"A PLACE TO GO SO THAT WE CAN BECOME BETTER TEACHERS":
A STUDY OF A VOLUNTARY, SCHOOL-BASED, CROSS-CURRICULAR TEACHER LEARNING GROUP

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative, practitioner research study, conducted by a school leader-as-researcher, was designed to gain insight into instructional leadership and teacher learning through the perceptions of high school teachers participating in a voluntary, school-based, self-organized, self-directed, cross-curricular teacher learning group within a diocesan, Catholic secondary school setting. Using qualitative research methods to gather participant perceptions, the study explored the work of the group, its impact on participants in relation to self, students, colleagues, and the larger school family, and the role of the instructional leader in relationship with the group. Using lenses of instructional leadership, adult learning theory, the relationships between knowledge and practice, and professional/teacher learning communities, I analyzed the legitimacy of this particular type of teacher learning and highlighted leadership dilemmas that may be encountered when a voluntary teacher learning group self-directs. These conceptual frameworks also allowed opportunities to think about issues and practices that matter to an instructional leader and to challenge assumptions about teaching, learning, and leading within a strong, academic tradition in a resilient secondary setting. The inquiry provided
a rich analysis of one context through which educational leaders may expand their understanding of teacher learning in different educational settings.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. iii

List of Tables .......................................................................................................... x

Preface .................................................................................................................... xi

Chapter

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1

   Statement of the Problem .................................................................................. 1

   Story of the question ......................................................................................... 4

   Research questions ............................................................................................. 7

Significance of the Study ....................................................................................... 9

Conceptual Framework .......................................................................................... 10

   Instructional leadership .................................................................................... 10

   Adult learning .................................................................................................... 12

   The relationships between knowledge and practice ....................................... 16

   Professional/teacher learning communities ...................................................... 19

Literature Review .................................................................................................. 22

   Trust .................................................................................................................. 22

Instructional Leadership for Teacher Learning .................................................... 26

   Principal leadership for learning .................................................................... 27

   Shared leadership for learning ....................................................................... 28

   Teacher Learning Groups ............................................................................... 29
Teacher learning groups – the importance of context .............................................. 30

The “work” of teacher learning groups ................................................................. 32

Teacher learning groups’ impact on practice ...................................................... 34

Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 35

2. Methodology and Methods .................................................................................. 37

Practitioner Research ............................................................................................ 37

Role of the researcher ............................................................................................. 39

Ethical issues .......................................................................................................... 40

Research Context .................................................................................................. 43

Research site .......................................................................................................... 43

Participant selection .............................................................................................. 45

History of the Instructional Strategies Group ....................................................... 47

Phase 1–Getting started .......................................................................................... 48

Phase 2–The PLC coach .......................................................................................... 50

Phase 3–Re-grouping .............................................................................................. 54

Research Methods ................................................................................................. 59

Surveys .................................................................................................................... 60

Interviews ............................................................................................................... 61

Instructional Strategy Group meeting notes ......................................................... 62

Short e-mail questionnaires ...................................................................................... 63

Research journal ................................................................................................... 64

Data Collection ...................................................................................................... 64
Data analysis .............................................................................. 65

3. The Culture of a Voluntary Teacher Learning Group ....................... 70
   Attendance and Participation .................................................. 72
   Group membership—All are welcome! ...................................... 73
   Group norms ........................................................................... 79
   Spaces ...................................................................................... 81
   Emotional Space ...................................................................... 81
   Physical Space ......................................................................... 86
   Temporal Space ....................................................................... 87
   Evolution of the Focus of the ISG ........................................... 89
   Who do we say we are? .......................................................... 89
   Changing foci .......................................................................... 92
   Intra-Group Relationships ..................................................... 97
   Democracy in the ISG .............................................................. 97
   You’re not alone ..................................................................... 99
   Relationship of the ISG to the BCHS Community ................... 100
   The culture of BCHS ............................................................. 100
   Changes ................................................................................... 103
   Conclusion ............................................................................... 104

