessions, however some felt that they were not relevant or did not offer an opportunity to revisit content in which to build knowledge in subsequent sessions (see Figure 5.6 on the next page, Tension C). Analysis of the interview data revealed that new and inexperienced teachers sought greater mentoring and in-school support, but many were confused about whether there was a JSS mentoring program. This was unclear and left some teachers feeling overwhelmed and under-supported (see Figure 5.6, Tension B, on the next page).
These tensions were often negotiated by participants, with the outcome of the activity different than what it was proposed to achieve. For example, some professional development sessions were made available to teachers with the goal of building teachers’ capacity and providing opportunities for learning to support students. Some teachers who saw little use for or relevance to professional learning did not attend, or attended but rarely implemented any new strategies (Field notes, Term 1, Term 2,

**Tension A:** Quality and extent of communication (e.g. guidance needed on how agendas brought in by leadership were relevant to each other vs. agendas in competition)

**Tension B:** Mentoring support for new and inexperienced teachers (e.g. support for teachers about teaching and learning at JSS vs. confusion about support available and for whom)

**Tension C:** Professional development opportunities (e.g. relevant learning opportunities for all levels of teachers vs. lack of coherence and building of new knowledge overtime)

**Figure 5-6: Tensions of supportive conditions**
Term 3 and Term 4). Meanwhile, those new to the year level demonstrated frustration and a sense of feeling overwhelmed in trying to manage behaviour and student needs while attempting to meet the obligations of the school. This led to some teachers adapting, altering or abandoning new practices of teaching and learning altogether. Thus, as depicted in the examples, transformations in the activity were a result of the negotiations that teachers made, as they navigated through the tensions in the activity. Consequently, this resulted in limited implementation of innovation to support student learning.

Figure 5.7 shows tensions in relation to “supportive conditions for learning”: the quality and extent of communication at JSS (Tension A); mentoring processes for teachers new to the role at JSS or the profession (Tension B); and professional development opportunities provided by the school (Tension C) emerged as a sub-theme in the interviews with teachers and leaders.

These three sub-themes will now be discussed in turn.

5.6.2 Communication
JSS operated two campuses. The lower school (P-4) operated on one campus and, several streets away, the Years 5-7 teachers delivered their classes. Communication across sites was difficult as it reduced group cohesion and the ability to collaborate,
consequently creating tensions (as discussed earlier in section 5.4.2 on page 84). Within interviews and focus groups, JSS teachers identified issues related to sharing and exchange of information across campuses (see Figure 5.6 on page 95, Tension A). The amount and extent of information sharing between campuses was limited according to some teachers (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11). One teacher expressed a sense of “running a bit solo over here with that” (Lawrence, Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Team D, Term 1) in relation to these communication issues.

Finally, there is tension between the teachers’ (subject) need for guidance and communication about new agendas brought into the school and the leaders’ expectations (rules) about teachers’ involvement and implementation of these agendas.

5.6.3 Mentoring processes
In the year of this study, JSS had a high teacher mobility rate. This was consistent with other low-SES schools (Feng, 2009; Vagi, & Pivovarova, 2016). It is critically important in contexts where teacher turnover is high for systems of induction and mentoring to be implemented. In the context of this study, tensions existed for teachers who came to the school and who felt unsupported in their efforts to get settled. Many teachers in Team D (the team that had the highest turnover rate) identified this perceived lack of support (see Figure 5.5 on page 89, Tension B). Team D consisted of both new teachers and those new to teaching specific year levels. The leadership team indicated that there was an induction program that provided support to new teachers:

> We have induction meetings on a Thursday morning, so that’s for anyone new to the school or if there’s a topic in induction that you’ve forgotten about and you want to touch base with, then that’s available on the Professional Learning Framework as well.

(Interview, Leader Luke, 12/04/11, T1).

The leadership team believed that support was available to teachers through an induction and support program but an apparent misalignment of views existed
between what leaders believed to be the well communicated availability of support to teachers and perceptions of teachers. This created further tensions within the system.

In Team D’s focus group in Term 1, the topic of induction support was raised. Teachers expressed frustration about the lack of support while others expressed some surprise:

*Maggie:* We do?

*Tom:* Oh apparently…

*Researcher:* Maybe not, okay.

*Tom:* There is, but I don’t think it’s actually working, or running.

*Mason:* I’ve never seen it.

*Tom:* We’re all new to the year level. I’m the only one that’s worked on this campus. Tara’s come from the other campus with the older kids. Tom’s come from a completely different role, and the other three … are new to the school, and possibly the year level, I’m not sure. But I don’t feel we’re I personally feel we’ve just been put together and…

*Maggie:* Exactly.

*Tom:* Basically “deal with it, and make sure you get good results”, and that’s it.

*(Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Team D, Term 1)*

Furthermore, there was tension between the teachers’ perceptions (subject) about the support that they should be receiving and the role that leaders played in providing
that support (division of labour). One teacher felt the same tensions regarding the lack of support as others who had been working in this team at the beginning of the year (Interview, Lucy, 25/11/11, T4). It is unclear whether the induction program was only offered to those teachers coming into JSS as new teachers or whether this program was implemented as consistently as the leaders had indicated. These types of examined interactions of members of a school community help us to understand how support within the school is essential for the development of the PLC.

Moreover, the mentoring established within the school was unlike the RPM activity (see Chapter 1), were SBRs had a clear responsibility to provide scaffolded supports (division of labour) to teachers (subjects) and frequently check progress made in innovation on practice, capacity building of new knowledge and student achievement.

5.6.4 Professional development opportunities
In a climate that creates supportive conditions, teacher professional learning has a major role in the change process (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). At JSS, the leaders had created a “Professional Learning Framework” (see Appendix E on page 190) to assist in allocating funds for professional development. While leaders wanted to create a culture of continuous professional learning, they felt that money spent on sending teachers to professional development had limited effect because the learning was often not shared with others. This tension caused leadership to rethink the use of funding, wanting those experiences to be of benefit to more staff. Luke, one of the leaders, described the Professional Learning Framework from the beginning of the year:

*We looked at our budget previously and we would previously spend around $60,000 to $70,000 on professional development at this school, which I think is huge. When I looked at it and we asked some questions about what did we get out of it last year, no one could answer. If we looked back over our staff meeting agenda there was no time that anyone was expected to relay what they went and did PD on. It really was a [unclear] method of: “Here's a great looking flyer, it's a nice day out of school, it's going to make me feel better…there's food, I don't have to deal with kids and yes, for me I'm*
going to learn something and hopefully I'll implement it in my classroom” but further than that, we saw nothing. So at the reference group – the consultative committee – we talked about the fact the value in that because that’s a teacher, that’s money. I like to be really transparent to teachers and say what you could get in replacement for it so okay, that’s another teacher that we could have. How else might we look at doing that? Why are we sending people to PD that doesn't fit under those four quadrants [literacy and numeracy, wants to improve attendance, community involvement]?

(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11)

The leaders’ expectations about the role of professional development transformed after reflection upon the benefits. Professional development was now seen as an opportunity for teachers to gain knowledge directly related to identified student need to effectively impact student learning.

While the leaders struggled with and tried to resolve tensions around teacher learning and value for money, teachers struggled with tensions between teacher learning and its usefulness for their everyday teaching lives. Tensions of teacher learning was exemplified in a Focus Group with Team D. Some teachers in this group found external professional development relevant to their learning and practical application in the classroom. Others did not:

Maggie: That's the point, it's not coherent. What it is they drop Continuer, they drop Science Sparks, they drop PTO online, they drop something, something, something and they drop it. I'm going it's a…I don't know how to rein it in and make it coherent.

(Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D)

Finally, there was tension between the teachers’ perceptions (subject) about the value of external professional development sessions (mediating tools) to their
teaching. Many of the professional development sessions described by teachers were one-off sessions, which were attended by teachers who had upcoming student formal assessment (e.g. Queensland Comparable Assessment Task [QCAT] Science) related to the session topic or attended for administrative reasons (i.e. new online platforms).

Unlike the professional development described by teachers above; the internal professional development sessions facilitated by the SEP project were tailored to the current needs of teachers. The design of these sessions was partly based on teacher feedback about what they felt they wanted to learn more about to support students’ current needs, which was based on current student achievement data. Perhaps, these SEP run sessions were viewed by teachers as part of the project, and therefore teachers saw these sessions as coherent and more relevant; however, it should be noted that attendance to these SEP run sessions was at times limited.

5.7 Leadership and supportive and shared power
As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, a PLC requires strong leadership, supportive and shared power to facilitate effective and sustainable school improvement (Bolam et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Robinson & Timperley, 2007; Wiley, 2001). A number of tensions existed in relation to leadership and power.

5.7.1 Major Tensions of Leadership and supportive and shared power at JSS
At JSS, the leaders’ goal was to create conditions that were supportive and empowered teachers to make decisions as adaptive experts within the PLC. However, this too was a cause of tensions in the PLC. For example, some teachers perceived that their professional knowledge about streaming one student cohort was not taken into account by the leaders during classroom planning (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D) (see Figure 5.8 on the next page, Tensions A). Also, teachers said that clearer guidance was required to resolve issues of teaching and learning (see Figure 5.8 on the next page, Tension C), often feeling that they were left to address these issues on their own.
Teachers recommended for their school goals to be acknowledged more frequently as a means in which to enhance staff morale (see Figure 5.8 above, Tension B). These tensions, relating to the role of leaders in creating supportive and shared power, were often negotiated in ways that transformed the PLC activity. For example, some teachers experienced tensions that made them feel like they were “drowning” and unable to make critical decisions for student learning (Focus Group Interview,

**Tension A:** Empowerment to make informed decisions (e.g. collective decision making vs. centralised decisions about students made by leadership)

**Tension B:** Lack of recognition (e.g. achievements made towards school goals by all vs. recognition of some)

**Tension C:** Guidance and support for problem-solving (e.g. advice offered by Leadership vs. uncertainty of how to resolve problems)

**Tension C:** Professional development opportunities (e.g. relevant learning opportunities for all levels of teachers vs. lack of coherence and building of new knowledge overtime)

**Figure 5-8: Tension of leadership and supportive and shared power**
06/04/11, Term 1, Team D); others felt that opportunities to celebrate accomplishments were missed (Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Term 1, Team C). The drive for change was affected by some teachers' feelings of discouragement about goal setting and reflection on progress.

Moreover, teachers reported tensions relating to this theme of leadership at JSS. Two sub-themes were identified in the interview and focus group data (see Figure 5.9 below).

![Figure 5-9: Themes of leadership emerging from participants' interview responses](image)

The first is related to the shared power from the leaders at JSS (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension A and B), the second was leadership guidance and support for problem-solving by the leadership (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension C). The following section will further discuss these tensions as they relate to JSS.

### 5.7.2 Leadership: shared power

Within a PLC, teachers are empowered and encouraged to be involved in decision-making processes. Also, consensus about the vision and goals of the school are sought with consensus from school staff and the larger school community. When JSS teachers were interviewed, tensions around shared power became apparent. This was expressed by some teachers as follows:

*Maggie: We're not being heard, and to an extent, we're being blamed.*
Tom: Yeah.

Maggie: This is the part that really sticks in my craw, is we - it is managerial prerogative, it is the prerogative of admin to sort the timetable out any way they want… then to be made to feel that you’re responsible for its inefficiencies or poor execution, well that’s a double whammy. Because we didn’t have any input in what our classes look like, and then, secondly, we get to pick up the responsibilities for something that we didn’t have any ownership over in the first place. Like we all own our home class. I own my home class. If anything goes wrong in that, my problem. But these things – and I say, “Why is that kid sitting next to that kid? Why are these kids even together? We separated them last year so they wouldn’t be together this year”.

When asked if the group strategised about how tensions could be resolved, participants said:

Mason: At the moment we can’t really, because we can’t…[we] haven’t been allowed to change the streaming groups. It’s like: “Well, they’re your problem.”

Sue: Yeah, I think you tried to discuss that at the beginning of the year.

Tom: I just tried to because I knew a lot of the children. So I tried to say: “No, let’s not do it this way. What about this?” But my concerns weren’t taken on board. So, and I’ve tried to bring it up a few times, and it’s just completely ignored.
Sarah: Sorry. In all honesty… I think everyone here would agree; we believe that we should all have our own class, home class, and just differentiate in that. Because even if we’re moving around the streaming groups now, to break up behaviour, then we’re starting all over again. We’re not going anywhere with the learning. It’s just a new process all the time to try and get them in the same habits that we’ve already taught. So if we had our home class from day one, we could track their learning. We could differentiate, and we’d know where they’re all at.

Sue: You can take ownership of that. Sarah: Yeah.

(Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D)

As shown, some teachers felt a lack of empowerment to make informed decisions on functional aspects of their classrooms. Teachers reported their concerns were raised with leaders, but were not resolved and they were left feeling a lack of “ownership” in decision-making. There is tension between the JSS leaders (subject) and centralised decisions (rules) (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension A). The presented excerpts highlight some of the teachers’ perceptions about the value of their professional opinions and shared power within the JSS community.

Finally, some teachers expressed a lack recognition by leaders of efforts made towards JSS goals. Teachers expressed ways to alleviate tensions of leader support, for example:

Bella: …putting that extra effort so much – like, if you were being recognised, well, [Team C’s] attendance has gone up, or something like that. Like, if you just say we all got up to 90 per cent. Like, recognition goes so much further than…
Bre: It doesn't – you're not asking for anything apart from a, “well done.” Like...

Bella: Yes. Or a pat on the back. Like, I'm not asking for it to be done in front of the whole school.

Bre: Publicly, no.

Bella: Like, just an email saying, “We’ve noticed that this has happened… Well done! You’re obviously working really hard,” and that’s it.

(Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Term 1, Team C)

Moreover, there is tension between the JSS teachers (community) and recognition by leaders for the achievements of teachers in positively affecting student learning (object) (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension B).

5.7.3 Leadership: guidance and support for problem-solving

While teachers can obtain assistance, advice, guidance, and encouragement from leaders to resolve issues within a well-functioning PLC, tensions developed when some JSS teachers felt that they were not supported by the leadership, causing frustration (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension C). Teachers reported:

Maggie: … there was a very strong sense of it being cobbled together, and a very strong sense that here's a swimming pool, there's the deep end, there's the shallow end - we haven't been allowed to wade in, we've been pushed into the deep end.

Tom: I think we all feel very unsupported, and…

Maggie: Yeah, absolutely.

Tom: It's the sink-or-swim thing, and I think in some cases they're waiting for us to sink, which is really horrible.
Moreover, tension existed between the subject (JSS Leadership) and support provided to teachers (a division of labour) (see Figure 5.8 on page 102, Tension B). As discussed at length in Chapter 1, leaders should both drive improvement efforts and provide support through alignment of activities, constructive conversations and resourcing. At JSS, opportunities for growth to occur were provided (i.e. year level meetings, WOW, and professional development sessions), however, management lacked a clear communicated focus on what the activity aimed to achieve (object).

5.8 Shared values, mission, vision and goals

According to the literature, PLCs are established on a firm foundation of shared values, mission, vision and goals (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2001; 2007; Hord, 2004). This foundation is created by its members whose voices contribute to the development and ongoing reflection of the goals. Consensus exists within the staff about the overarching goals, mission and vision of the school. As discussed in Chapter 2, this foundation is critical in ensuring and facilitating the sustainability of the PLC.

5.8.1 Major tensions of shared values, mission and goals at JSS

Several participants revealed tensions created around expectations (rules) from both JSS leadership and the National Partnership Agreement expectations, for school performance. Figure 5.10 on the next page, illustrates through the mediation triangle two tensions of shared values, mission and goals reported at JSS.
School leaders made agreements with the government under the National Partnerships School (DETE, 2010) scheme resulting in pressure to raise student achievement, measured using a range of performance indicators; causing quaternary contradictions. Two tensions in the system were subsequently produced (see Figure 5.10 above, Tension A and B).

The JSS leadership team formulated their future goals around those of the National Partnership Agreement with minimal input from the collective JSS community (see Figure 5.10 above, Tension A). These new expectations created tensions within the system, and further pressures for teachers to lift student achievement in literacy and mathematics (see Figure 5.10 above, Tension B). Expectations placed on the school community are similar to those of other interventions and reforms (e.g. Chicago...
Consortium for School Research (CCSR) and Smart Education Partnership (SEP)) that had set goals for improved achievement.

Two sub-themes were identified in this study: (a) the enactment of the mission/goals at JSS, and (b) consensus on the valued outcomes (see Figure 5.11 below).

![Figure 5-11: Themes of collaboration emerging from participants' interview responses](image)

### 5.8.2 Enactment of goals/mission

The goals and mission of the school were determined and enacted by the JSS leaders. Overwhelmingly, most teachers felt that they had not contributed to the development of the “vision” for JSS. This, hindered their understanding and engagement with these goals. For example, one teacher described the lack of input into the vision and direction of the school:

…Can I say that admin went on a voyage of discovery to Victoria they call that experience Victor Victoria, after the Julie Andrews thing, right? Right! So they’ve seen preppsies and one year olds reading War and Peace, right, and doing all this wonderful stuff. So they have a very clear picture of what it looks like, where they want to drive their school to. But that picture is not necessarily being translated at a time and a place and in a manner that works for this particular group.

*(Focus Group, Maggie, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D)*
Clearly there existed ambiguity between what the leaders envisaged for the school and what change in classrooms was possible; how the leaders’ vision could translate into classrooms. There was tension between the JSS teachers (subject) and the need for collective inquiry for learning and teaching (a division of labour) to set shared goals (see Figure 5.10 on page 108).

Furthermore, when asked about where the vision and mission of the school came from, many teachers indicated that they reflected the priorities of the National Partnership program stating:

…I suppose when we became the National Partnership School and we got the professional learning team leaders and we focused more on data and attendance and all those sort of things… To me, it felt like we were just meandering along and the kids [that achieved], “well done” and the other ones well you know, what do we do for them? The last two years, it seemed to have been much more focused and driven is probably not the right word – but I suppose it’s more expectations.

(Interview, Sammy, 29/11/11)

As discussed in Chapter 2, a school’s mission and vision provide key principles for an improved future. As shown, there was a perception among JSS teachers that the National Partnership provided clear expectations regarding the areas of improvement, which were often referenced. However, it did not give an opportunity for consensus about establishing a collective vision for the school, as these were established to align with the National Partnership expectations. Further, this vision was not collectively reviewed. As discussed previously (see section 5.5, p. 87), leadership should support teachers and empower them in order to collaborate on an agreed set of principles.