4. Is the ISG Making a Difference? .............................................. 106
   Making a Difference for Self .................................................. 110
   Intellectual ............................................................................. 111
Professional/Teacher Learning Communities ........................................... 170
Implications for Future Research .......................................................... 172
Researcher Reflections ........................................................................... 175

Appendices

A. Invitation to Participate .................................................................... 177
B. Researcher and Participant Agreement ............................................. 179
C. Professional Learning Community “To Do” list ................................. 182
D. Barresville Catholic High School PLC Group Norms ......................... 184
E. Aligning Data Collection Instruments to Research Questions ............ 185
F. Survey ............................................................................................... 187
G. Instructional Strategies Group Participant Interview Protocol ........... 190
H. Open-ended E-mail Questionnaires .................................................. 193
I. Codes for Analysis .............................................................................. 194

References ............................................................................................... 198
List of Tables

Table 1. ISG Study Participants ................................................................. 46
Table AE. Aligning Data Collection Instruments to Research Questions ............ 186
Preface

When I became a student in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania, I thought that I was embarking on a rigorous and challenging intellectual journey that would, hopefully, lead to a successfully defended dissertation, the letters “EdD” behind my name, and the knowledge that I had traversed what I imagined would be the road to the summit of my professional life. The journey I have taken was much different than expected. The ticket that I bought for this trip included detours and re-routing that led me to places that I would never have included on my itinerary. They were hard places; places that I did not intend to visit. Among them were familiar places that all of a sudden seemed strangely unfamiliar. They were places that required me to examine myself and my own learning, teaching, and leading in ways that I had never before considered. These places were much more personal than professional. Some were new places that I have come to regard as more familiar, less scary, but which, even now, continue to trouble me and to compel me to scale ever new, unfamiliar and sometimes more terrifying summits. This journey has changed me profoundly for it did not lead to the epitome I had expected, but rather, to more beginnings.

I was born into the Barresville Catholic High School family. The daughter of two alumni, my ties to the high school have been, literally, lifelong. However, my history as a learner at the site for this study dates back to 1972 when I entered the school as a freshman. Without a doubt, it was the dedication of and relationships with my high
school teachers, some of whom are still teaching at the school, that set a foundation for learning upon which I continue to build. These were the people by whose example I was encouraged to become a teacher. As I studied in college and graduate school for certification as a secondary world languages teacher, it was always my hope that I would return to my high school to teach one day. I was anxious to give back to the place that had given me so much. Eleven years ago, I was given that opportunity.

In September of 2001, I was thrilled to be part of the faculty of my alma mater and to share the high school experiences of my two children who were students at the time. After serving as a teacher learner in the world languages department for three years, I was asked to consider moving to an administrative position as the school’s director of studies. I decided to make the move and worked for another three years as the individual primarily responsible for instruction and curriculum at the school. In July 2007, I was appointed principal of the high school, honored to be the first alumni principal, and its first appointed female principal.

In the past five years, my duties as principal of the high school have expanded in ways that I could not have anticipated. When I was appointed principal, the school also had a president. At that time, the distinction between the two offices was akin to the distinctions between a chief operating officer (principal) and a chief executive officer (president). The president/principal model was in effect for the first two years of my principalship. However, at the end of my second year, the diocese removed the president from the high school, and I was left to navigate what had become full-time duties in two distinct and vital offices. For the past three years, my availability to serve as the
instructional leader of the high school has been significantly curtailed by the financial, advancement, and enrollment responsibilities that routinely pull me away from the high school, requiring that I spend increasing amounts of time outside of the school.