The lack of ownership of the mission and vision caused tensions within the system that the leadership team was made to negotiate:

Researcher: … Do you have a vision or goals across the school?
Hayley: Yeah. But they fall under National Partnerships…
So our goal is improving literacy and numeracy
data, increasing attendance and our community
engagement.

Researcher: Do you feel a sense of ownership to those goals?

Hayley: I guess so. I guess we've had to. It's not a matter of
whether you do or you don't. I think in some cases
you have to.

(Ilterview, Hayley, 25/03/11, T1)

The leader explains further tensions that resonated as a result of the implementation
of the National Partnership (rules) (see Figure 5.10 on page 108).

I guess being a National Partnership School, that's just one of the
competing agendas. We were talking about it yesterday in terms of
time. We spend two hours on literacy and two hours on numeracy,
four days a week. When you add that all up, that's 16 hours out of a
22 or, whatever they say, hour week that we can fit other KLAs in.

(Ilterview, Hayley, 25/03/11, T1)

Leaders too faced systemic tensions affecting choices made within the school. The
expectations of the National Partnership Agreement (DETE, 2010) narrowed the
leaders' focus to National Partnership-related key areas, as schools were bound to
these expectations. When asked if the vision or goals of the school had changed
over the school year, one leader highlights the continued focus on the National
Partnership expectations:

In a sense, it's shifted a little and not changed. The overall vision and
expectations in the four areas [National Partnership key areas] are
100 per cent still the same. But we've probably spent more money
and put more time into building the capacity of our staff to enable them to carry out the others.

(Interview, Luke, 29/11/11)

The leader reported providing more resources and support (mediating tools) to promote the extraneous goals of the JSS (Improve Literacy and Numeracy; Build Capacity; Attendance and Punctuality; and; Community Engagement), to negotiate tensions created by external bodies (rules) (see Figure 5.10 on page 108).

5.8.3 Consensus of valued outcomes
The mission, values and goals at JSS failed to have staff act collectively. The lack of unity was exemplified by some teachers feeling that work pressures dominated the school environment (Focus Group, Sammy and Bre, 08/04/11. Team C). Teachers identified that the goals of the school were related to the targets of the National Partnership (Interview, Lucy, 25/11/11). In discussing these expectations, one teacher said:

Well, the school wants to improve literacy and numeracy, wants to improve attendance, community involvement and I can't remember the fourth one off the top of my head. But, I mean, we've all got that information. They want that as our main focus and everything basically anything that we do has to fit into those four areas.

(Focus Group, Carmel, 15/09/11, Team B)

They recognised too that performance data was another key component of whether JSS was meeting the obligations of the improvement funding – to show they had raised student achievement in literacy and numeracy (see Figure 5.10 on page 108, Tension B). As a result, some teachers felt more pressure for student improvement within their classrooms (Individual Interview, Sammy, 22/02/11; Focus Group Interview, Bella, 08/04/11; Individual Interview, Carmel, 25/11/11; Individual Interview, Mike, 21/11/11).
For example:

I think the thing is as well, like, with NAPLAN coming up like, I really want the kids to do well in the next TORCH test, but like, NAPLAN is first, do you know what I mean? Like, NAPLAN comes before the TORCH test, and NAPLAN because the school is an NPS [National Partnership School] school, we have to do well in it. So, in a sense, like, I feel more pressure to get them all writing a proper persuasive text.

(Focus Group Interview, Bella, 08/04/11, Team C)

Other teachers indicated similar pressures:

Sammy: ...because there is enough pressure on the teachers to have this data going up, and yes, it probably will be a little bit embarrassing if every other teacher goes up and you don't. I don't call that a goal, I call that pressure.

Bre: Yes.

(Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Team C)

As shown then JSS teachers, both individually and as a group, were concerned about student performance on formal assessment as a measurement of improvement and for teacher accountability. There was tension between the teachers (subject) and the need to collect assessment data (a division of labour) to show improved student learning; and as a measure of teacher performance. This type of tension created a prioritisation of agendas, as the JSS NAPLAN scores would be visible to the public and provided an indicator of cohort performance. As a National Partnership School, there were additional pressures. TORCH student data would also be visible within the school community, and these created tensions because of the pressure on individuals to improve. Finding the notion of “do this, get that” protocol of establishing an effective PLC, less certain. Using activity systems analysis allowed for the description of how human activity and the setting, evolved over time within the
contexts of multiple activities. The contradictions introduced tension into the activities which made it difficult to obtain the object (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

5.9 Conclusion
This chapter provided illustrations of some of the tensions evident in the JSS community from the perspectives of teachers and leaders. At JSS, teacher perceptions and actions varied, often influenced by how supported teachers felt and how valued they thought they were by the leadership team. These tensions arose when overlapping activities within the PLC system saw teachers and leaders having different paths to achieve common goals, and sometimes having divergent goals. Similarly reported by other researchers, the current study found the importance of a common direction for action, developed in collaboration with key community members. (Tarnoczi, 2006; Kilbane, 2009). At JSS, these varying goals created tensions between those who were perceived as being open to change within the PLC and those who were not.

Through an analysis of the five tensions, utilising the mediation triangles, I showed how at times, these tensions led to transformations in the system that allowed the object to be realised. At other times these transformations caused the activity to transform into a different construct. Interventions and the introduction of new tools to foster a PLC culture created new tensions that complicated the activity. At the same time, tensions can be a cause of change that initiate new activities and these tensions do not always act as obstacles. Some act as opportunities for growth (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 114). This concept, as it relates to the PLC at JSS, will be explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

The next two chapters will provide a deeper analysis of two PLC activities, namely the RPM and the WOW. My application of CHAT concepts and an analysis of these PLC key activities focuses on and explores the social, cultural and historical aspects of this school’s functioning. With particular attention given to the multiple activity systems in play and the contradictions within these activities, I explore how contradictions, in some instances, became spaces for learning and development (Douglas & Ellis, 2011) and at other times manifest as roadblocks to achieving valued goals.
Chapter 6: Working Together: Negotiating Tensions in Collective Inquiry through Conversations and Collaboration

6.1 Introduction

Schools working as well-functioning PLCs are encouraged to focus on developing five key characteristics; namely, a collective inquiry; supportive conditions for learning; shared values, mission and goals; leadership; and collaboration. In this chapter, I will consider an activity, the Reflective Practice Meetings (RPMs), used by JSS and its university partner, to work towards a shared vision, mission and goals, and provide supportive conditions for teacher learning. RPMs also help to foster an inquiry orientation to teaching, learning and student achievement.

My purpose in this chapter is to present an elaborated case of a JSS teacher who was engaged in the processes of interpreting and navigating the demands of improving literacy instruction in her classroom. My goal is to illustrate and discuss the complex nature of the change process for this individual who had worked to understand the concept of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) and what that meant for her learning and that of her students. Data sources include field notes, meetings and interviews.

As this chapter proceeds, I will illustrate the complex negotiations that occurred over time as “Maggie” engaged in the process of coming to understand the demands of the schooling improvement agenda and developing her expertise and knowledge as a teacher. In this analysis, I present the RPM as a bounded activity system whereby, it has subjects, an object, rules, meditation tools, community and an identifiable division of labour. Within the system, some contradictions and tensions are negotiated (for better or worse) which transform the activity and mediate outcomes.

Towards the end of this chapter, I will consider how the activity system of the RPM interacts with other activity systems within the PLC, for example, the Watching Others

2 As previously mentioned, the names of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.
Work (WOW) activity that I will discuss in the next chapter and the activity system that represents Maggie’s practice in the classroom.

6.2 The Reflective Practice Meeting as an activity system

As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, the school, as part of the larger SEP project, used two main PLC meeting activities to support the development of teacher expertise in inquiry and literacy pedagogy and to focus the PLC on common goals, collaboration and effective leadership. One of these meetings was the RPM. Maggie participated in three of these meetings, one at the beginning of the year, one mid-year, and one at the end of the school year. These RPMs were conducted by a school-based researcher with a teacher (in this case, Maggie) and, on occasions, a school-based coach. The purpose of the meeting was to engage each teacher in inquiry around their student data for reading and supporting them in reflecting on current practices, while offering them ideas for ways to innovate in their classrooms for more effective teaching and learning in reading. The goal of the recurrent RPMs was to create conditions for continued improvement by revisiting goals and targets, examining the most recent data and making needs-based adjustments to classroom instruction. At another level, the school-based researcher and the teacher were able to negotiate professional learning goals over the course of a year and check in on teacher learning and changes to practice that may have been implemented.

In the course of each RPM, the subjects (JSS teachers) acted upon an object (to develop a team of adaptive experts who use collective inquiry and who continuously seek new knowledge to affect student learning). The meeting had rules (protocols for data discussion; teachers were accountable and responsible; researchers had expectations of commitment; JSS leadership had expectations as did the National Partnership Agreement and Unions). The RPM had a division of labour (shared responsibility for examining and interpreting data and reflecting on pedagogy, teachers open to innovation, researchers supportive as outside experts), and mediation tools were used (funding, assessment information spreadsheets, class mapping sheets, teachers’ ideas and knowledge, the researchers’ ideas and expertise, collaborative reflection for practice).
Figure 6.1 depicts the Activity System of the Individual RPM. Engeström’s (1999) meditation triangle is used here to illustrate the primary object of the activity system before any contradictions transpire. As I work through the series of RPMs with Maggie, I will discuss how pervasive systemic tensions arose and were negotiated in ways that led to the various transformations a participant can have on the goal of the activity. I will use Activity Systems Analysis to explore how Maggie’s participation in JSS’s PLC as a teacher focused on learning and innovation shaped by her interactions in these meetings.

Figure 6-1: Reflective Practice Meetings as an Activity System

### 6.3 Maggie

Maggie, like other teachers at JSS, negotiated tensions in ways that accommodated her lived experiences and her theories of action. She was an experienced teacher and had taught a variety of year levels but was relatively new to teaching younger students. She was an occasional attendee at voluntary professional learning sessions offered by university staff, engaging in around half of the sessions offered. In conversations and reflections, Maggie often expressed frustration about
organisation and teamwork at her year level. As the year progressed, she talked about regular staffing changes that occurred as contract teachers left the school and were replaced throughout the year.

These staffing changes offered little stability or cohesiveness within the group and made it hard to collaborate and plan for instruction. It also made it difficult for Maggie to learn from other experienced teachers within her year level team. The RPMs provided Maggie with opportunities to discuss what bothered her, what she was struggling with and the inconsistencies in what she felt she was expected to know and do. She was frank about her current levels of understanding related to various aspects of literacy knowledge for primary school students. She felt she was limited because she had previously taught in the upper years and was not a “bottom end teacher.” She explained:

…”I have had to relearn a lot of this stuff that these teachers take for granted. Um, the idea of a running record, the idea that of…how you treat kids differently at this level than you would with older kids. The different ways you talk to them. The different expectations that you have, right or wrong.

(RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11)

At our first meeting, Maggie requested “as much help as possible” (Maggie, RPM Field notes, 25/02/11) and disclosed that she did not know how to improve her students’ reading. Her main instructional focus when we first met was phonics for spelling. She planned many lessons around this aspect of literacy but did not know how to balance it with other activities that might help students become better with fluency and improved comprehension.

Regarding managing classroom literacy instruction, Maggie said she struggled with classroom organisation and student behaviour. Because of this, she structured her literacy block so that all students were supervised at all times. Maggie felt that without supervision, students would get off task and become disruptive. Each day in a 120-minute teaching block for literacy she planned for 30 minutes of phonics as whole class instruction and 30 minutes of spelling rotations involving students moving
around teachers and teaching assistants to complete planned activities. On some days, the special education teacher was present to support students in her class. Maggie and the special education teacher prepared some lessons for those students identified as needing additional support. A new literacy program was being implemented in the school, and this new set of rules and expectations provided Maggie with difficulties in tensions around changing existing practice to embrace the new “Literacy Café” (see Boushey & Moser, 2009) ways of working. Without support from teammates at her year level, Maggie struggled to reconcile new demands for more focused literacy teaching with her current levels of professional knowledge and experience. Maggie said that she wanted to learn more about activities that promoted fluency, and thought that she would find collaborating with other teachers valuable. From the beginning of our working together, Maggie was very open to suggestions and eager to know more.

6.3.1 Maggie’s readers
The number of student in Maggie’s class, who were TORCH tested (ACER, 2003), fluctuated slightly over the course of the school year, with an average of five students in her class who were able to complete the test. Initially, she had been given the students who had the lowest achievement profiles in her group. The result of this streaming was that Maggie was facing a class that she felt she was not equipped to teach effectively.

As was the expectation for involvement in the school-university partnership project, Maggie’s students were assessed at the beginning, middle and end of the year using the TORCH (ACER 2003) assessment (see Chapter 1). As discussed earlier, the test is normed on an Australia-wide sample. ACER year-level information, percentile ranks and stanine distribution profiles that allow teachers to compare the performance of students in their classes to a national achievement profile or expectation. TORCH can be used as a progress monitoring tool and can provide teachers with valuable diagnostic information about how their students are developing as readers.

Like many others at JSS, Maggie’s students struggled to complete the tests. Data generated from the TORCH assessment showed that Maggie’s students were indeed
underperforming. At the first testing interval, all of them scored in the lowest 10% band relative to the national norming sample. As the year progressed, Maggie took on more students who were severely underachieving as readers. The new readers were allocated to her by the school leaders who had re-organised the year level.

Towards the end of the year, the achievement profile of the class had changed. Several students were achieving in “low” rather than “very low” achievement bands, and some impact seemed to have been made on the achievement profile of the class. In the final focus group interview, Maggie reflected on her learning as a teacher and on her students as readers, acknowledging that the year had brought with it new challenges. She talked about how practices had been bedded down and was clear about the direction she needed to go in her professional learning to better support her students as readers.

In the next section of this chapter, I examine the interactions that took place with Maggie over the year in the RPMs. During these meetings, Maggie and I (acting as school-based researcher) engaged in joint inquiry together, trying to achieve a consensus around mission, values and goals. I also sought to create supportive conditions for Maggie’s professional learning. Throughout the following sections, I will use an activity systems analysis to illustrate the complexity of the nature of this type of professional conversation over time.

6.4 Reflective Practice Meeting 1

Maggie’s openness about her limited knowledge of literacy instruction was evident in the first RPM. She was forthcoming with her uncertainty of how to effectively address student needs in her classroom and in requesting professional support. She stated, “I would need that [shared reading] explained to me and scaffolded to me” (RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11). It became apparent that building deep knowledge and understanding was necessary to make any change in teaching and learning effective and powerful. This new knowledge created a secondary contradiction in the system with Maggie needing more support, to fully understand how to use new strategies in her classroom. This expansive learning transforms the object to that of building Maggie’s knowledge of how to use shared reading in the classroom. There is also a secondary contradiction between Maggie’s understanding of shared reading and the
use of it to improve student achievement in literacy. Figure 6.2, below, illustrates student achievement in literacy. Figure 6.2 illustrates the transformation in the activity.

**Tension A:** Knowledge of shared reading practice and purpose vs. limited understanding for effective implementation

**Tension B:** Trying to accommodate new approaches to teaching and learning for achievement in literacy vs. building capacity to meet teaching and student learning expectations

**Figure 6-2:** Overtime previous objects become mediating tools in the system
Figure 6.2 illustrated how the activity from the outset is complicated by the level of knowledge that Maggie brought with her about literacy and primary school instruction as a whole. A contradiction was found between the mediating tool and the subject (Tension A). Could it be expected then that the goals of the RPMs would be espoused in the same ways as previously designed and for all teachers? Primary contradiction in the activity of the RPM arose due to the difference in this teacher’s level of knowledge (Tension B) and willingness to adopt or adapt their theory of action (Timperley & Parr, 2005) (Tension A) to accommodate larger school goals. The researcher’s expertise was utilised, with the view to achieving the now transformed object of building the capacity of Maggie in shared reading.

Over the course of the three RPMs, Maggie’s theory of action and the contradictions that arose as a result became evident. As already discussed, I was mindful of the importance of building trust so that these collaborative conversations could be effective and provide opportunities for problem-solving and challenging Maggie’s practice.

Teachers’ ideas about student learning and effective practices for instruction largely influence their interpretations of what is implemented in their classrooms to support student achievement. This is why it was important for me, the researcher, to explore the ideas, values and histories, which each teacher brings with them to better address needs and to create opportunities for development. Again, this layer of descriptive content helped to highlight the history, beliefs, and values Maggie brings to the task of interpreting and responding to her school context, including goals for learning and instructional approaches in literacy (Madda, 2010).

During this initial RPM, I attempted to put the participant at ease and informed her about the process of student data collection and how it would be used in this project. This initial RPM was not audio recorded because it may have been a deterrent for teachers to feel comfortable and open to the process. Field notes were used to describe the context and record of the content of the meeting (see Appendix L on page 205). Table 6.1 (on the next page) provides a summary of key actions that surfaced from the first RPM:
Table 6-1: Resonating tensions existing with Maggie in the RPM activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Resonating Tensions</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Practice</td>
<td><strong>Tension A:</strong> Knowledge of shared reading practice and purpose vs. limited understanding for effective</td>
<td>Implemented little to no new literacy innovations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 1</td>
<td>implementation</td>
<td>New understandings of literacy instruction developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Tension B:</strong> Trying to accommodate new approaches to teaching and learning for achievement in literacy vs. building capacity to meet teaching and student learning expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Tension B:</strong> Supporting student learning vs. monitoring behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Practice</td>
<td><strong>Tension A:</strong> Implementing strategies to support identified student needs vs. implementation of strategies is dependent on Maggie’s Theory of</td>
<td>Implemented some fluency strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 2</td>
<td>Action and established knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Tension B:</strong> Supporting student learning vs. monitoring behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Practice</td>
<td><strong>Tension A:</strong> Deep knowledge about literacy instruction and practice vs. building on current understanding</td>
<td>Sought further professional learning for further understanding of literacy practices for improved student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 3</td>
<td><strong>Tension B:</strong> Implementation of practices that used effectively to improve fluency vs. implementing a modified practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Tension C:</strong> Supporting student learning vs. monitoring behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some initial contradictions in the system resonated (see Appendix M on page 206), from analysis of field notes taken from the Maggie’s first RPM. Maggie was giving control over literacy learning to multiple people (i.e. teacher aides and the special education teachers). Dispersed allocation of planning was due to what seemed to be, as discussed earlier and recorded in field notes, her lack of knowledge to meet
the literacy needs of all students in her classroom. This tension between the division of labour of the teacher aides, the special needs teacher and Maggie were evident and will be discussed further in following sections (see Figure 6.3 on page 128). In trying to establish focused goals to make an immediate impact on student literacy learning, it was recommended by the school-based researcher (SBR) that Maggie provide more opportunities for reading throughout the day, and that she use repeated reading practices in her classroom to support fluency needs.

6.4.1 In-class support
As Maggie became more confident in her understanding of strategies to support her students, she confronted the problem of how to effectively implement them. The tools that had been discussed were no longer feasible because of other tensions within the system. In this example, the researcher was talking with Maggie about incorporating guided or shared reading in rotating fluency activities into her classroom to work with students more closely on their identified needs, which was evident from the valuable diagnostic information, recently rendered from the recently administered TORCH assessment. Maggie took a more ‘if, then’ approach to the use of the strategies in her classroom: “Okay, it’s a logistical problem. It’s a structural problem…when I get more confident with say Poet’s Corner or Reader’s Theatre…that leads itself to popping them into three different groups…those kids won’t work …unsupported” (Maggie, RPM interview, 14/06/11).

The above section of transcript demonstrates how the nested actions that occur within an activity led to a secondary contradiction within the system. The researcher (in suggesting alternative practices to meet the needs of her students) caused tension with Maggie’s theory of action (Tension A) and her ability to provide more focused instruction in small groups to her students because of logistics (Tension B). Maggie revealed her belief that the students were not able to work in groups without the aid of supervision. Within this action, the SBR provided guidance to increase student achievement in literacy. There was tension between the SBR and Maggie’s theory of action, inclusive of her beliefs about her abilities. Maggie then, in negotiating this tension, identified that the writing time would have to be altered to accommodate more reading opportunities which could then be monitored by additional classroom
support. Changing the allocation of classroom time became a possible resolution to this tension to achieve the object.

These tensions continued throughout the RPMs. Maggie identified the secondary contradiction of replacing fluency activities in her literacy block thus creating tension with student supervision and the timing of additional support that was allocated to her in a day:

Researcher:  … I understand the logistics. That aside they need to [be] reading with support because…

Maggie:  Yeah, but what support? Yes, you’re right.

Researcher:  Because if [the students are] reading silently to themselves, that’s great. But we can’t really be sure whether they are…

Maggie:  Are doing it right...

Researcher:  They are [reading]…correctly, right? Or if they are really processing or they could be reading it but not comprehending it. So there is all these different things…

Maggie:  Yeah, well, I get it. But here’s the thing. I go the reading, I go the writing. I get these people for the last half an hour hour. That lends itself to them breaking it into Reader’s Theatre, Poets Corner whatever. Right? Then I now have a problem with spelling. I have to shift…

(RPM Interview 2, Maggie, 14/06/11)

As the school-based researcher, I continued to suggest ways in which Maggie could use the time in the literacy block allowing for more supported reading time in order to improve fluency. Maggie, in negotiating the tension of including fluency practices with the availability of the teacher aides to provide support to students, proposed that
these fluency practices could run “in that session with the two ladies that’s assigned to me” (RPM Interview 2, 14/06/11). I made it clear that the role of the aide is not to make literacy instructional decisions, that “what I'm suggesting is that obviously, you are the professional...” (RPM Interview 2, 14/06/11); clarifying that it was Maggie’s role to provide initial instruction.

Moreover, in the later part of the interview, Maggie indicated that she also had a listening post as an activity in her classroom. However, the way in which the listening post was utilised was not effective for supporting students with fluency needs. Maggie indicated that the students “tended to skirt through” (RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11) this activity. It provided an opportunity within our collaborative conversation for me to suggest how to transform this activity into one that could be used to support fluency (see Figure 6.3 on page 128):

Maggie: That makes sense. Um, if you have a spare body. Um, teachers tend to use that as an independent activity. But not independent in the proper or purer sense. If a teacher could sit at that, if a teacher didn’t have another thing to do, if a teacher could sit at that post and do what you just suggested I could see that would be a way forward.

Researcher: I would tend to say that if you model that and scaffold that learning so that they know that expectation. That it is the same thing as a choral reading they are not yelling they are whisper reading...

Maggie: Mmm.

Researcher: That they are whisper reading as the narrator reads, so that you wouldn't need another body there.

Maggie: Okay, so it would have to be scaffolded. Everything has to be scaffolded.
Researcher: That they would get to, you know that would be playing, and they would be whispering, and that’s it.

Maggie: And whispering is a new thing because it is an, um, ambient level

Researcher: Yeah. It’s not at a speaking level…

Maggie: Yeah, it’s a number one voice or a number 2 voice…

Researcher: (Modelled how to read quietly aloud) You know? But they are reading!

Maggie: Yeah. Yeah. That’s a great idea! Researcher: So those are all things that…

Maggie: Well, that’s a strategy that I just picked up from you now!

Researcher: It has to be scaffolded. But that’s how you turn it from a listening station to actual a fluency (practice).

Maggie: Yes.

(RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11)

In the dialogue above, from the second RPM interview, I highlighted to Maggie the reasons why the students might not be engaged in the activity. I also discussed how the goal of the activity, to support fluency, was not adequately being met through the current format of the activity (Tension B); see Figure 6.3, on page 128. Again, in the third RPM, there was evidence of further capacity building when I clarified how Maggie could use the listening post as another opportunity to choral read, using the author reading the story, as a support.

As the RPM activity proceeded further, tensions arose. The tension between the
division of labour and the subject continued to resonate from RPM 2. Maggie, in RPM 3, addressed the secondary contradiction of monitoring students and incorporating effective practices to address student needs (Tension A & C). I attempted to negotiate this tension by supporting Maggie, offering suggestions on how to use this activity in a controlled manner and sought to eliminate potential disturbance issues. Maggie seemed to view these suggested modifications as valuable stating that it “is a great idea” and that “it is a strategy that [she has] just picked up” (RPM 3, 08/11/11). Expansive learning improved Maggie’s knowledge of fluency and fluency practices transformed over time into a mediated tool that she used to assist improved fluency and inevitable student achievement in literacy, as shown in Figure 6.3.

**Figure 6-3: Identified tensions around using new approaches**

**Tension A:** Deep knowledge about literacy instruction and practice vs. building on current understanding  
**Tension B:** Implementation of practices that used effectively to improve fluency vs. implementing a modified practice  
**Tension C:** Supporting student learning vs. monitoring behaviour
6.5 Negotiating the practice
To promote an effective and student-focused learning environment, Maggie had to negotiate the various demands she faced. However, she felt that any deviation from her schedule could cause tension in her classroom. Her consideration of moving writing time to accommodate more supported reading opportunities was an example of trying to negotiate tensions that existed within the activity system.

6.6 Reconstruction and destruction of activities
Maggie’s practice also revealed that she reconstructed the listening post in her classroom, as it aligned with her new knowledge of actual fluency practices. This direction modified the original intent of the activity, as Maggie understood it. The goal of the listening post, as she described it, was for students to listen along with the tape recording of a book.

By modifying the way in which students used the listening post, Maggie reconstructed the activity so that it functioned less as a passive activity and more as a fluency practice offering students another opportunity to read.

6.7 Appropriation and integration
During RPM 3 (08/11/11), Maggie reflected on the support provided to enhance her professional learning and how it had become a part of her practice. She had a better understanding of how to use data to inform practice and was less resistant to using it.

Maggie reflected on wanting to incorporate other fluency practices into her classroom, acknowledging too her need to build her knowledge and understanding of comprehension strategies in the classroom (outcome). Maggie reflected on this,

... now I've used it and it is a useful tool as it becomes embedded. As I don't question it as I am more accepting of it as I use the data as I keep data properly as it should be kept. All these other things, yeah I would probably want to turn to some of the other things like...say Reader's Theatre, even though it's not much different to Poet's Corner...but
how you bring that in and a lot of the other stuff as well...a lot of the other activities and possible shift my focus to more comprehension....

(RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11)

It seems that Maggie had negotiated tensions around her Theory of Action (Timperley & Parr, 2005) and beliefs about using data. Maggie seemed more open to using suggested practices in her classroom, even stating that they were now “embedded” in her practice (RPM Interview 3, 08/11/11). The knowledge and practices that Maggie had gained during the RPMs had transformed the object of the activity.

It is often difficult to shift people’s thinking because they are predisposed to safeguard their existing schemas. The tension was created when literacy activities were suggested to be incorporated into a rotation during the literacy block. Maggie did not see it as viable in her classroom without more support. In further conversation, Maggie reconstructed the activity so that she was able to utilise the aides by shifting the writing time. Often people take new knowledge and transform it into something that is consistent with what they already know – to avoid being overwhelmed, they assimilate (Katz, Earl & Jaafar, 2009).

Maggie identified that she needed more supports, knowledge, and guidance about the literacy innovations discussed and how to implement them in a literacy block even after further clarification was given and solutions established.

6.8 Conclusion

JSS leadership sought an activity that was designed to promote student achievement in literacy, essentially through collective inquiry and supportive conditions for learning the mission set out by the school, which mirrored the National Partnership goals. This activity would be one way that teachers could reflect about, not only their student’s learning but also their own.

In this chapter, I illustrated how the PLC is a complex social entity, through the exploration of the RPM activity over time. The RPM was designed as an activity to promote collegial learning in a supportive environment, whereby the teacher could
ask questions around teaching and learning, and the researcher would offer solutions that were research-based, flexible for all students and engaging. The goal of these meetings was for teachers to come away with new or expanded knowledge about areas of literacy that they were initially unfamiliar with and commit to innovate on supports for students aimed at improving literacy. However, this activity proved to be complicated by individual histories, values and knowledge. By this I mean the activity of RPMs, though designed to support teacher learning and foster inquiry around student data and performance, were complicated by the teacher who inevitably made the activity itself a complex negotiation. Teachers came with different levels of understanding, different interpretations of expectations and goals for students and themselves, varying pressures and varying levels and kinds of support needed to accommodate innovations.

The challenge is in the helping teachers reflect on their literacy histories and preconceived notions about literacy learning. Deeper understanding occurs when teachers begin to orient themselves with theory, data and literacy innovations that are presented. Through the RPM activity, Maggie’s Theory of Action was impacted and inevitably transformed the way that Maggie understood literacy and affected her teaching and learning in her classroom. This activity had a logical structure with clear goals for the meeting, which provided multiple opportunities for deep reflection and new learning.

In the RPM activity, Maggie was able to honestly reflect on her current knowledge and ability to support her students effectively. At the beginning of the school year, Maggie had limited understanding of fluency and shared reading strategies. As shown in Table 6.1 (see page 123), by the end of the year, Maggie was referring to strategies with a greater understanding of their purpose and was implementing strategies into her classroom. Maggie appeared to be more confident about supporting her students in productive ways (Field Notes, 08/11/11). However, tensions still resonated and these are identified and outlined in Table 6.1 (see page 122).
This chapter offers a ‘real’ world context for the utility in providing teachers with multiple opportunities for evidence-based professional learning conversations for collaborative problem solving and inquiry around student data.

In the next chapter, I will explore the JSS implemented PLC activity, Watching Others Work (WOW). I will argue that this peer-mediated and leadership implemented activity designed to promote teacher learning and collaboration, was also complex in its development and enactment.
Chapter 7 Tensions and Tactics for Improving Collaboration and Teacher Learning

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I presented a view of the school change process as being fraught with tensions. Individual teachers felt many of these tensions; some were felt by groups of teachers, some by the school administration and some by project staff. Subsequently, Chapter 6 presented an up close view of an activity designed to promote collective inquiry and a sense of individual and shared responsibility in the activity called the Reflective Practice Meeting (RPM). Teachers and school-based researchers’ perceptions of these meetings led to tensions around different levels of understanding, interpretations of expectations and goals for students and themselves. Some tensions were negotiated by teachers and researchers more successfully than others. Over time, many recurring tensions became negotiated in different ways, as collaboration and collective inquiry built a common focus for researchers and teachers.

In this chapter, I focus on another activity, Watching Others Work (WOW), put in place by the school administration as a tactic to help staff learn from each other. As discussed briefly in Chapter 5, and more in depth in Chapter 2, school reform scholars and researchers consider collaboration to be a key characteristic of a PLC. WOW, as it was implemented at JSS, provided an opportunity for collaboration which facilitated further occasions for teachers to build on their professional knowledge and become more reflective practitioners. It was not part of the larger SEP project.

The remainder of this chapter addresses tensions relating to the WOW activity. Using Activity Theory (AT) as an analytic tool, I present a descriptive analysis of participants’ experiences in an activity initiated to support collaboration for peer-to-peer learning. Data sources include individual and focus group interviews conducted with teachers in all year level groups and with the school leadership team. As I proceed, my goal is to understand the complexity of actions involved in the implementation and development of a seemingly simple activity that is designed to promote teacher learning and collaboration in the PLC.
7.2 The background: Watching Others Work (WOW)

JSS’s 2010-2013 Strategic Plan outlined the use of National Partnership School Reform (see Appendix B on page 187). In the strategic plan, the leadership outlined funding for school culture and staff morale to improve teacher quality and workforce planning. The WOW was introduced into the school during 2011, aligning with the goals of the strategic plan. It was designed to promote peer-to-peer learning (through observations) and to share and celebrate good teaching practice at the school. This innovation was rooted in larger policy and funding decisions within the school region (i.e. National Partnerships Agreement).

7.2.1 The JSS leaders’ beliefs and goals

Figure 7.1 (see page 135) illustrates how the JSS leadership team aimed to develop a PLC that focused on student achievement. To achieve the outlined objective, they implemented a Professional Learning Framework, discussed later in this chapter (see Appendix E on page 190), which incorporated solutions to problems that were embedded in the JSS community. Figure 7.1 (see page 135) displays the activity system transformed. This transformation occurred with the introduction of a new activity into the PLC activity system (the WOW activity). As discussed earlier, the school leaders had introduced the use of WOW to create open and shared professional learning across the school. WOW was seen as an opportunity for JSS teachers to collaborate for innovation on practice; specifically, by way of peer-to-peer observations and this is shown in Figure 7.1, on the page 135.
With models of good practice already established, leaders offered teachers the opportunity to go and watch others and share what they were doing. This WOW experience is described by Luke, one of the leaders:

*We used some of that professional development money to release teachers to go and watch other teachers because I think – and I could be wrong – we’ve got some really good teachers at this school and I think we’ve got some teachers with some really great strengths. When they’ve gone outside they come back and say, “Well, we’re already doing that” or “we’re trying that”. So I think for me that said: “Well, let’s share what we’re already doing.” That came a bit from all the Fullan stuff because you know, in their change in Ontario they went around and found good practice and then shared good practice.*

*(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term1)*

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**Figure 7-1: Interacting activity systems at JSS**

With models of good practice already established, leaders offered teachers the opportunity to go and watch others and share what they were doing. This WOW experience is described by Luke, one of the leaders:

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*(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term1)*
Luke’s background, values, goals and beliefs influenced various aspects of the PLC mediating his leadership in diverse ways. They had an effect on how he organised for implementation, structured activities, deployed tools, and cultivated rules and norms.

Luke used leadership literature to provide the guidelines for the WOW activity, both in theory and practice. Expectations were also influenced by external forces including DET policies and the National Partnership Agreement. Luke further clarified, saying:

…We see it as a long-term thing, so I do the Fullan version- much of the ready, fire and then aim – as in, let’s put something in place and tweak it as we go along.

(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term 1)

Luke’s construction of WOW as a ready-fire-aim activity was realised through action first and specific purpose later. According to Fullan (2010, p. 17), underpinning “ready, fire, aim” was a set of specific change-savvy ideas that acknowledged the need to get some change happening and later refine it. Similarly, for Luke, WOW was about taking risks, getting to the actions sooner to achieve some kind of effect. He was ready and firing and in the course of this he was engaging in communication during the implementation; Luke treated WOW as a learning experience both for the teachers and the leadership team, and he made the necessary changes to the activity as it progressed.

Luke also described the long-term goals of the WOW, to make room for more authentic conversations with peers around teaching practices.

The following illustrates the leaders’ perception of the activity:

Where we want to get to at the end, and I would think that’s probably Term 4 is that that’s really more of a coaching role, that those people feel comfortable enough to have the conversation around: “This worked really well. Have you thought about doing something different around this?” I’ve seen it somewhere else, and it really worked so nearly a critical reflection. At the moment it’s a very positive-based
reflection: “Just go in and grab something great and try it in your room.”

(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term1)

The leader recognised that this was an activity that would evolve over time, as teachers became more trusting and collaborative and leaders continued able to reflect on the activity and purpose in the PLC.

In the following section, I will provide an overview of peer-to-peer observation and how the WOW activity transformed over time. Again, the focus of this dissertation is on how teachers and leaders experienced and negotiated tensions as a result of the introduction of PLC-related activities. In this chapter, I will centre my description primarily around the context of the WOW activity.

7.3 Peer-to-Peer observations

Working with your peers is not a new concept but one that school leaders grapple with when trying to promote authentic collaboration in their schools. As discussed in Chapter 2, authentic collaboration includes dialogue, inquiry, and reflection as strongly favoured collaborative norms, which include “respect for diversity of opinion, openness and ultimately trust” at its core (Piggot-Irvine, 2012, p. 4).

The value in focused peer interaction “is the social glue or focus and cohesion” that results (Fullan, 2010). This is the reason why school leaders like Luke, make their best efforts to facilitate this type of interaction to create a PLC, with the aim to create a community that collaborates in authentic and meaningful ways to reach common goals.

Therefore, the focus on peer-to-peer observations was appropriate for JSS because of the links between professional growth of teachers and collaboration amongst educators and the goals of the school.

Furthermore, research has strongly suggested that direct observation of classroom practice is one of the most effective professional learning experiences for teachers in building capacity (Hattie, 2009). Many studies that look at peer-to-peer observations
exist at the tertiary level of education. These studies used approaches called ‘collegial classroom observations’ (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009); ‘peer coaching’ (Showers, 1984); and ‘action learning’ (Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009). These approaches have the potential to support teachers to take responsibility for their professional learning through observing and discussing with their peers in context, promoting further authentic collaboration; and in moving from observation for positive feedback to an opportunity for critical reflection on practice (Sandt, 2012, p. 356).