I share these details as a way to survey the landscape of the journey represented in this study since my perspective as the school leader as practitioner researcher has been influenced by my lifelong personal and professional experiences at the high school. It is my hope that, through this research, I will be able to give back to and advance the teaching, learning, and leading of my colleagues and fellow alumni-to-be. It is my reminder to myself and my school family that every day presents the opportunity for a new beginning, one that, hopefully, finds us a little closer to the next summit.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Catholic education nationwide is facing many complex challenges (Hamilton, 2008). With dwindling resources and student populations, educators in U.S. Catholic schools are working to re-invent Catholic education in the 21st century. Our school is no different. Barresville Catholic High School (BCHS)\(^1\) is situated within the Mideast region of the United States in a southeastern Pennsylvania, urban location. Catholic high schools like BCHS are financed primarily by tuition. The financial resources available to the school directly correlate to its student population; fewer students, fewer dollars available. Since the opening of the 2000-2001 school year, the student population at BCHS has declined from 955 students to 812 in 2010-2011; down 15%. Enrollment at BCHS is derived principally from diocesan feeder schools supported by their Catholic parishes representing both urban and suburban congregations. For the period 2009-2011, the total number of diocesan feeder schools for BCHS declined from 14 to 10, a decrease of 28.6%. These numbers exceed averages of corresponding national and regional Catholic schools for the same time period.

The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) reports that total Catholic school enrollment has declined 22.1% in the United States between the 2000-2001 and 2010-2011 academic years (National Catholic Educational Association, retrieved October  

\(^1\) Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.
28, 2011). Total secondary school enrollment has dropped approximately 8%, while elementary school enrollment is down 28.4% for the same period. All regions in the United States have seen a decline in Catholic school enrollment but the numbers for the Mideast represent the largest regional decline in student population of over 32%.

Not unlike challenges also faced in public education, there are many ways that the reality of limited financial resources in Catholic schools affect school operations; one of the most salient being the strain on funding available for providing opportunities for increased teacher professionalism and meaningful staff development (Bryk, Lee, Holland, 1993). An extension of this reality is the subsequent difficulty in encouraging the development of instructional leaders for our schools. In this sense, the challenges facing BCHS are not unique but clearly nonetheless formidable. Our faculty and staff are looking for ways to better utilize existing resources to provide improved instruction for our students. As the principal and instructional leader at Barresville Catholic High School, I have had the opportunity to encourage our teachers to address these challenges drawing on their own expertise and professionalism. Wood (2007) reminds that “no recipe for change could promise more than the revitalization and empowerment of those whose work directly affects what children actually experience in their classrooms” (p. 737). Fullan (2002) extends this notion even further positing that “an organization cannot flourish - at least, not for long - on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many different levels” (p. 20).

Principals cite instructional leadership as the most important function of a school leader; however, the ever increasing demands and complexities of the managerial aspects
of the position are superseding the time spent on instructional leadership within schools as well as adding to administrative frustration and turnover (Gajda & Militello, 2008; Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003). Pijanowski, Hewitt, and Brady (2009) report that, although principals receive the greatest satisfaction from the interpersonal and relational aspects of their job, the time spent nurturing relationships is decreasing as principals spend more time on non-instructional and non-relational tasks. For many Catholic secondary principals, all responsibilities and decisions, i.e., Catholic identity, instructional, financial, personnel, facilities, technology, transportation, athletic, extracurricular, enrollment management, advancement, endowment, marketing, vision, long-range planning, public relations, etc., are handled locally. This partial list of my duties and responsibilities as a Catholic secondary school principal requires that I look to “other” educational leaders in our school to perform some of these important tasks.

At BCHS, one group of teachers has taken the initiative to respond to the need for teacher learning and leadership by taking steps to challenge the instructional status quo and share professional practices. A small group of educators at BCHS decided in 2009 to capitalize on the resources available among our faculty and staff for teacher learning and improved professional practice by self-organizing to share expertise. They created the Instructional Strategies Group (ISG). Simply stated, I began this study as a means to better understand the work of the ISG and how I, as principal, may play a more supportive role. Interestingly however, as the story of the ISG began to unfold within the context of this inquiry, it quickly became apparent that another vital dimension to my study of the group was my position as the school’s instructional leader. Although my
intent has always been to study the ISG, my original proposal suggested an attempt at a more "objective" research project. However, I quickly realized the importance of positioning myself more deliberately in the study as a practitioner researcher and instructional leader.

This additional dimension of the study served to heighten its complexity with regard to the “multiple positionalities” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007) I assumed in my roles as principal, instructional leader, and researcher. The complications inherent in this multiplicity are noted by Clay (2001) in her account of conducting practitioner research as an instructional supervisor in a middle school. Clay states that “it is precisely the relationships - insider to insider - that pose the most significant ethical dilemmas” (p. 33). As the school leader, I would suggest that the dilemmas extend to include relational, “epistemological, methodological, [and] political” (Anderson & Jones, 2000, p. 430) dimensions as well. It is in navigating the relationships and dilemmas with ISG participants that, like Clay, I hope to “[come] to know my place” (p. 25) as an instructional leader, a practitioner researcher in a Catholic secondary setting who remains deeply committed to improving teaching and learning at our school.

**Story of the question.**

Fundamentally, my interest in this study has evolved from my work as principal of Barresville Catholic High School during a time of great change and uncertainty. My role at BCHS cannot be simply defined since I have a long affiliation with the high school. I am an alumna of the high school; the daughter, sister and mother of BCHS alumni. I have worked at the high school for eleven years, first serving on the faculty as
a World Language teacher, then the director of studies, and now, principal. I currently act as leader to teachers who taught me when I was a student. My work at BCHS is complicated and enhanced by these roles.

In March 2009, two members of the faculty requested my permission to initiate a cross-curricular Instructional Strategies Group (ISG) that they proposed would meet after school on a regular basis for the purpose of collegial sharing of ideas aimed at expanding and improving teaching and learning. They proposed that teachers would meet periodically to present successful lesson plans to one another and, thereby, have the opportunity to benefit from instructional ideas across curricula. Thinking it was a wonderful initiative, I gave the teachers permission to meet at school and made a classroom available for their meetings. The group enjoyed faithful attendance by a small corps of teachers for the duration of the spring semester and into the fall. However, by November 2009, several participants expressed concern that the group was losing momentum because it had exhausted its small reserve of faculty presenters. The teachers were looking for direction, ideas, and increased participation.

In December 2009, when I became aware that federal funds for professional development were being made available to the high school through our local public school district, I consulted with the two ISG facilitators and made arrangements for the ISG to work with an outside coach recognized for his work establishing professional learning communities in neighboring public school districts. It took several months for ISG members to feel comfortable working with a coach, particularly since he encouraged the use of a different meeting format. However, by the end of the school year,
participants expressed interest in continuing the ISG for the 2010-2011 school year, utilizing information they had learned from the professional learning community (PLC) coach. ISG meetings resumed under the group’s direction in the fall of 2010 and continue on a regular basis.

As I watched the group evolve, and I began to do some initial research into the format, design, and purpose of teacher learning groups, I struggled with understanding how to categorize the type of teacher learning group represented by the ISG. After reviewing current literature, it became evident there are a multitude of names, norms, and purposes for groups of teachers who have been mandated to organize, or who have self-organized to engage in collegial conversations about their work; teacher professional communities (Achinstein, 2002; Westheimer, 1999), professional development communities (Battey & Franke, 2008), school-based professional learning communities (Birenbaum, Kimron, Shilton, & Shahaf-Barzilay, 2009), collaborative inquiry (Bray, 2002), teacher research groups (Chandler-Olcott, 2002), professional learning communities (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Wells & Feun, 2007), and instructional strategy groups, to name a few. Each of these titles, utilizing distinct and contextualized language, indicate groups of educators engaged in collaborative work. While the name of the group may have implicit or explicit characteristics, identifying it in a particular way from other teacher groups (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), ultimately, it is the nature of the work of the group that distinguishes its identity. And so it is with the ISG. Its unique name represents its unique identity particular to the work the teachers are doing at a certain point in the history of Barresville Catholic High School.
At the onset, I understood the ISG to be a cross-curricular teacher learning group that engaged in professional conversation, study and sharing of instructional, classroom management, and other strategies helpful in navigating school bureaucracies for the improvement of teaching and learning, the support of teachers, and the encouragement of teacher professionalism at Barresville Catholic High School. This inquiry will describe and analyze the work of the ISG as reported by its participants, thus expanding upon my initial understanding, and the capturing of its identity at this moment in time.