7.3.1 The challenges with peer-to-peer observation

Creating trust and moving teachers away from operating in “siloes” is difficult in schools where autonomy is embedded in the culture of the school. To shift privatisation of practice, there must be trust and a willingness to change. Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban. (2009), conducted an action research study as part of the New South Wales state government initiative which introduced peer observation as a strategy to build a community of learners. Initially the study found widespread opposition among many teachers as participants felt uncomfortable with peer observation until they recognised that the focus was more about professional learning and less about judging and critiquing. The study made clear the need for trust and openness to be established for the peer observations to be purposeful in developing a community of learners (Aubusson et al., 2009). The leaders at JSS were mindful about this too and were cautious not to put too much pressure on teachers before building trust:

So we’ve tried to focus on that this term by giving everyone an hour extra outside of their non-contact of viewing someone else and fill in a reflection… It wasn’t mandating “you’re going to do this.” It was, “Let’s share what’s working.”

(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term1)

Research by Sandt (2012) identified three main tensions related to the use of peer observation to promote learning and collaboration among teachers in school. The first was the limited effectiveness of peer observation as a tool for collaboration; which is
also evidenced in this current study. Second, he discusses the evaluative nature of some peer observations. In this study, the JSS leaders did not place evaluative expectations on the teacher observers to provide critical reflection. Leaders explained that teachers were encouraged to give the peers positive feedback from the observation and follow the activity parameters:

So we've put it in place, we've given them a format to reflect, we've given them some parameters of our expectation and that is what you do before you go and watch someone, what you do during, as in etiquette, and what you do after. That is an expectation that you touch base with one of the administration to say what you saw and what you liked and that you touch base with the teacher that you saw to tell them what something positive was in their classroom.

(Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term 1)

Leadership was mindful not to cause further tension by having teachers rating each other or by having too many rules about the reflective process. Instead, they wanted to create a positive and safe environment for teachers to share their practice, to erode the walls of autonomy and build trusting relationships.

Moreover, research by Murrary, Ma, and Mazur (2009) revealed that teachers who participated in peer observations also used the post-observation time to have productive and general conversation. However, at JSS the actual time spent discussing collaborative instruction was short and the conversations lacked depth. Researchers have asserted that peer observations without significant structural support did not, in and of itself, aid professional development (Sandt, 2012, p. 358). As Timperley (2011) attests, how “tinkering around the edges or leaving teachers to it does not lead to the kinds of change that make a difference” (p. 3).

Finally, Sandt (2012) also found that teachers who used a peer-to-peer observation format reported that time allocation was a major issue and caused tensions resulting in shallow collaboration. Some of the teachers involved in that study did not believe that such an activity would become a part of the teachers’ professional development because there was simply no time (Sandt, 2012, p. 362).
This type of quaternary contradiction of structure and format of the peer observations; expectations from the leadership on protocol; and what occurred before, during and after the activity; were manifested during the implementation of the WOW activity at JSS. Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts; as “contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 37). These are further described by Engeström (1993) as conditions of the activity that put the subject in adverse situations that become secondary to achieving the object (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), and thus transformed. Transformations of the activity of the WOW over time create further tensions, which will be discussed in greater depth in the following sections.

7.4 Watching Others Work: Terms 1 to 2
Various JSS teachers perceived the WOW activity, as gaining knowledge from peers that was relevant to them. However, teachers experienced barriers and tensions in the activity which hindered making the most of it. This section will discuss the experience that the JSS teachers had during WOW in Terms 1 and 2 based on interview and focus group interviews.

The WOW during Terms 1 and 2 was an opportunity for teachers to observe a peer for a one-hour released block, once in each term. One leader described the purpose of the first WOW activity to be a teacher watching and learning something new and trying to create conversation around the experience; which they view as building capacity, as shown in Figure 7.2 on the following page.
According to the JSS leaders, teachers were encouraged to collaborate before and after the WOW activity. Teachers were also invited to fill out self-reflection forms and meet with a leader to discuss their experience (Field Notes, 06/09/11, Term 3). Some teachers then took ideas that they observed and implemented them in their classrooms (Carmel, Focus Group, 14/04/11, Term 1, Team B; Focus Group, 07/09/11, Term 4, Team D).

At least one leader was aware of the contradictions that would be introduced into the PLC. He conceded that, in the Term 1 WOW activity, teachers observed others not based on what they wanted or needed to learn more about, but rather watched for the convenience of looking at a familiar teacher teach (Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term 1).

The following section will discuss tensions that manifested during the initial implementation of WOW. These tensions relate to the goals (object) of the activity
established by the JSS leaders to promote an ideal PLC, organising for effective collaboration and the authenticity of collaboration.

7.4.1 Outcomes of the WOW activity

The JSS leadership introduced WOW in the PLC, to create an opportunity for teachers to observe their peers best practice and break down barriers of autonomy between teachers (object), as displayed in Figure 7.3 on page 143. However, some teachers indicated that, during the Term 1 WOW activity, they were unsure of the goals of the activity (Tension D). Some teachers treated the activity an opportunity to have a look into other teachers’ classrooms or “just go watch someone work” (Focus Group Interview, 04/06/11, Term 1, Team D). What is more, there were few instances of teachers who had chosen peers to collaborate with for the purpose of supporting their professional learning to better meet the needs of students in the classroom. Most teachers did not engage in the WOW as a collaborative inquiry cycle. Most simply saw the WOW as an hour observation of another teacher.

For many teachers, tensions existed between the freedom to select a peer who might offer the kinds of learning experiences suited for the observer, versus observing a peer who was simply available at a given time (Tension B). The tension may have been in part due to the scheduling of the WOW, which limited teachers’ ability to choose who and what they wanted to watch, creating further tensions (see Figure 7.3 on the next page).
7.4.2 Authenticity for peer observations and professional learning across classrooms

Teachers were initially unable to pick a time for the WOW experience as they were allocated specific times. This timetabling created tension within the system because some teachers found that they were allocated times that did not suit either what they
wanted to observe or who they wanted to observe (Tension B and Tensions D) (Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). Secondary contradictions in the system were created because teachers often chose a peer to observe due to availability during their allocated time (Tension B and Tension D) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). Teachers’ limited choice of observation slots for the mandated activity (rule) served as a tension which was later renegotiated by the leaders. When discussing the ability to view teachers of interest, one teacher, Dan stated that they “got allocated a time” for WOW in Term 1, which restricted his ability to observe his classroom of interest (Individual Interview, 25/11/11, Dan, Term 4, Team C).

While the leaders wanted the WOW activity to provide opportunities for teachers to engage and learn from their colleagues and share practice (object), the opportunities to observe across year levels were limited (Teacher Dan, Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C). Another teacher discussed this tension saying:

…The first time we were given a time slot, so you really had to work with the time slot you were given...So it was a first in, best dressed sort of thing but you got to go where you wanted to go rather than be like, oh I've got to go do it today at this time...On this side it was bad because the days we were first given – the first two times we did it, one of the other cohorts was at non-contact time so you were always going to the same class.

(Individual Interview, 29/11/11, Bella, Term 4, Team C)

Further most teachers were unable to observe others who would facilitate effective peer sharing and collaboration (Tension A) and choices were not made on individual needs or interest (Tension A and Tension B), as these teachers reflect saying,

**Bella:** Yeah. But I think the thing is, when you went and saw someone, you actually weren't really necessarily interested in seeing...You sort of were literally just there.
Dan: You had to go during that time, which was Maths time. If you were in the first half an hour of someone’s maths group, you’re watching Maths Mentals and that’s what we all do. We all do it exactly the same way, so it wasn’t necessarily a part of the day you would prefer to have seen, even from that teacher.

(Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C)

Teachers frequently exhibited confusion around the objective of the WOW activity, as it did not allow them to organise in ways that would promote peer observations and collaboration. They seemed to struggle to see it as a purposeful way of learning new and relevant practices (Tension A). Across year levels, teachers felt a lack of flexibility (rules). They had to “look at who’s available and choose those people” Sue, Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D rather than someone from whom they thought they might learn a lot. In a sense WOW was more about the activity than the learning. In other words, Watching Others Work became a very literally interpreted activity. The contradictions in the system transformed the WOW activity from one that was supposed to foster critical reflection and build teacher capacity, to one that merely provided an opportunity for teachers to watch other teachers work.

7.4.2.1 Proximity

The proximity of the classrooms and the ability for teachers to get to the other campus and use the time effectively was a secondary contradiction in the system that created further tensions (Tension B) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). When asked about collaboration across year levels, one teacher responded: “it might be good to go over and watch the other campus…see what they’re doing, rather than over here” (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D) (Tension D). Another teacher responded saying, “The problem with us doing that though is it takes so long for us to get over there, and we’re only given an hour. So, by the time we leave our room, get
there we'll probably have a really short time…” (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D).

One leader also recognised that if teachers were located on the same campus, they were more likely to discuss peer observations (Individual Interview, Hayley, 09/06/11, Term 2). Cross-campus collaboration and post discussions of teachers were more complicated due to the time restraints (Tension B), stating:

…I know there's follow-up on the same campus, but when you've got these guys coming across to see something on this campus or vice versa, it makes it a bit harder to follow up, other than when we all meet together or whether they're sharing emails. I don't know.

(Individual Interview, Hayley, 09/06/11, Term 2)

The leader did not negotiate to alleviate organisational tensions of proximity to others or allot release time to facilitate this cross-campus peer collaboration.

### 7.4.2.2 Opportunities to collaborate

In a related tension, teachers' actual WOW observations took up all the time allocated, which put pressure on their ability to collaborate post experience with peers (Tension C) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). For teachers to negotiate this tension, this would have required them to use their non-contact time or other personal time, to be able to engage in critical reflection with the teacher observed. Most teachers did not use their non-contact time to negotiate the tensions in the system as non-contact time was viewed as their own time protected by the Union.

One teacher indicated that their non-contact was already encroached by other JSS activities, saying, “… what I could do is use my non-contact time, potentially, to see somebody. But quite honestly my non-contact has taken up quite a bit as well with meetings and PD and stuff. So that's not always available either” (Individual Interview, 25/11/11, Teacher Dan, Term 4, Team C). Many teachers found that they did not have a chance to talk to the teachers that they observed (Tension C).
7.4.3 Authentic collaboration for learning

During interviews, there was rarely any discussion around specific tools or strategies that teachers saw in their WOW activity, which was then implemented in their classrooms. At some point, teachers from one team did report that a resource used during a WOW experience was shared during a meeting (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D) and taken up by some teachers within the team. As discussed previously in Chapter 5, this type of lower level collaboration may cause professional conversation around a resource, but rarely extends to strategies that impact teaching and learning (Tension A and Tension C) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). For example, the following is the reflection that one team of teachers had about the Goal Booklets resource (a booklet used to track five goals for each student) introduced to Mason during his WOW time:

*Mason:* I didn't adopt it, the goals booklets, but these guys did.

*Sue:* I knew there was. They're the best thing…

*Mason:* That's what bought back and shared…

*Sue:* …ever to come out of that…

*Researcher:* So when did you share that with them?

*Mason:* I had it on the Wednesday in the first session and then our non-contact middle session, so it was in that day.

*Researcher:* You brought it into them?

*Sue:* Yeah.

*Tom:* Yeah, it was towards the end of the term. I've been off on and off working this term, so I don't really know. I made the booklets up ready to go here.
Teacher Mason had shared the resource he gained from his WOW activity, with his colleagues, but did not see its use in his classroom (Tension A). At some level, this Goal Booklet provided an opportunity for the peers in that team to collaborate with each other, even if only for resource exchange (Tension C). Team D teachers did not discuss specific learning strategies around the Goal Booklets; rather they simply considered the purpose of using the resource. The WOW activity in this instance served a way for teachers to provide positive feedback about useful elements/resources of the classrooms that they observed.

Furthermore, when asked to reflect on the difference between the participation in the WOW in Terms 1 and 2 and how it benefitted them; Teacher Maggie said it [WOW in Term 2] was “More discerning…Less interested in the fringe, frivolous stuff and more interested and focused on what am I going to take out of this” (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D).

However, Teacher Maggie’s actions and responses during other interviews found that she had not thought about the teacher she was going to observe in Term 2 until it was time for her to participate in the activity. Moreover, when she participated in the WOW, she had no indication of what the teacher planned to teach, nor to what benefit the observed lesson would have in meeting the needs of students in her classroom (Tension A). The lesson was seen as useful as she could see how to modify the lesson to meet the needs of students in her class (Individual Interview, 14/06/11, Maggie, Team D). When asked about whether she thought that she would go back and discuss what she observed with the teacher she said,

No, … in this particular lesson that I observed, it's fairly straightforward. [It was] functional grammar, I understand functional grammar better. But I don't implement it because it's above my kids. Secondly, with the resources, it's just a simple creation of some
purpose-built resources which can be done, so really there would be no follow-up with this particular teacher.

*(Individual Interview, Maggie, 14/06/11, Team D)*

The teacher did not see the value in following up with the teacher observed as part of the WOW activity, nor did she feel that further collaboration would take place (Tension C and Tension D).

### 7.4.3.1 Reflection

Most teachers perceived the “reflection” of WOW as a series of informal discussions and responses around classroom observations, providing positive feedback as to what teachers thought was useful. When discussing what needed to occur after the peer observation, a teacher said: “We have like a checklist or an A4 page of just questions or reflections about your time there, and then we go and see our deputy and discuss it with them – what we'll do in future and what we liked” (Elliot, Focus Group Interview, 14/04/11, Term 1, Team B). Another teacher elaborated, emphasising the informality of the process saying, “I think our management team, our principal, actually described that as ‘informal’. They [JSS Leaders] want it to be an informal feedback” (Emmelia, Focus Group Interview, 14/04/11, Term 1, Team B).

Most teachers saw the use of the reflections sheets as optional, the meeting with a leader to discuss the experience as an informal follow-up was not as an opportunity for them to deeply critical reflect on their learning as such (Tension A and Tension D). One teacher used the reflection sheet as a way to take notes for remembering what they saw, saying, “…It jogged my memory as to what was happening, and I took about two pages of notes while I was in there as well. So I mean it was more a matter of that reflection sheet was for us to jog our memory on things that worked, things we want to try…” (Carmel, Focus Group Interview, 14/04/11, Term 1, Team B).

Teachers also described the post-WOW meeting with a leader as a “requirement,” to complete the WOW. Some teachers reiterate the informality of the activity, referring to it as a chat (Carmel and Emmelia, Focus Group Interview, 14/04/11, Term 1, Team B). Teachers’ perceptions of the activity and the expectations of what was to
be done before, during and after the observation were continually unclear. Teachers believed that they were complying with the expectations of the leaders. However, these engagements in this format (rules), seemed to be too informal and too time restricted for any real impact to be made in creating open professional learning and sharing across classrooms.

7.4.4 Transforming the WOW activity: teacher reconstruction

Perceptions of the WOW activity by some teachers reflected the informality of the activity (rules), which left room for teachers to adjust the activity to meet their needs in negotiating the inherent tensions (Tension A and Tension D) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). One teacher decided to go and “watch” multiple classes changing the structure outlined by leadership altogether saying, “...The first time I went I went to the [Team X] building, and I went to the three different classes, so I spent about 20 minutes in each one...Just watching, because they were doing similar things (Tom, Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D). This teacher was not engaging with the collaborative process in any of the classrooms he visited. Instead, going in and out of classrooms at different points of time throughout the hour viewing lessons at various times, suggested that what the teacher was going in to observe was so broad that it did not matter what point in the lesson he came in (Tension A). Tom did not see this as a conflict and instead negotiated the activity to suit his interests, as the rules of the activity were often unclear (Tension B and Tension D) (see Figure 7.2 on page 141). Likewise, another teacher used their WOW time to observe teachers from a different year level who had not seen gains in their student achievement data in literacy. This teacher sought to provide a critical eye to peers and offer some ideas on how they could improve the literacy block.

The consistency of how the WOW time is meant to be used and its purpose was continually unclear, as Chris, a JSS teacher, suggested. He said: “…The second time I went into a year level where data from the first round of LL4LL [SEP] wasn’t so great, and I thought ‘Well, I’ll go in and see if I can see what they’re doing and whether I can help them improve on what they’re doing or give them some ideas’.” (Individual Interview, 25/11/11, Term 4, Team A). The teacher did not provide any clarification of what he would be observing and why or how this observation was contributing to their professional learning. It created an environment whereby only
some teachers were seen to need further professional development, which caused further tensions in the system (see Figure 7.2 on page 141). The informality of the rules of the activity again seemed to have clouded its purpose (object), leading to less than desired outcomes.

7.4.5 Leaders’ reflection on the effectiveness of the WOW activity
As already discussed, some JSS participants depicted an activity that, because of current tensions, inhibited the ability for teachers to engage in critical reflection about their practice for improved teaching and learning in their classrooms. Hayley (leader) identified the primary contradiction in the system saying:

…So, I think for some teachers it’s [WOW] been really powerful for some of them, the feedback that we’ve got in terms of them going, “Oh God, I’ve got to see this teacher do this”. That was fantastic! Now whether that then becomes something they apply to their own practice, we probably haven’t gauged that and gauging that is - I guess maybe we have to look at how we do that.

(Individual Interview, 09/06/11, Term 2)

The leader recognised that, because of a lack of structure for critical reflection and collaboration, the essence of the activity, many teachers were not participating in post observation conversations with the teacher because they were unclear of the expectations (rules). The leaders were trying to be cautious and not to push teachers too hard, but the building of trust and comfort with the activity should have been paramount (Tension D) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). Instead, uncertainty about how teachers were engaging in the activity was created. The leader recognised this tension saying,

I know some have done some follow-up but others, I wonder whether they have. After they do their WOW they’re meant to do some feedback for the teacher, you know, some positive stuff and do some reflecting themselves. We haven’t made that – or [the Principal] hasn’t made that like mandated or anything that’s meant to be occurring…Some people do it and some people don’t.
Moreover, the leader seems uncertain about whether or not this perception of observing teachers during the activity was promoting a culture of learning for all, by all; or just for a few teachers. Leader Hayley identified this tension stating,

… I think they’re certainly more aware of what others are doing and can talk about each other’s work. So someone will say, “Oh, wow! [Tom] does this well or so and so does this well.” What it has done, I think, for some, is that it has made some teachers more heavily loaded with observations because the word spreads, “Go and see this person, go and see that person.” Then there are others who don’t have their work watched at all. So, I don’t know what the fallout from that is either.

In a PLC focused on authentic collaboration for learning, all teachers would be viewed as contributors to the process, and that all have something to offer. The continued tension over what should occur throughout the WOW clouded the activity as an opportunity for collaboration and its importance in including this as a function within the activity to achieve the outline goals.

7.5 Leaders’ negotiations

Tensions and contradictions that were created in the system were transformed through negotiation. As discussed previously, the format of the WOW within the JSS PLC Framework was modified by the leaders over time due to negotiations intended to resolve tensions. The WOW for Term 3 proposed that I, which they deemed as the “expert” from the SEP project, would be available to meet with teachers every Tuesday for 50 minutes to offer literacy expertise during their WOW time (Artefact, 01/08/11). The leadership viewed the WOW time as a way to better support teachers with strategies from the SEP project:

_We thought the most obvious solution for us (regarding TRS cost) was to use the available staff we have for this term. The additional staff member will not be available to us next term so we are keen to_
have the teachers released to focus on [SEP]. [The Principal] is also concerned that if I am the one who is going to facilitate the meetings, then that is not the best use of time for me or our staff as I already met with the teachers on a weekly/fortnightly basis either as a team or individually.

(Hayley, Artefact Email, 1/8/11)

There had been miscommunication as to the availability and use of the SEP school-based researchers (SBR) within the school. A meeting was called by the Chief Investigator of the SEP project to discuss and clarify the role of SBRs and actions needed for the goals of JSS to be achieved. SBRs were not to consult individually with teachers beyond the scheduled RPMs to maintain the consistency of involvement across SEP schools. The limitation on allocation of resources also prevented this from being feasible. During this meeting, the Chief Investigator discussed the need for teachers to focus on what they were “watching” during their WOW experiences. Also discussed, was more structure around the WOW activity to effect professional learning and promote collaboration. More teachers needed to be critically reflective about their learning needs; and then use the WOW time to collaborate with a teacher who could support their learning before, during and after the activity.

The leaders’ case for changing the WOW activity was a complex array of negotiated approaches that they engaged in to manage tensions among beliefs, external demands, and practices. Leader Luke indicated the sense of urgency saying,

… For us, it was about timing, it was about the urgency that we needed around LL4LL [SEP] and the fact that at the same time we were introducing Developing Performance Plans and wanting to give people some clear guidelines around how they use their WOW, looking at feedback from you guys around LL4LL and [Hayley] with planning meetings, to give people a little bit more structure instead of just going in and observing whatever they felt their weakness was. But it was moving towards I guess for me, from an administration
perspective, I'm looking at it down the track they don't necessarily know that I guess.

(Individual Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3)

The leaders felt a sense of urgency to embrace the strategies that the SEP project had introduced through professional development and RPMs. The TORCH data indicated the need for teachers to close the student achievement gaps in literacy faster than they had in Terms 1 and Term 2.

7.6 A transformed activity: Watching Others Work Term 3 to 4

The WOW in Terms 3 and 4 was transformed from that which was initially introduced in Terms 1 and 2. The leadership gave teachers more freedom in how they used tools and were able to decide how they used the time. The WOW activity, as it was conducted in Terms 1 and 2 as peer observations became an optional mediating tool. In Terms 3 and 4 it became an opportunity for teachers to choose their WOW activity. For example, teachers had the choice of (1) observing another teacher as in Terms 1 and 2; (2) making SEP resources; or (3) meeting with the Head of Curriculum (HOC) to collaborate around SEP strategies (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D) (see Figure 7.3 on page 143). Additionally, during Term 4, many teachers were able to use the time to work on their Developing Performance Plans (required by Education Queensland) to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Also, teachers needed to select professional development based on their weaknesses to achieve outlined goals that they set for themselves. Some teachers reported that they used their time to plan, mark and develop resources for their classrooms (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D). These seemed to be acceptable mediating tools for teachers to engage with during their WOW activity, as described by leaders.

Teachers were again released for a one-hour block for this activity to occur. The leadership and teachers still referred to WOW as a distinctive activity even though in Terms 3 and 4 there were more options. The activity itself looked very different from its original purpose (see Figure 7.4 on the next page).
The various options of how to use their WOW time further confused the purpose of WOW throughout the school year. For example, Mason did not recognise that the meeting he had with the HOC constituted his WOW activity. He felt as though he had missed the opportunity to participate altogether, saying “Well, we didn’t get to do WOW in Term 3, we had a meeting with [Hayley] about LL4LL [SEP]” (Mason, Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D).

The following teachers’ discussion of WOW in Term 3 illustrates the confusion that teachers faced in trying to figure out what the WOW activity was and the parameters (rules) associated with it:

Mason: In WOW Term 3 we were just pretty much taken off class and given our own time.

Lucy: It was like a,, wasn’t it like a half hour meeting with…

Mason: An hour.
Lucy: An hour? Mine wasn’t an hour.

Sue: I didn’t even have a meeting.

Maggie: What? I can’t remember that.

Sue: I just had to do some of that LL4LL [SEP] stuff.

Mason: I got given the time to myself to do what I wanted.

Lucy: So did mine, but that time was when I met with you and that was - that’s the only WOW time I’ve had all term.

Researcher: Okay. So everyone else sort of used that time as an independent sort of…

Mason: Yeah, I just did marking and some planning…

(Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D)

The WOW activity was confused further when it no longer remotely resembled its original structure or purpose (Tension A), as displayed in Figure 7.5 on the following page. Teachers seemed confused about the meaning of the WOW, how the goals aligned with the larger JSS mission, and how to use this activity to target the gap in professional learning through authentic peer collaboration. This showed “a lack of direction from leadership” (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D).

The transformation of the WOW activity created new tensions and left others unresolved. The new WOW structure was transformed to provide teachers with options on how to use the time, but not directly support the goals of the WOW activity (object). In negotiating later tensions associated with the activity and the system, the leaders introduced new tools to the activity with the same goals (see Figure 7.4 on page 155). This transformed the activity and created new tensions which were negotiated by teachers in different ways, shown on the next page, in Figure 7.5.
7.6.1 Tensions resolved, created and lingering

7.6.1.1 Collaboration for learning with the HOC

The leaders decided to use the WOW in Term 3 to support teachers’ implementation of SEP strategies by giving them a choice of how to use the time. In Term 3, teachers were given the option of using the leader as a resource to ask questions directly related to their class. Sometimes a group of teachers and the leader would meet, sometimes it was just an individual and the leader. Teacher Dan felt the feedback about his class from the HOC was “the best opportunity” stating, “…To talk to
somebody about what I'm doing and for somebody who knows the process to give me feedback as to what is working, probably, and what I need to change. Nobody else has been maybe in a position to tell me what I need to be doing or changing” (Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C).

The tensions of the peer-to-peer observations continued to exist, contributing to teachers opting for other experiences because they did not see the value of peer observations for collaborative learning or critical reflection (Tension A) (see Figure 7.5 on page 157). One teacher, Sammy, described the activity as a “Hit and miss sort of thing” (Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C).

Another teacher found that meeting with the leader was a useful tool in order “to come up with buddy reading” as a strategy to use in the classroom, but that it should have only been allocated 30 minutes, with the rest of the time used as the teacher saw fit (i.e. grading, planning, etc.) (Teacher Lucy, Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D). This showed that authentic collaboration amongst peers persisted, hindered by the perceived value of the activity for that teacher. Though the meeting with the leader during the WOW activity was used to address specific concerns of the teachers, it looked more like an up-skilling opportunity rather than a collaborative one as intended (WOW field notes, 23/08/11, Team D Teachers; 16/08/11, Team C teachers).

7.6.1.2 Tension: Authentic collaboration for learning from peers

In Term 3, many teachers still did not put any emphasis on the importance of collaborating with the teacher that they observed to build mutual capacity. When asked if there was an expectation for teachers to collaborate after the WOW, a group of teachers responded:

Maggie: No.

Tom: No, there wasn’t at the start.

Other (unclear): No.

Maggie: No, no. Watching others work is watching others work.
Often when teachers did meet after the WOW activity, the quality of reflection and collaboration was still limited due to time restraints, with teachers saying that they had difficulty finding time to just go; e.g. “Okay, can you just explain why you've done this and things” (Bre, Focus Group Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3, Team C).

Teachers often exchanged resources or gave positive feedback about what they liked about the lesson that they observed. One teacher mentioned the following when asked about whether she had conversations with the observed teacher, saying, “Yeah, but they were low-level conversations like; “How's this working with that behavioural kid?” and ‘How long has it taken you for it to look like this?’ What I consider to be low level” (Maggie, Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D).

In Term 3, some teachers still saw peer observations as adding little value to their learning and engaged in it as a perfunctory exercise – teachers moved through it to complete the task, as required by leadership. For example, these teachers responded to questions about whether they were observing a peer based on their needs (Tension A) (see Figure 7.5 on page 157):

Sue: For the sake of watching it.

Mason: But it's just, yeah, you're there because you've have to be there.

Sue: Sometimes it was a case of who can I go and see.

Tom: Yeah, I've got to go and see someone.

Maggie: Yeah.

Sue: … I've got to go and see them, and it seems a waste.

(Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D)
One leader conceded that in other collaborative activities there had been a clearer purpose, whereas the structure of WOW and the expectations and purpose around it were often unclear or still being negotiated (Tension D) (see Figure 7.5 on page 157):

…The WOW timetable, I guess, is still in its infancy in terms of purpose, if that makes sense. There are some teachers that have had a purpose and know they want to go and see somebody for some reason and there’s purpose behind it and intent, and therefore they go and they get something out of it. But there are others, like you were saying, that go, “Okay, now it’s my Watching Others Work. Who am I going to see? Oh, I’m just going to go and.” And while I wonder - while it may not be as authentic as we’d like it to be, if just merely by going through the motions, do we tick the box if, oh well they’re actually in someone else’s classroom, so that’s the first step.

(Individual Interview, Hayley, 09/06/11, Term 3)

The leader recognised that part of the original goal of the WOW activity was creating an open environment; concluding that the deprivatisation of classrooms had mostly occurred. However, she conceded that little, if any, critical reflection for targeted teacher professional learning and shared practice to support improved student achievement, was evident.

Moreover, when teachers describe what occurred throughout the WOW, it is clear that many chose teachers to observe for general reasons. Teachers discussed wanting to watch their peers during literacy time, but often lacked specificity about what they were aiming to inquire about and how this new learning would benefit their students. The WOW activity could instead be an opportunity to promote the goals of the school to create a culture of collaboration and support for learning and inquiry, not simply an opportunity to observe a peer doing a random lesson.

Teachers would have benefited from collaborating before the activity. Doing so would have allowed teachers to determine: the goals of the lesson; where the peer was in the teaching process; and why the lesson and was planned to meet the needs of students. The observing teacher on their WOW experience could then go into the
activity knowing how the lesson would flow and be mindful of what specific aspects of the lesson to focus on.

Additionally, there was limited opportunity to determine if the planned lessons would provide them with any support for their identified learning needs. Follow up reflection and authentic collaboration is another critical aspect of the activity that would go further than sharing resources (i.e. worksheets).

7.6.2 Further negotiations transforming the WOW activity: Term 4 and Beyond

Discussions with SEP Chief Investigator in Term 2 highlighted the need for the WOW activity to be more structured so that teachers could enter into the activity knowing what they are going to observe for the purpose of building their professional learning. The leaders indicated more focus on what they were observing and why would be beneficial for them when they had to complete their Developing Performance Plans required by the Education Department (Individual Interview, Luke, 09/09/11, Term3).

But we've just started implementing Developing Performance Plans where they have to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and that their PD has to be based on their weaknesses to improve and achieve the goals that they set for themselves. So for me, setting it out this way was a bit about me saying: “This needs to be your goal for this term and this needs to be where you need to improve.”

(Luke, Individual Interview, 09/09/11, Term3)

Hayley, another leader, reflected on her experience as an observer in classrooms and highlighted the difficulties of reflection for learning with the awareness that “some of them [teachers] do, and some of them definitely don't” know what aspects of the lesson they should be looking at in order, to fulfil the goals of the activity in support of their learning):

I know that when I do observations on teachers, I'm looking for particular things, particularly because when you're in a classroom and you can, and that's for teachers who are struggling or that have got issues. You know what you're looking for. Whereas if you, I guess, as a teacher going into another teacher's room, you don't
necessarily you might not recognise what you’re looking for or you may not have had any internal purpose.

(Individual Interview, 09/06/11, Term 3)

The leader acknowledged the lack of structure and the limited expectations about what occurs in the activity had contributed to limited reflection for learning: “…Some structure would help them. But if you know that your deficit’s Behaviour Management, do you necessarily go into a classroom and just look at behaviour management?” (Individual Interview, 09/06/11, Term 3). Hayley indicated her uncertainty as to what the focus of the peer observation should look like had minimised the effectiveness of the experience for teachers. This shows that ongoing leadership reflection and the ability to act on resolving tensions throughout the implementation (“fire”) phase and beyond would be crucial in keeping the goals of the activity (object) clear.

Additionally, the Education Queensland Developing Performance Framework (DPF) created a further quaternary contradiction in the system in Term 4 (DET, 2015). All teachers were expected to complete the framework by the end of the following year, so the JSS leaders wanted to prepare teachers (Individual Interview, Hayley, 09/06/11). In doing so, the leaders decided to provide the 14 teachers time to work on their Developing Performance Plan. They offered teachers their WOW time in Term 4 to do this because they wanted to give them the opportunity to link their learning needs with the WOW.

Leader Luke described how these two activities should have informed the reflective learning required for teachers to improve practice; working as interacting activity systems with a common objective, saying:

So it was the beginning of that process about giving them more structure around not just picking anything, “Oh, I’ve heard [Toms]’s classroom’s beautiful, I’m going to have a look.” But rather only to work on: “How do I implement the LL4LL [SEP] powerful practices in my reading block? Therefore, I’m going to go and observe [Mason].” So I’m trying to build them more that way so that their WOW is more for them personally but also based on a reflection of their practice.
Reflection on practice became an additional secondary contradiction in the system. In addition, the leaders anticipated tensions caused by the mandated DPF activity. In trying to negotiate the tension of pressure from EQ, the leaders determined that the WOW time could be used for this preparation, which inevitably transformed and further complicated the WOW activity. However, the leadership felt that giving this time would provide teachers opportunities for reflection on practice: “...Next term [Term 4] we've got 14 people trialing or doing their first Developing Performance Plans, that in their WOW time, they will link that to their plan. They will know ‘my weakness is this, I need to observe someone’.” (Luke, Individual Interview, 09/09/11, Term 3).

The leader felt that for the teachers involved in the Developing Performance Plans trial in Term 4, the activities would allow them to identify what their “… goal is and making sure that they observe and reflect on something that is going to help them succeed to achieve their goal.” She believed that this way of reflecting on learning had “… 100 percent [that is] changed for those people. So I think that would be good to see how that works because that then makes it more of a personal journey and it makes it more about their teaching and their improvement and their personal needs, whatever that might be and recognising that. So I can see that changing for sure” (Individual Interview, Luke, 09/09/11, Term 3).

In previous Terms the leadership provided teachers with a schedule of available times for teachers to participate in the WOW. The leaders realised in preparation for Term 4, that assigning teachers a time to observe other teachers was not conducive to valuable professional learning and authentic collaboration:

*The timetable of it will stay quite structured because we have to employ someone to release on a day. However, it's worked better this term when we've given them the opportunity to select their own time and place, and leave it as an open calendar on [One Portal], they've engaged better. So instead of us doing the timetable up at the start, which we thought would make it easier for them, and then*
them having to find a teacher, they’ve preferred to go and find a teacher and a time that’s going to be best and then timetable themselves in on the blank timetable that we put up. So we’ll do that again next year.

(Luke, Individual Interview, 29/11/11, Term 4)

The leadership had to negotiate tensions while dealing with the restraints that they faced within JSS (e.g. paying for relief teachers). As Bella, a teacher, reflected on the diminution of this tension for her, “…this time around, which was really good, they put a blank timetable up on the computer and you got to put in which day and what time you wanted to go…” (Individual Interview, 29/11/11, Term 4, Team C). The teacher recognised that the WOW activity was evolving over time and felt that teachers had the ability to pick (rule) “… because it was your choice, as opposed to being told you’ve got to go this day at this time, and it’s not something I want to see, sort of thing” and she found it more useful saying, “I'd love to see it stay, especially in the format that they did this term.” (Individual Interview, 29/11/11, Term 4, Team C).

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined an activity that was introduced into a PLC activity system to share good practice across classrooms for continued professional learning, in order to improve student achievement. However, tensions and contradictions in the system led to transformations of the activity, to better achieve the object. Some of these negotiations were made by teachers who adapted the activity to suit their needs. Leaders inevitably were the ones who had the most control over how the activity transformed. Over the course of the school year, leaders modified the rules and introduced new tools into the WOW activity system.

One leader was committed to his belief about the significance of first building trust and then refining the activity to more purposefully contribute to the larger JSS PLC goals. He identified the difficulty leaders often faced in gaining the trust of teachers to the point where they were willing to share their practice with others openly (Individual Interview, Luke, 12/04/11, Term 1)
Initially, Luke negotiated this tension by easing teachers into the WOW. The leaders chose to introduce this activity to mitigate tensions gradually but, unfortunately, compromised the effective use of the activity – mainly due to fear of backlash from teachers who might refuse to open their doors for others to come in to observe. There was no instance of teachers refusing to take part in the WOW activity perhaps in part due to the peer observations occurring mostly within a select group of classrooms – where “best practice” occurred.

This too created contradictions in the system, with teachers not recognising that all teachers, including themselves, had something to offer their peers. These few teachers became frustrated with the pressure of having regular visitors into their classrooms (Individual Interview, Hayley, 09/06/11). It also created a mindset that some teachers had little to offer regarding professional learning. The WOW activity was modified to help support these teachers. Throughout the course of the school year, teachers were confused about the expectations and rules that were associated with WOW – some teachers in Terms 1 and 2 used the reflective sheets; some met with the administration; some chatted with their peers about what they observed; while other teachers engaged in some or none of these related activities (tools).