For the purposes of this study, I will utilize the phrase “teacher learning group” as generally representative of collaborative teacher work in a school setting. I will refer to the specific teacher learning group that serves as the basis for this inquiry as the Instructional Strategies Group or ISG.

**Research questions.**

As the ISG continued to emerge under the group’s own direction, I sought to explore ISG members’ perceptions of their participation in this ongoing, school-based teacher learning group, and how these perceptions contributed to my understanding as an instructional leader of teaching and learning at our school. The study also endeavored to provide a rich analysis of one context through which teachers and other educational leaders may expand their understanding of teacher learning in different educational settings. The essential questions of the research were:

1. How do participants (individually and collectively) characterize the work that is done in the Instructional Strategies Group (ISG) at Barresville Catholic High School over time?
2. How do participants describe the impact of their participation in the ISG on their practice?

3. According to participants, what constitutes principal support of the ISG?

4. As an instructional leader, what do I learn from ISG participants about what they consider important in teaching and learning in my school?

Although the research questions went through several iterations, consistent throughout the process was my desire to understand the work of the ISG, and my relationship, as the instructional leader, to that work. I would like to note here that after a preliminary literature review, I hypothesized in one of my memos that the concept of “trust” might be an essential, fundamental characteristic to the work of the group and this inquiry. However, I made the conscious decision to exclude trust lexicon from my research and methods questions for two reasons: 1) to avoid normative responses; and 2) if present, to allow trust to emerge on its own merit within the study. Conversely, I made the deliberate decision to include “trust” in my empirical literature review discussed later in this chapter as a way to frame a discussion about the relational aspects of the ISG.

This study afforded me the opportunity to explore the reasons that participants gave for their ongoing membership in the Instructional Strategies Group and what their expectations were for my support of the work of the group. It was deeply important for me to understand the work of the ISG so that I may better support it and encourage ongoing and expanding inquiry and membership. Acknowledging the learning differences present among our teachers, studying the ISG also offered a poignant point of
reflection for me as I considered the portfolio of professional development opportunities offered to teachers at BCHS.

Significance of the Study

This study endeavored to provide a rich analysis of one context through which teachers and administrators may expand their understanding of teacher learning in different educational settings. Although both theoretical and empirical literature exists in abundance regarding the theory and practice of teacher learning groups, this study represented work performed outside of public education and within the context of a private, Catholic, diocesan high school. In an effort to highlight the work of Catholic educators within our school, this study also attempted to expand understanding of the work of Catholic educators within and beyond our school. It is my belief that Catholic education is an important component of the portfolio of education available to students in the United States. I also believe that all educators have a professional responsibility to learn from and with other educators, public and non-public, by sharing experiences and expertise. I am honored, therefore, to share the experiences of the ISG with colleagues beyond our school. In addition, through this study I hoped to add to my own and others’ understanding of how principals may support teacher learning groups within a secondary school setting. Furthermore, by engaging in this work as a practitioner researcher, I endeavored to add to the body of knowledge that encourages instructional leaders in all contexts to become co-constructors of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) and
educational improvement with their fellow educators, students, and extended family of school stakeholders.

**Conceptual Framework**

As I began my initial foray into this inquiry, I failed to acknowledge the implicit albeit fundamental role of instructional leadership as the primary lens through which I was viewing the work of the Instructional Strategies Group and my relationship to that work. After urging from my dissertation committee, the need to be more explicit about my commitment to instructional leadership and its importance as both the foundation and the goal of this study quickly became both the window and the mirror (McIntosh & Style, 1994) I embraced in order to deepen my understanding of the ISG.