The activity then looked different for different teachers. The common tension expressed by most teachers in reflecting on their experience was about the scheduling of the WOW time. Teachers found it difficult to observe the practices of teachers at a time they were both available. Some teachers did not regard the WOW as a professional learning opportunity, as it lacked the opportunity to learn from their peers (Focus Group Interview, 07/09/11, Term 3, Team D).

The leaders recognised this and negotiated this tension in a few ways. Firstly, the scheduling was problematic because it limited who teachers were able to see and at what time. The leaders then in Term 4 provided more freedom for teachers to schedule their own WOW time, so they could select who they wanted to observe and collaborate with. Secondly, leaders recognised that teachers were often less reflective of their professional learning needs to inform whom they observed, which made this activity less potent. With the introduction of the Development Performance Plan by Education Queensland, leaders saw how these two activities shared a
common goal (objects) which, over the course of the school year, they became more responsive about addressing.

Implementation of innovations within the system is very complex work; and when leaders made changes in an "ad hoc" fashion, they did not accomplish their goals. The object of the activity at the beginning of the year fell further and further out of reach, as teachers negotiated the tensions created in the system contributing to diluting the power of peer-to-peer observation. Dufour, Dufour & Eaker (2009), warned about implementing change in schools, finding that the “existing methodology of schooling is so seductive that rather than recognising the need to create a new culture based on assumptions, educators are prone to adopt and dilute ideas and concepts to fit their existing culture” (DuFour et al., 2009, p.25). The leaders approached introducing this new activity into the system with caution so as not to create too many tensions that might affect teachers. In doing so, the impacts of the introduced activity were minimal.

Within the literature, there is some encouragement for people just to get going with something: “ready, fire, aim” (Fullan, 2010). What they got going with at JSS was only superficially related to the actual activity. They could say that they had peer-to-peer learning networks through WOW but in reality, what they did was not well aligned with the practices advocated by Fullan (2010). This was not anyone’s fault, as policies and external demands for action came down the pike creating new tensions; this school did the best they could. In some instances, they have tried to negotiate tensions, like scheduling, but also recognised that there was more to be done for the WOW activity to achieve positive outcomes (Individual Interview, Luke, 09/09/11, Term 3).

In the next chapter, I will restate the aim and the significance of the study, summarising the research methodology employed and the methodological contributions of this research study. Subsequently, a summary of the main findings are presented about the research questions relating to the development of a PLC; and recommendations are proposed for informing the field of education about how PLCs develop.
Chapter 8: Discussion and Summary of the Study

8.1 Introduction
The research reported in this thesis was undertaken to develop a deeper understanding of how a school emerges and grows as a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Using a case study methodology, I explored the complexity of ideas and activities that are part of the process of PLC development, and I challenged the often-over-simplified rhetoric that exists in the professional literature about improving schools.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I reviewed past reform efforts and the professional literature related to PLCs and made the case that the field of schooling improvement needs to develop more elaborate explanations of how PLCs develop through activities and initiatives deployed by administrators, researchers and professional developers.

In Chapter 3, I presented a synthesis of research and theory related to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). I articulated its strengths and limitations as a framework for exploring the nature of PLC activities as systems. In these systems, tensions within their components emerge and are negotiated. PLC activities continuously take shape and transform in the course of working toward the collective goals of school reform.

Chapter 4 was used to outline the case study methodology. I detailed data collection and analysis procedures for the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with teachers and leaders. I described the processes for observing teachers at work and provided details and examples of the artefacts and field notes collected to develop full descriptions of a school, its staff and university researchers at work. My goal in using a case study approach was to provide a detailed account of the highly-contextualised nature of, and complexity within, the decision-making and innovation in schools.

In Chapter 5, I explored themes related to participants’ experiences of PLC development. I reported data about common tensions evident in participants’ talk as they discussed PLC foundations, activities and processes. In this chapter, my goal
was to build a complete account of where and why tensions in activity systems emerged and how negotiations were made by those involved. I described how the change process was challenging for all those involved and I argued that, in real schools, the change process is more complicated and emotionally charged than the professional literature might lead us to believe. Throughout this chapter, I argued that building a well-functioning PLC involves iterative cycles of intervention, negotiation and resolution.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I developed a CHAT analysis of two different PLC activities. In Chapter 6, I developed a theoretical account of how (Reflective Practice Meetings (RPMs) worked as part of a schooling improvement agenda. University school-based researchers mediated these RPMs. Chapter 7 dealt with the other activity, which was a peer-mediated and leadership-implemented WOW activity. This took place as teachers were encouraged to reflect upon teaching and learning and provide each other with feedback. My analysis and discussion demonstrated how both of these activities caused contradictions and tensions in the activity systems and the larger context of the PLC. These tensions were resolved in ways that sometimes had unintended and unpredicted consequences. These chapters contribute a unique perspective on PLCs as comprised of dynamic; socially-mediated activities replete with tensions and negotiations that have the potential to transform activities for better or worse. The findings in these two chapters, resonate with conclusions drawn by other researchers. Specifically, in the ways teachers and leaders “respond to these tensions affects how effectively they implement the intended reform” (Russell & Schneiderheinze, 2005, p 39).

In the remainder of this final chapter, I will discuss the contributions that this thesis makes to the field of educational change and to understandings of how PLCs develop. I will also examine the limitations of this study and the complexities of doing research in a dynamic educational setting. Finally, I will outline recommendations for implementing and monitoring changes to enhance the functioning PLC. As an educator, I hope that this work will provide opportunities for others to examine the development of the PLCs and to contribute to understandings of how teachers and leaders make decisions about teaching and learning that ultimately impact their students.
8.2 Unique contributions to educational change and PLC development
This present study contributes to schooling improvement research and offers insight into how activities, to promote fundamental tenets of the PLC, develop within a school and responds to changes and pressures from both within and outside of the school system.

8.2.1 Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory to unpack complex education change
In this thesis, I have described and analysed the experiences of people engaged in a complex change process, filled with human histories, beliefs and values. These inevitably influenced community members’ actions and reactions within the PLC activity system. Leaders and teachers often held different beliefs and expectations leading to tensions around teaching and learning. Other contextual factors created tensions at JSS including student and teacher mobility; competing policy demands from the Education Department; the pressures of high stakes testing and public reportage of data. Further pressures were related to the fact that some of the principals were employed on performance related contracts under the National Partnerships scheme (Singh et al., 2013; Glasswell, et al., 2016).

The contradictions introduced into the system impacted the activities within the JSS PLC, transforming, manifesting and inevitably changing the system. Leader and teacher perceptions about the use of student achievement data to monitor progress created further contradictions. Some teachers prioritised NAPLAN test preparation over other instruction within their teacher activity (Bella, Focus Group Interview, 08/04/11, Team C). There was pressure for improvement at a class, school and regional level. Teachers and leaders experienced this impact, in different ways.

JSS teachers and leaders were engaged in complex, often boundary-crossing activities systems, “involving going into the unfamiliar territories” which required “cognitive retooling” (Tsui & Law, 2007, p.1290). Negotiating practices within these activities holds the potential for transformative action for teachers and leaders in schools. Sometimes tensions caused more disturbances in and across activity systems and transformed outcomes considerably. For example, when the leadership continuously modified the WOW activity, altering it from an opportunity to observe
and collaborate with peers to a specified block of time, where teachers could choose to engage in a variety of activities unrelated to the original goals of the activity.

A major contribution of this study has been the in-depth analysis of influences on, and interaction within, PLC activities. As the use of CHAT in Chapters 6 and 7 showed, actions can be viewed as positive or negative. The PLC literature suggests a somewhat rigid, unidirectional developmental trajectory for PLC growth (see Fullan, 1985). However, this present study has shown that change is more complex. At JSS, PLC development was more susceptible to the impact of tensions, negotiations and the reconstituting of activities in everyday interactions. Transformations (for better or worse) were largely the result of how people within the PLC managed tensions and negotiated them over time. Activity Theory (AT) provided a methodological framework that allowed for further examination of how, and perhaps why, these transformations occurred within the PLC activities, and influenced other activity systems within JSS.

This interplay and boundary-crossing, the horizontal movement between activity systems, has been discussed by CHAT scholars. According to Engeström (1999), “creative externalization occurs first in the form of discrete individual innovations. As the disruptions and contradictions of the activity become more demanding, internalization increasingly takes the form of critical self-reflection – and externalization, a search for solutions, increases” (p.33-34). This current study further highlights the importance of examining the differing impacts of reform within a system and how those involved deal with those impacts. The creation of new activity systems at JSS required teachers and leaders to reflect on current tools, histories and practices which offered ways to negotiate internal contradictions described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. In this present study, approaches to critical reflection for change and negotiating contradictions for better outcomes was seen as a way of moving closer to the goals of the PLC system both in the RPMs and in the WOW activities.

As discussed in Chapter 3, boundary-crossing is the interaction among joint activities and their outcomes to resolve contradictions that occur (within and across those activities) (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009; Singh et al., 2013). There is a continual boundary-crossing between the immediate and everyday activity and the
often dissociated and abstract activity. At JSS, the tensions in the WOW and RPM activities were central to the complexity of the interrelated actions. This made activities dynamic and continually developing entities (Engeström, 1999).

For example, in Figure 8.1 (below), the RPM activity system and the WOW activity system were used as mediating tools for the developing PLC activity system. When new elements like tools (RPM and WOW activities) were introduced in the PLC system, tensions and contradictions were created between factors in the system producing an outcome.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 8-1: Interacting activity system impacting the PLC development**

My analysis focused on the relationship between the different layers of contradictions, as well as the way I related these contradictions to negotiated actions. This analysis offers educational researchers an alternative route to explore reform, examining how teachers and leaders negotiate their collective activity. It also provides insight on the various levels of contradictions and a model of their utility in–
action’. As analysed throughout this thesis, the PLC development as an activity system was driven by shifts, disruptions, and remediation in participants’ engagement with their evolving object (Foot & Groleau, 2011). This case demonstrates that the CHAT framework is particularly pertinent to research on the schooling improvement process. It allows for the consideration of some social variables and histories that better contextualise the often decontextualization of policy and reform (Hattie, 2009; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014).

8.3 Rethinking the PLC development

This thesis also makes a contribution to the ways in which researchers might represent PLC development process and the characteristics of PLCs. What JSS taught me, was that the pillars of the PLC, as described by Dufour, Dufour & Eaker (2009), and similarly by other PLC proponents, are not easy to construct. Moreover, the process of PLC development is not steady and unidirectional. While scholars do warn us that schooling improvement is complex, they provide a limited description of how change occurs (see Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2009; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves, 2004; Schlechty, 2005). Even when there are good intentions to build a solid PLC, we can gain knowledge from this current study about the tensions caused by the surfacing contradictions and ongoing negotiations. My point here, similar to other scholars, is that PLC development is much more unstable than it is often described (Riveros et al., 2012; Tarnoczi, 2006).

The following sub-sections will discuss further the PLC pillars as they presented at JSS. These sub-sections will discuss the common tensions as the starting point from which innovations seem to emerge. This is by no means an exhaustive examination of all possible manifestations of the contradictions in the PLC activity system, but a further analysis of some of the most apparent ones.

8.3.1 PLC Pillars: commitment to collective inquiry, learning and the application of learning to teaching and supportive conditions for continuous improvement

Collective inquiry as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 was evident through data interrogation for literacy innovation. However, it was also a major site of tension in the PLC. Data collection and use were reported as creating tension when the
interpretation of the data was meant to inform practice (see Chapter 5). Teachers at JSS engaged in collective inquiry mostly through the RPM activity facilitated by researchers. The RPM activity discussed in Chapter 6 was an example of joint developmental activities. It was also a chance for expansive learning between JSS teachers and researchers to occur. Such inquiry and support transformed the object of the teachers’ work activity. Similar to other studies, transformation occurred not in the students’ learning as such, but the evolving teacher relationship with the goals (object) of the activity in which the inquiry and student support was provided (Virkkunen, Makinen & Lintula, 2010).

The RPM was an activity where teachers were placed in an environment where tensions were identified, and support was given. The RPMs created a reflective space where teachers could discuss strategies that would best suit students, negotiate barriers for implementation and resolve the tension in the context of their theory of action.

For example, the RPMs provided multiple opportunities for teachers like Maggie, as discussed in Chapter 6, to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses. Participant teachers had the opportunity to clarify understandings about pedagogy, practice and literacy instruction. If tension had arisen, the researcher assisted through collaborative problem solving and to negotiate identified tensions for the best outcome. Other researchers suggest that professional learning, like that offered during the RPMs, provides a contextualised process for capacity building (Timperley et al., 2007). The scaffolding approach to capacity building allowed Maggie to settle contradictions and transform her teaching activity to meet the needs of her students better.

Maggie’s initial change attempts generated secondary contradictions because newly introduced elements (i.e. using fluency practices in the classroom) were in contradiction with other elements of the system (i.e. having aides to support the management of the classroom during this time). Though many contradictions existed for Maggie throughout the RPM activity, this is one example of the response to tension, where the teacher takes advantage of innovation (mediating tools) within the system. This teacher reflected on the way in which she negotiated both her history
and new ways of operating to make room for new learning. Maggie widened her object overall by building capacity around specific aspects of literacy instruction, to meet the needs of her students, through her professional learning. Similar research conducted by Andrews and Lewis (2002), the current study found that shared understanding developed through professional learning in the RPM, had the potential to impact on action taken in the classroom. Maggie through her engagement in ongoing inquiry and reflection, recognised that she still had more to learn in realising the object of the activity.

Contradictions reveal an opportunity for new learning and transformation highlights the richness of the activity system, as a “growth bud” (Foot, 2001). Maggie changed her beliefs about her learning and innovations on practice, realised through asking questions in RPMs; attending professional development and trying new things in her classroom to support her students. Bruce, Peyton and Batson (1993) acknowledge that it is “in the ways they respond to these tensions affects how effectively they implement the intended reform” (p.39). Indeed, Maggie saw clear connections between her learning within the collective inquiry during these RPMs and the impact that had on meeting the needs of her students.

This present case study builds on the research of others who have brought to the foreground the value of how teachers’ reflective practice built on inquiry skill and knowledge (Day, 2003, Earl & Timperley, 2009; Glasswell et al., 2016; Lai & McNaughton, 2009; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Märtin & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013). This type of research work is “essentially concerned with construction and deconstruction of meaning; and its proponents recognise either implicitly or explicitly the existence of a ‘reflective spectrum’ through which personal theories may be examined and made public” (Day, 2003, p 84). Based on the evidence from this current study, the emphasis of working together in a supportive environment where the researcher and the teacher could approach the improvement of students’ learning as a collective endeavour and shared responsibility, proved productive at JSS. Opportunities for ‘in house’ mentoring would have provided teachers with further day-to-day support beyond the RPM with researchers or induction opportunities with leaders.
This present study further highlights the utility in providing teachers with multiple opportunities for evidence-based learning conversations across year levels. It is important that these evidence-based conversations are held within a trusting environment that evokes reflection, in order to lead to the development of new knowledge (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). As seen at JSS, the difficulty for further professional conversations built on teachers’ knowledge was mainly due to distance and limited time for strategies and knowledge to be communicated effectively school-wide, as discussed in Chapter 5.

8.3.2 PLC Pillars: Strong leadership and supportive and shared power; and Shared values, mission, vision and goals

The JSS leadership had a clear vision of what they wanted their school to “look like” but were not clear on how to implement their vision. Leaders faced decisions about how to manage the change process at JSS.

The balance of how tight or loose, how top-down or bottom-up, how distributed or not a leader should be, is not simple either. How are leaders to know which decisions are to be made by them and which should be made with consensus by the whole? These are all complicated moves the JSS leaders had to consider when making decisions about the PLC – some created tensions and contradictions in the system that subsequently disturbed its culture for better or worse. For example, Luke, a leader, identified the Union as an external pressure that he navigated in the developing PLC.

The WOW activity was initiated to support a culture that the leadership team was striving to develop. This present study highlights the need for leaders to move beyond the mere establishment of a mission and wider set of school goals. They should instead make clear the purpose of activities introduced to the system and communicate what role teachers play in accomplishing these goals.

Leaders modified the activity as they recognised tensions around timetabling and the introduction of the Development Performance Plan. As the multiple iterations of the activity emerged, teachers found it increasingly difficult to clearly identify the purpose of the activity and how it supported the JSS goals (see Chapter 7). Leaders attempted to establish supportive conditions for the WOW with teachers using a
reflection sheet during the observation and subsequent meeting with the administration about the observation. This interaction occurred only occasionally as reported by teachers (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, ongoing consideration about how the activity was supporting outlined goals was needed for collaboration and professional learning to have been authentic and valuable. Specifically, it must include dialogue, inquiry and reflection as strongly favoured collaborative norms (Piggo-Irvine, 2012).

Tensions around ongoing support and leaders’ shared power for problem solving were reported. For example, some teachers initially did not feel they were heard when recommendations were made about student streaming early in the year (Focus Group Interview, 06/04/11, Term 1, Team D) (see Chapter 5). Inevitably, these classes were reorganised. However, this had already impacted on the teachers’ perceptions of the value of their professional recommendations and influence over decisions.

8.3.3 PLC Pillar: Collaboration
Collaboration is a key aspect of the PLC, which relies on individuals to trust and support one another for the greater good of the whole. As discussed in depth in Chapters 2 and 5, authentic collaboration requires community members to be reflective and inclusive in problem-solving. Collaboration as an embedded practice within the JSS PLC was undefined and infrequent. At JSS one was reminded of the limited opportunities for members to authentically collaborate due to time constraints, physical distance or availability, and expectations.

Collaboration, specifically in the WOW activity, was viewed by leaders, as an opportunity for teachers to learn from and share with each other good practice in a deprivatised setting. As discussed in Chapter 7, this activity transformed over the course of the school year, with leaders narrowing the goals (object). Still, the teachers seemingly had a limited understanding of the specific goals of the activity initiated by the leadership. The implementation phase of the WOW (in Terms 1 and 2), presented elements in contradiction with other components of the system, resulting in a secondary contradiction to emerge.
The goals of the WOW activity (object) evolved with the leaders’ attempt to provide more opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other within the PLC. A divergence resulted between the tools (mediating tools) and protocols (rules) of the WOW experience, which had been employed since early in its implementation phase. Thus, this extended the goals of the activity (object). Teacher’s engagement toward the object in the WOW activity varied widely in content and structure. For example, the frequency with which teachers were able to collaborate about the peer observations were dependent on individual teacher’s allocation of time and energy. This reflected the relative priority of WOW over other activities in which they were involved. The WOW activity required feedback from teachers throughout the change process. Continually reflecting on ways that would make authentic collaboration and sharing of good practice (object) more achievable. However, there was little evidence that this occurred.

This study found that the WOW created a space in the timetable for the possibility of focused collaboration and sharing, but due to various tensions created, often missed opportunities for powerful reflection and collaboration, as the leadership had envisioned. Similarly, research conducted found that creating opportunities for teachers to work together, collaborate and have ongoing conversations about teaching and learning may have increased the likelihood of this sharing occurring; but did not guarantee that it would (Graham, 2007; Yiend, Weller, & Kinchin, 2012; Sandt, 2012). Furthermore, similar to the research conducted by Timperley and Robinson (2000), this current study found that school leaders allowed teachers to engage in processes that were often ineffective.

For Luke, a school leader, the outcome of the WOW activity fell short of the goals (object) established at the outset; as further quaternary contradictions emerged (see Chapter 7). Beyond the WOW activity, teachers engaged in collaboration mainly to share resources and plan curricular activities (see Chapter 5 and 7). This level of collaboration is what Fullan (1985) would see in the initiation phase of PLC development (see Chapter 2).

8.4 Summary
Tensions arose due to the presence of new expectations or new practices within the
PLC activity (using shared reading vs. using silent reading; or using data to inform practice vs. testing for collecting student data). Often tensions became the goals of the activity (object) themselves; thus, complicating the activity further with multiple and overlapping tensions. These complexities are not limited to tensions in the system, as tensions within individual components should not be looked on as rigid dichotomies (Madda, 2010). For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, the innovations that Maggie implemented in her classroom activity were enacted alongside those of the RPM activity, demonstrating the level of complex negotiation for innovation in practice and ongoing boundary-crossing. It is unsurprising, as Fullan (1985) acknowledges, that schools rarely move to a final phase of development,

Most strategies for reform on structures formal requirements, and events based activities...they do not struggle directly with the existing cultures within which new values and practices may be required...restructuring (which can be done by fiat) occurs time and time again whereas enculturing (how teachers come to questions change their beliefs and habits) is what is needed. (p.25)

Moreover, this current study magnified the complexity of how teachers of varying experiences and skill sets engage in building an effective PLC. Like that reported by other researchers, the current study found the importance of a common direction for action, developed in collaboration with key community members (Tarnoczi, 2006; Kilbane, 2009).

8.5 Limitations of this study

8.5.1 Considerations concerning the sample
The case study methodology, nested within a large-scale SEP study, highlight the difficulties of school settings; allowing an exploration of common tensions that might be generalisable to another school. Attempting to encapsulate how one school develops a PLC offers value to the educational community. The issue of generalisability is less relevant when the “intention is one of particularism” and exploration, as long as methodological approaches are also considered (Willis,
However, it is imperative to continue to attempt to build a new understanding of the development of PLCs in other school contexts.

The number of participants in this study was small (N=21). Those who were interviewed were willing to disclose aspects of the activity which became a tipping point for some; negotiating tension by adapting, adopting or abandoning aspects of the activity. As educational research can be confronting for some, I appreciated those teachers and leaders who participated. I acknowledge too that there were problems inherent in small participant size.

**8.5.2 Considerations of positionality of the researcher**

As discussed in Chapter 3, I acknowledged my dual roles as a researcher and participant in the change process were conflated. These roles were complex to manage. I also encountered tensions between my research and SEP project as I boundary-crossed between the roles of observer and change participant (Singh et al., 2013). My role as a participant was to support the school and build teacher knowledge, but my role as a researcher was to continuously observe the tensions that arose and how teachers, leaders, and the university team negotiated these tensions over the course of a year. As the study progressed, I felt as if I had become less of an outsider and more of a community member. My goals for the school became more aligned with those of others and more contextualised as valued relationships of trust were established. The teachers and I developed ways of communicating and sharing knowledge (Singh et al., 2013) to avoid misrepresentations about the community.

**8.5.3 Considerations of site stability**

As I reflect methodologically, I can see that my qualitative design was premised on the assumption that staffing at the school would remain stable over the course of the year. High rates of staff mobility meant that participants came and went with regularity. For one team, only 33% of teachers were consistent from Term 1 to 4.

Team B had 75% consistent teaching positions. Over the course of the school year, 25% of student support teachers consistently held positions. Such rapid and steady staff change meant that data collection and tracking participants over time was extremely challenging. Other challenges presented was in the timing and frequency
of data collection from teachers and leaders, as this was often determined by their general availability and other scheduling restraints. The result of this was a smaller than expected number of teacher cases (see Chapter 4). If I were to replicate this study, I would gather data more intensively and in shorter time frames, so that when changes in staffing occurred, I would have complete data sets for more teachers.

8.6 Implications and recommendations for the future direction of research

The use of CHAT as a framework for analysis highlights the transformative potential of participatory, interventionist methodologies used in school sites (Ellis, 2011). Further educational research needs to be conducted in CHAT to continue to build on the body of literature, examining the complexity of this change work in education by trying to understand the histories and contradictions that exist in school settings and the relationship between them (Bourke & McGee, 2012; Orland-Barak & Becher, 2011; Douglas & Ellis, 2011; Tsui & Law, 2007).

As there has been limited use of CHAT in educational studies involving PLC at varied sites Sleegers, Krüger, & Geijsel (2010) suggest that there is a utility for deeper investigation in schools about the contradictions as catalysts for collective transformation within systems, specifically PLC systems. Such research could build on this study and investigate how both internal and external activities shape a school’s PLC reform at multiple levels - a student, teacher and leader level; over a longer period. Identification of similarities and differences within and across school settings allows for further understandings of effective initiatives. These may be used to inform future reform efforts.

8.6.1 Implications and Recommendations for Reflective and Responsive Educational Policy and Schooling Reform

This study develops understanding of the features and the processes of a developing PLC. It provides new insights into schooling improvement and theory without oversimplifying its complexity. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the literature indicates that, if teachers and leaders “do this” it will help them achieve “that”, in simplifying what we know to be complex. Future research needs to attempt to unpack the complexity of schooling improvement.
New questions naturally emerged through the research process. One direction for future research is to more closely explore the implications that these tensions and negotiations play on students within the larger school system. How do PLC activities impact student outcomes? A better understanding of how these boundaries between PLC activities (i.e., WOW and RPM), teacher activity and student activity influence each other is needed. More effort should be spent in helping leaders and teachers understand how to negotiate change in productive ways and how to track tensions, both positive and negative, in dealing with them (Singh & Glasswell, 2016; Glasswell et al., 2016; Singh & Glasswell, 2013).

Further models for exploration, like those of the Change Laboratory process (Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pinlaja & Poikela, 1996), where the overall aims of the research-intervention are broad, might help imagine future possibilities. Such research interventions could include: leadership-driven PLC interventions; curricula and system policy design; concepts for researching teacher experience and academic work; historical-analysis into the changing mission of leaders' and teachers' professional learning for informed practice; and develop the transformative agency of reform efforts within education. In other studies, reviewed, the Change Laboratory method was used to create opportunities for communication between activity systems; allowing community members (i.e. teachers, leaders, regional directors) to support teachers in more productive ways (Jahreie & Ottesen, 2010).

There is shared hope within the educational community that teachers working collaboratively will significantly transform schools. However, collaborative cultures need to focus on factors that directly affect student learning (Eaker & Keating, 2008). In this present study, the lack of productive collaboration and ongoing communication between teachers and leaders limited outcomes. Teachers and administrators cannot rely on old practices or assumptions to get them by. PLC members need to move beyond trivial knowledge of concepts and instead make a sincere “commitment to developing knowledge of and beliefs related to being change agents in collaboration with others” (Fullan et al., 2005, p. 59). There is also a further need for the opportunity for intentional learning, whereby “research and exemplary practice inform school administrators and teachers” about more effective ways of promoting student achievement (Hord, 2008, p.11).
Furthermore, the findings from this present study suggest that researchers and all educational stakeholders should consider the impact that initiatives have within a system. There should be considered attention put on the varying levels of involvement in the system, with ongoing reflection on how tensions created are identified promptly. Leaders need to have structured urgency to take “aim”, get “ready” and “fire” but must also attend to the direction or goals of the activity system. This study emphasises the importance of a supportive environment where listening to and problem-solving of tensions by leaders, unremittingly happens alongside teachers within activities.

Frameworks like that of Fullan’s (1999) “change lesson,” views organisations as living systems that realise change by managing conflict and diversity (p.14-16). Fullan highlights the need for both top-down and bottom-up initiatives within the organisation, with an emphasis on personal conflict (Bligh & Flood, 2015). The value in Fullan’s framework is in trying to understand better how change occurs within unique systems.

Leaders need to have the opportunity to reflect on how they make decisions and prioritise to meet the goals of the activities employed effectively. More frequent communication at all levels within and across the schooling system needs to occur including at federal, state and local levels. Key stakeholders should co-design activities in order to adopt each other’s perspectives, in “continuous configuring and re-configuring of working modes, a process of boundary-crossing that is different from moving across settings or subject domains” (Lund, Rasmussen & Smørdal 2009, p. 208). In this study, the opportunities for co-design and authentic collaboration were limited. More and ongoing communication within and throughout the multilayer system could have alleviated some of the tensions around rules, the division of labour and tools.

Finally, this study found that with the support of more expert teachers in evidence-based conversation, such as that which occurred in the RPM activity, the potential exists to offer more responsive pedagogies for teachers and schools sites (Glasswell et al., 2016; Heimans et al., 2015; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2014; Singh et al., 2013) Teachers and
leaders can actively reflect and inquire about their contributions, both positive and negative, to affect student achievement. Once these factors are identified only then, can the school community move forward to address shortcomings effectively. As seen at JSS, discussions with staff revolved around future endeavours and little time were given to reflect on what processes or solutions worked, beyond the RPMs (see Appendix M, p. 206, for resonating tensions). As discussed in the previous section, research has consistently indicated the need for reflective thinking, individually and as a community (Graham, 2007). Future studies should continue to investigate “how” inquiry and opportunities for expansive learning occur within the PLC system.

8.7 Conclusion
A significant contribution of this study has been the analytic description of the development of a PLC in a ‘real’ school context. The findings from this research study are in no way critical of the decisions that teachers and leaders made throughout this complex process, but rather, has provided further knowledge into the ongoing transformation that occurred in the JSS’s professional learning community. In the course of undertaking this study, I have demonstrated my contribution of new understanding of the theoretical underpinnings, associated methodological issues and the pragmatic use of the concept of PLCs in school settings.

Moreover, the purpose of this study was to gain new understanding of two interventions within the larger PLC system; focussing on the local practice as descriptive of the wider systemic incongruity of Julian State School system.

This study also considers the complexity of the activity, examining the action to develop practice and the places of practice. Furthermore, this study found that some PLC activities created a space in the timetable for fostering the key characteristics (collective inquiry; supportive conditions for learning; shared values, mission and goals; leadership; and collaboration) of a PLC. However, the various contradictions generated in the system often resulted in less than productive activities; which impacted the achievement of outlined PLC goals.

As seen at JSS, transformations caused the activity to manifest into an alternative version from that which was initially envisaged. This change was evident as teachers and leaders questioned practices, analysed activities and developed new models of
Moreover, CHAT provided a methodological framework that allowed for further examination of how, and perhaps why, these transformations caused the activities (specifically the RPM and WOW) to manifest into alternative versions. The analysis of the relationship between the different layers of contradictions, as well as the links made to the negotiated actions by teachers and leaders within their collective activity, often led to transformative action within the system. Further, in this study, I have aimed to show how transformations within the PLC activity, rested on how encroaching activities were treated, influencing the outcome of the system.

The study established that it is not as simple as implementing “PLC activities” within a system to achieve improved outcomes. The study challenges the assumption that the development of a PLC can be described simplistically, and seen as a mostly formulaic process. Therefore, this study added further detail to understanding the features and the processes of a developing PLC. It also provides new insights for schooling reform and theory without oversimplifying its complexity. This study has highlighted the way in which schooling systems (i.e. teachers and leaders), professional developers and researchers who should give considered attention to the development of a PLC, as a complex socially-mediated process fraught with tensions. This thesis further highlights the necessity of providing ongoing reflection for “just in time” solutions to overcoming tensions within the system that obscure or block broader goals.

Furthermore, this current study has built upon the research of others (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Chrisman, 2003), highlighting the utility in providing teachers with multiple opportunities for evidence-based conversations across year levels, within a trusting environment, to evoke critical reflection and lead to new learning. Educational studies based on the research of innovations and effective PLCs could assist in clarifying the concepts and skills needed for educators for more productive system engagement at all levels.
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Appendix A: The Year Level Co-ordinator guidelines at JSS

Year Level Coordinator Role (YLC)

- Deliver 16 hours of instruction to identified group of students who have the potential to make significant gains.
- Perform all of the associated planning, data tracking and analysis, assessment and reporting.
- Set targets for ability groups and ensure students can track their own progress.
- Develop, create and manage Data Wall.
- Track students progress in conjunction with the CT.
Appendix B: JSS Examples of priorities in National Partnership Strategic Plans (2010-2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve student Literacy and Numeracy results</td>
<td>Through a range of projects such as “Every Classroom is the most effective classroom”, “Early Invention” and “Personalised Learning” we aim to improve on every child’s results in every classroom every day. These projects will deliver on a range of outcomes from ensuring that all stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) own a child’s learning, extending our top 10% every day, and “Closing the Gap,” in all target groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance and Punctuality</td>
<td>Through the purchase of ID Attend as well as the employment of a Student Welfare Officer we are making attendance and punctuality a major focus of everyday at JSS. All stakeholders will be rewarded for their commitment and improvement in this area through celebration days and award programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community engagement</td>
<td>We have developed a number of initiatives to engage our local community on many different levels. We will create our own “Well Being Centre”, develop and deliver a range of Parent Education Session to improve parent understanding of how they can best help their students, build links with the local universities and create a community garden which represents the diversity present in our community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the Gap for students in all target groups</td>
<td>Through Deadly Maths, Jump into Number, the creation and construction of a community garden and engagement and employment of specialised staff we will strive to close the achievement gap for Indigenous students, kids in care, students with disabilities and Pacifica students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Morale</td>
<td>We will engage in a variety of strategies to help improve staff morale. Some of these include a strong mentoring program for all teachers in their first and second year of teaching, the introduction of parallel leadership strategies, implementation of the Developing Performance Framework and reinvigoration of the Watching Others Work strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: JSS Examples of priorities in QLD Implementation Plan (2011-2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The 2011-2013 JSS Strategic Plan outlines the following outcomes taken from the State Implementation Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All students are successfully engaged in learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Young people are meeting basics literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Specific Target: NAPLAN - percentage of students at or above National Minimum Standard annual increase of 3% pa for all year levels in each domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Specific Target: NAPLAN – Percentage of students in the upper 2 bands of each domain annual target increase of 4% pa for all year levels in each domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the education disadvantage of children, especially indigenous children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Australian students excel by international standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Young people make successful transition from school to work and further study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community confidence in the capability of schools.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: National Partnership Key Areas of Reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The 2011-2013 JSS Strategic Plan outlines the following outcomes taken from the National Partnership Key Areas Reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Incentives to attract high-performing principals and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adoption of best-practice performance management and staffing arrangements that articulate a clear role for principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School operational arrangements which encourage innovation and flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provision of innovation and tailored learning opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strengthened school accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• External partnerships with parents, other schools, business and communities and provision of access to extended services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix E: Poster of JSS Professional Learning Community Framework 2011

### Improve Literacy and Numeracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2011 T1</th>
<th>2011 T2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Streaming across all year levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 8 hrs Maths and 8 hrs English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data Walls- Reading, Spelling, Maths (regular collection of data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All students have 3 targets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student achieving targets to be sent to the office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classroom library by beginning of Term 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• WALT and WILF in use daily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Embed ICT’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• See maths and English expectations on the One Portal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use new Science Centre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Building Capacity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2011 T1</th>
<th>2011 T2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Read One Portal each morning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inform colleagues of upcoming events on One Portal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate as a member of our Professional Learning Community-depravities practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Write your Personal Developing Performance Plan-Semester 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2 way participation in Watching Others Work (WOW)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflect upon peer and admin and observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Share planning with Admin twice yearly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- National Curriculum/Roadmap
- Professional Learning Team Leaders
- Data Walls-Student targets
- Let’s Personalise Learning (Extension, Tutoring, Pre-Prep)
- Assessment Framework
- SWPBS
- Closing the Gap- EATSIP
- LL4LL (Smart Education Partnership) and Literacy Café strategies
- Primary Connections

- Professional Learning Community Framework- including optional PD
- Developing Performance Plans
- WOW- peer learning from peers using 5E Model
- Peer and administration observations
- In house, professional learning
- Parallel Leadership
- Action Learning Project
- One Portal
- Innovation Grant
- One School
Appendix F: Participant Teacher Informed Consent

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher:
School of Education and Research of Higher Degrees
Griffith University

Dr. Kath Glasswell, Chief Investigator, Griffith University,
k.glasswell@griffith.edu.au, Phone 373 53615
Lindsey Judd, Student Researcher, Griffith University,
lindsey.judd@griffithuni.edu.au, Phone 0450903600

School-based Professional Learning Communities: collaboration, conversation and innovation for literacy improvement

Dear XXXX Teachers,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study that will involve classroom teachers of students in years XXXX; Learning Support Teachers; and those who are in a leadership role (i.e. Principal and Lead Literacy Teacher). The details of the study are explained below.

Description of the project:

The research project seeks to develop an account of the processes by which a professional learning community focused on using student assessment data to inform instruction can be created and sustained. The researcher is completing this research project as a component of a Doctor of Education degree from Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus.

Teachers in years XXXX will participate in the project (23 teachers in total). In the course of this research, the teachers will work with the researcher and the school leadership to establish a professional learning community focused on raising student achievement in literacy. The project will help the school establish a team approach to planning, instructional reflection and professional learning activities.

At the core of this team approach is a focus on capacity building for collecting, analysing and using student achievement data to inform instructional innovations in classrooms. Data collection will document the processes engaged in at the school site, as the professional learning community takes shape and develops. Priority will be given to gathering information from all participants regarding their experiences throughout the process.
This study will contribute to a growing body of research that seeks to understand the nature and consequences of professional collaborations in schools.

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to undertake the following during the 2011 school years:

1. Engage in six teacher support meetings (3 individual and 3 staff meetings) to enhance analysis and use of data for teaching and leadership purposes; Term 1, Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4.
2. Participate in one individual end of project interview and 2 focus group interviews; to reflect on the teacher’s role in the understandings of the professional learning community and the use of student data in the school to be completed in Term 1, Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4 (6 interviews in total);
3. Complete two questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project. The questionnaires will allow participants to reflect on the school environment (MSLEQ) the leadership support, student data use, processes of collaboration amongst colleagues (Using Data in Your School Questionnaire);
1. Participate in three professional learning sessions focused on the teaching of reading comprehension.

Confidentiality:

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without participants’ consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data will be used for other research purposes. Audio recordings made during this research will be erased following transcription of the data and each item will be de-identified. The school, teacher and leadership’s anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at www.griffith.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp or telephone the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 5585.

Withdrawal:

You are free to withdrawal from the study at any stage without any comment or penalty.

Questions/Information:

You are free to contact me at any time regarding this research. Email and phone contact details are provided above.

Concerns/complaints:

This project is under review by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Griffith University Research is conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Human Research (2007). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical conduct of the project, you can contact the Griffith University Research Manager at research-ethics@griffith.edu.au or at 3735 5585.
**Feedback:**

If you are interested you may receive copies of papers resulting from this research. You will need to notify Lindsey Judd of your interest. A summary of the outcomes of the research will be provided to the teachers via a school based seminar and as an emailed report.

**Risks:**

In this research there are no risks to the participants above those of ordinary, everyday living.

**Your participation:**

The participation of teachers and students is voluntary. In terms of the questionnaire/survey, participants do not need to answer every question unless they wish to do so. Teachers may refuse the invitation to be interviewed. Participation by staff in the project will in no way impact upon your relationship with the school and its colleagues. As a participant, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

(SIGNED).................................................................................................................................

(DATE)........................

Lindsey Judd-
Student Researcher
STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

✓ Have read and understood the information;
✓ Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction;
✓ Engage in six teacher support meetings (3 individual and 3 staff meetings) to enhance analysis and use of data for teaching and leadership purposes; Term 1, Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4; which will be audio taped and videotaped;
✓ Participate in one individual end of project interview and 2 focus group interviews; to reflect on the teacher’s role in the understandings of the professional learning community and the use of student data in the school to be completed in Term 1, Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4 (6 interviews in total); which will be audio taped and videotaped;
✓ Complete two questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project. The questionnaires will allow participants to reflect on the school environment (MSLEQ) the leadership support, student data use, processes of collaboration amongst colleagues (Using Data in Your School Questionnaire);
✓ Participate in three professional learning sessions focused on the teaching of reading comprehension, which will be audio taped and videotaped;
✓ Anonymity of individuals and institutions will be maintained at all times in the analysis and reporting of the research, audio tapes and videotapes will be destroyed after transcription. The names of specific teachers will not be identified in the reporting of the study. In the reporting of the study, years XXXX will be discussed, though the specific year level will be de-identified in an effort to protect the
anonymity of those involved either by inference or association. The report will describe years XXXX as four consecutive year levels, in a state school in South-East Queensland;

☑ Understand that you are free to withdraw from the research at any time, without comment or penalty;

☑ Understand that you will be provided with a summary of the research findings via email;

☑ Understand that you if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher;

☑ Understand that if you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical conduct of the project you can contact the Griffith University Research Manager at research-ethics@griffith.edu.au or at 3735 5585; and

☑ Agree to participate in the Literacy Assessment within a Professional Learning Community study.

Name: _______________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________
Appendix G: Participant Leader Informed Consent

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher:
School of Education and Research of Higher Degrees
Griffith University

Dr. Kath Glasswell, Chief Investigator, Griffith University,
k.glasswell@griffith.edu.au, Phone 373 53615
Lindsey Judd, Student Researcher, Griffith University,
lindsey.judd@griffithuni.edu.au, Phone 0450903600

School-based Professional Learning Communities: collaboration, conversation and innovation for literacy improvement

Dear XXX Principal and Lead Literacy Teacher,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study that will involve classroom teachers of students in years XXXX; Learning Support Teachers; and those who are in a leadership role (i.e. Principal and Lead Literacy Teacher). The details of the study are explained below.

Description of the project:

The research project seeks to develop an account of the processes by which a professional learning community focused on using student assessment data to inform instruction can be created and sustained. The researcher is completing this research project as a component of a Doctor of Education degree from Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus.

Teachers in years XXXX will participate in the project (23 teachers). In the course of this research, the teachers will work with the researcher and the school leadership to establish a professional learning community focused on raising student achievement in literacy. The project will help the school establish a team approach to planning, instructional reflection and professional learning activities.

At the core of this team approach is a focus on capacity building for collecting, analysing and using student achievement data to inform instructional innovations in classrooms. Data collection will document the processes engaged in at the school site, as the professional learning community takes shape and develops. Priority will be given to gathering information from all participants regarding their experiences throughout the process. This study will contribute to a growing body of research that seeks to understand the nature and consequences of professional collaborations in schools.

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to undertake the following during the 2011 school years:
- Engage in three school wide data analysis meetings in Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4;
- Participate in Principal /Leadership Semi-Structured Interviews at the beginning (Term 1), middle (Term 2) and end of the year (Term 4) of the year to reflect on the leadership’s role in the understandings of the professional learning community and the use of student data in the school;
- Complete two questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project. The questionnaires will allow participants to reflect on the school environment (MSLEQ) the leadership support, student data use, processes of collaboration amongst colleagues (Using Data in Your School Questionnaire).

Confidentiality:

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without participants’ consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data will be used for other research purposes. Audio recordings made during this research will be erased following transcription of the data and each item will be de-identified. The school, teacher and leadership’s anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at www.griffith.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp or telephone the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 5585.

Withdrawal:

You are free to withdrawal from the study at any stage without any comment or penalty.

Questions/Information:

You are free to contact me at any time regarding this research. Email and phone contact details are provided above.

Concerns/complaints:

This project is under review by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Griffith University Research is conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Human Research (2007). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical conduct of the project, you can contact the Griffith University Research Manager at research-ethics@griffith.edu.au or at 3735 5585.

Feedback:

If you are interested you may receive copies of papers resulting from this research. You will need to notify Lindsey Judd of your interest. A summary of the outcomes of the research will be provided to the teachers via a school based seminar and as an emailed report.
Risks:

In this research there are no risks to the participants above those of ordinary, everyday living.

Your participation:

The participation of teachers and students is voluntary. In terms of the questionnaire/survey, participants do not need to answer every question unless they wish to do so. Teachers may refuse the invitation to be interviewed. Participation by staff in the project will in no way impact upon your relationship with the school and its colleagues. As a participant, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

(SIGNED)...........................................................................................................................

(DATE)............................

Lindsey Judd-
Student Researcher
Researcher:
School of Education and Professional Studies
Griffith University

Dr. Kath Glasswell, Chief Investigator, Griffith University,  
k.glasswell@griffith.edu.au, Phone 373 53615  
Lindsey Judd, Student Researcher, Griffith University,  
lindsey.judd@griffithuni.edu.au, Phone 0450903600

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

✓ Have read and understood the information;

✓ Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction;

✓ Engage in three school wide data analysis meetings in Term 2, Term 3 and Term 4. These meetings will be videotaped or audio recorded for later analysis;

✓ Participate in Principal /Leadership Semi-Structured Interviews at the beginning (Term 1), middle (Term 2) and end of the year (Term 4) to reflect on the leadership’s role in the understandings of the professional learning community and the use of student data in the school. These meetings will be audio taped;

✓ Complete two questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project. The questionnaires will allow participants to reflect on the school environment (MSLEQ) the leadership support, student data use, processes of collaboration amongst colleagues (Using Data in Your School Questionnaire).

✓ Anonymity of individuals and institutions will be maintained at all times in the analysis and reporting of the research, audio tapes and videotapes will be destroyed after transcription. The names of specific teachers will not be identified in the reporting of the study. In the reporting of the study, years XXXX will be discussed, though the specific year level will be de-identified in an effort to protect the anonymity of those involved either by inference or association. The report will describe years XXXX as four consecutive year levels, in a state school in South-East Queensland;
✓ Understand that questionnaires will be anonymous. Participating Teachers participating will be assigned a pseudonym. The school is only identified as a South-East Queensland State school. Teacher’s interviews will be digitally recorded and videotaped but will not be played in public. Transcripts will be used as data but pseudonyms and number identifiers will be used;

✓ Understand that you are free to withdraw from the research at any time, without comment or penalty;

✓ Understand that you will be provided with a summary of the research findings via email;

✓ Understand that you if you have any additional questions you can contact the researcher;

✓ Understand that if you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical conduct of the project you can contact the Griffith University Research Manager at research-ethics@griffith.edu.au or at 3735 5585; and

✓ Agree to participate in the Literacy Assessment within a Professional Learning Community study.

Name: _______________________________________________
Signature: ___________________________________________
Date: _______________________________________________
Appendix H: Individual Semi-Structures Interview Questions

1. Collaboration
   a. In what ways can we support continuity and responsibility within and between year levels and classrooms?
   b. How can we be better focused on staff and student learning, as a central point to staff meetings, planning, and school community conversation?
   c. How has student learning been affected by reflective practices and/or collaboration with colleagues?
   d. Can (have) peer groups grow(n) in their capacity for learning, working cohesively and working effectively? What have you noticed as evidence of progress?
   e. What might we say about how we learn and work together?
   f. Are more people choosing to engage in and support collaboration?
   g. What opportunity is there for you to collaborate and problem solve with other colleagues?
   h. How do you define a professional learning community?
   i. What evidence is there that this school could be classified as a professional learning community?

2. Partnership, Innovation and Outcomes
   ii. Inquiry around data
      o What indication do you have that there is more interest and confidence in using data to inform teaching practices in collaboration with colleagues?
      o Does data provide evidence to inform your teaching? In what ways?
      o Is data discussed to inform your teaching when planning in your year level?

   iii. Professional learning
      o How often would you like, or would it be reasonable, to get together with your colleagues to reflect on teaching and student learning?
      o Who can support you to enrich and inform your learning?
      o Who would be interested in contributing to your growth as an educator?
      o What are your biggest questions about teaching practices?
      o What would you like to learn more about?
      o How will such learning improve your practice?
      o Can working with others contribute to this improvement; and how?
      o In what ways do you contribute to the conversations around student achievement in your class, grade level and school wide?
Appendix I: Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Questions T1

Semi-Structures Focus Group Interview Questions
1. How often would you like, or would it be reasonable, to get together with your colleagues to reflect on teaching and student learning?
2. Who can support you to enrich and inform your learning?
3. Who would be interested in contributing to your growth as an educator?
4. What are your biggest questions about teaching practices?
5. What would you like to learn more about?
6. How will such learning improve your practice?
7. Can working with others contribute to this improvement; and how?
8. In what ways do you contribute to the conversations around student achievement in your class, grade level and school wide?
9. In what ways do grade-level meetings impact your teaching practices and student learning?
10. In what ways can we support continuity and responsibility within and between year levels and classrooms?
11. How can we be better focused on staff and student learning, as a central point to staff meetings, planning, and school community conversation?
12. What areas are the students finding challenging?
13. What do you see as a major strength related to student learning?
14. What is the range of evidence we use to validate and explore these claims?
15. Where might data lead us in terms of aiming for improvements in teaching and learning?
16. How can (have) student and student learning been affected by reflective practices and/or collaboration with colleagues?
17. Can (have) peer groups grow(n) in their capacity for learning, working cohesively and working effectively? What have you noticed as evidence of progress?
18. What might we say about how we learn and work together?
19. Are more people choosing to engage in and support collaboration?
20. What indication do you have that there is more interest and confidence in using data to inform teaching practices in collaboration with colleagues?
21. Does data provide evidence to inform your teaching? In what ways?
22. Is data discussed to inform your teaching when planning in your year level?
23. What opportunity is there for you to collaborate and problem solve with other colleagues?
24. How do you define a professional learning community?
25. What evidence is there that this school could be classified as a professional learning community?

Adapted from:
Appendix J: Focus Group Schedule Term 3

1. Collaboration
   a. WOW
      i. What is the structure of WOW? Has it change in anyway?
      ii. Which is more valuable to you?
      iii. What is your experience of WOW?
      iv. What supports are provided to you during and after WOW?
      v. What have you implemented?
   b. Year level Meetings
      i. What is the structure of the meetings?
      ii. Have these meetings changed in any way?
      iii. What supports are provided to you during and after meetings?

2. Partnership, Innovation and Outcomes
   a. Inquiry around data
      i. What types of inquiry around data occur?
      ii. How do you use this data?
      iii. Has the use of data changed since the beginning of the school year?
      iv. Is data discussed among teachers? When? Why?
   b. Professional learning
      i. Has the format of PD been more useful than previous years?
      ii. Who impacts your professional learning?
      iii. Do you collaborate around PD topics/teaching strategies?
      iv. Have new literacy innovations occurred in your classroom? What have been the effects?
      v. How do you view the LL4LL project?
      vi. Who is part of your school community?
Dear Mrs. Judd

I write further to the additional information provided in relation to the provisional approval granted to your application for ethical clearance for your project "NR: School-based Professional Learning Communities: collaboration, conversation and innovation for literacy improvement" (GU Ref No: EDN/12/11/HREC).

The additional information was considered by Office for Research.

This is to confirm that this response has largely addressed the comments and concerns of the HREC.

This decision is subject to:

Provision of a copy of the approval of the participating schools (and education authorities, if required).

The contact officer signing sF1 of the Expedited Ethical Review Checklist.

An appropriate authorising officer, who is not a member of the research team, completing and signing sF2 of the Expedited Ethical Review Checklist.

However, you are authorised to immediately commence this research on the strict understanding that these matters are addressed and that you provide details of how they were addressed.

Please note that failure to provide a timely response to these matters may result in this authorisation being suspended or withdrawn. The standard conditions of approval attached to our previous correspondence about this protocol continue to apply.

It would be appreciated if you could give your urgent attention to the issues raised by the Committee so that we can finalise the ethical clearance for your protocol promptly.

Regards
Gary Allen
Manager, Research Ethics
Office for Research
G39 room 3.55 Gold Coast Campus
Griffith University
ph: 3735 5585
fax: 5552 9058
e-mail: g.allen@griffith.edu.au
web:
## Appendix L: Reflective Practice Meeting 1 (Maggie, Field Notes, 25/02/11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maggie</th>
<th>Researcher Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limited knowledge of literacy instruction in primary school</strong></td>
<td>Discussed the importance for these students to read as much as possible within the literacy block; using shared/repeated readings, word work. She was given Poets corner to implement and Supported reading as a goal. We also discussed using independent book boxes which he is implementing through the Literacy Cafe program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie has requested as much support as possible. She plans many lessons around phonics. She is not sure how to improve the fluency of these students or improve their reading in general. She would find collaborating with other teachers valuable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heavy reliance on aides for support during the literacy block in or to manage students</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie has structured the literacy block with 30 minutes of spelling which has students rotating to other teachers and 30 minutes of whole group instruction usually around phonic lessons. Students get into groups according to need; verified students work with the Special Education teacher, RP students go with aide and the other students work with the teacher. Sometimes groups with the aide and Special Education teacher work on the plan that he has for the other students. Other times he allows the Special Education teacher to plan and implement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix M: Resonating Tensions within the JSS PLC

Tension A: Effective reflection and learning from peers vs. tools used flexibly with limited attention to goals of the activity

Tension B: Multiple opportunities for authentic peer observations and professional learning across classrooms vs. limited opportunity for purposeful peer observations and learning due to organisational matters and expectations

Tension C: Ongoing authentic collaboration for the purpose of building capacity and sharing with peers vs. limited collaboration and sharing

Tension D: Clear expectation of the WOW activity relating to the goals set by leader vs. flexibility with tools and rigidity with organisation
## Appendix N: Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term Abbreviation</th>
<th>Term Abbreviation</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>PLC’s five key characteristics</td>
<td>A PLC’s five key characteristics include: leadership and supportive and shared power; shared values, mission, vision and goals; collective inquiry and application of learning; supportive conditions (human and physical), and collaboration with colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAT</td>
<td>Cultural Historical Activity Theory</td>
<td>Ability to analyse the complex interactions and interrelationships which explain the social and collaborative nature of actions and examine the disruptions in the system known as contradiction. Activity system analysis is used to map the co-evolutionary interactions between individuals, individual groups and the context and how they affect one another (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Activity Theory</td>
<td>The conceptual and methodological framework underpinning this study. AT is based on “socio-cultural and cultural-historical epistemologies which suggest that humans live in an environment where the objective features of their responses/actions in the environment are culturally and historically shaped” (Larkin, 2011, p. 45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPM</td>
<td>Reflective Practice Meeting</td>
<td>Partners (teachers and researchers) engaged in professional learning conversations which examined the student data and its implications for the classroom, school and cluster. The goal was to use information about student learning and reflections on current teaching practice to engage in collaborative problem-solving and instructional innovation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOW</td>
<td>Watching Others Work</td>
<td>A collaborative learning activity at JSS. It was designed by the leadership team to promote peer-to-peer learning (through observations) and to share and celebrate good teaching practice at the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>Julian State School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBR</td>
<td>School-based Researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEP</td>
<td>Smart Education Partnership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBR</td>
<td>Design Based Research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLC</td>
<td>Year Level Co-ordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **JSS**: Julian State School
- **SBR**: School-based Researcher
- **SEP**: Smart Education Partnership
- **DBR**: Design Based Research
- **YLC**: Year Level Co-ordinator

- **Pseudo name for the case-study school.**
- **A researcher that serviced the school, assisting with data collection and analysis and in providing professional learning sessions for teachers.**
- **The SEP project was a federally-funded (through the Australian Research Council linkage scheme) research and development partnership for district/school level reform.**
- **A methodology aimed at addressing chronic issues in low socio-economic schools.**
- **The Year Level Co-ordinator (YLC) was responsible at JSS for collecting, analysing, goal setting and tracking student achievement data (see Appendix A for more information).**
References


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