Beyond instructional leadership, the supporting conceptual framework for this study has remained consistently grounded in theoretical work conducted in three other areas: 1) adult learning theory; 2) the relationships between knowledge and practice; and 3) professional/teacher learning communities.

**Instructional leadership.**

The importance of instructional leadership is referred to throughout the literature on educational leadership (Fullan, 2010; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Blase & Blase, 1999); however, it does not offer a generally agreed upon definition (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Fullan (2010) acknowledges that principals have a great deal of power in their leadership role and succinctly sums up
an instructional leader’s responsibilities stating that “powerful principals are obsessed with the instructional core of personalizing learning and getting results for each and every student” (p. 14). Fullan extends the influence of the instructional leader to “develop[ing] others in a way that is integrated into the work of the school” (p. 14), thus acknowledging the importance of collegial professional learning as another essential function of the instructional leader. It is the ability of the instructional leader to be vital, visionary, and visible as a teacher, learner, and leader that determines the leader’s impact on her/his educational setting. A myriad of empirical studies exists that add understanding to the specific characteristics found in effective instructional leaders. Several of these studies have served as a framework for this inquiry and will be reviewed in the literature review section of this chapter.

Although it is generally understood that the head of school or principal is the instructional leader, it is suggested by Lambert (2002) that “the days of the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators” (p. 37). Hallinger (2005) goes as far as to say that “one of the major impediments to effective school leadership is trying to carry the burden alone” (p. 234). These statements are important considerations for current leaders in education since they point to the necessity and the benefit of distributing leadership responsibilities with regard to teaching and learning in our schools. One aspect of this study focused on the ways in which group participants articulated their expectations for my instructional leadership of the group, and for my participation and role in the group. The inquiry also
allowed me the opportunity to encourage further development of the members of the ISG as instructional leaders in their own right.

In addition to the instructional leadership aspect of the group, the Instructional Strategies Group at BCHS exemplified much of what Wood (2010) posits as an approach that “positions teachers as learners, as inquirers, as critical colleagues, and as builders of knowledge” (p. 133). Consideration of adult learning concepts is explored in the next section in an effort to frame an understanding of the teacher learners in this study.

**Adult learning.**

For the purposes of this discussion, the terms adult learning and teacher learning will be used interchangeably since my study engaged a specific subset of adults whose selection for this inquiry was directly related to the fact that they were teachers. Furthermore, the broader implications of how adult learning theory may be applied successfully to teacher learning within professional development practices are also relevant to the discussion surrounding participation in the Instructional Strategies Group.

Dewey (1916) laid the groundwork for adult learning theory and thought throughout his work on educational philosophy. In addition to vocational and practical education, Dewey recognized the import for “the human being [to] acquire a habit of learning” (p. 45). He stated:

> Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education. It is commonplace to say that education should not cease when one leaves school. The point of this commonplace is that the purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling...Hence education
means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. (p. 51)

With respect to education, the term pedagogy refers to “the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011, p. 60). The relatively new and analogous term, “andragogy,” references “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p.43). The distinction in definitions made here by Knowles and his colleagues was deliberate and speaks to adult learning theory. The adult learning concept of andragogy began to emerge throughout Europe in the mid-twentieth century and is widely believed to have been popularized by M. S. Knowles in the United States in 1980 with the publication of his seminal work, The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy (Zmeyov, 1998). However, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) note that although andragogy has been “the primary model of adult learning for over forty years, relatively little empirical work has been done to test the validity of its assumptions and instruction” (p. 90). Still, in a review of similar criticisms of Knowles’ ideas, Henschke (2005) notes that “the common thread that runs through all of these critiques is that each one appears to start and stop the discussion on what Knowles did or didn’t do with andragogy” (p. 35). Henschke continues suggesting that “in the future, the discussion of andragogy should go beyond Knowles’ version and include the world-wide [sic] perspective of others who have written and published on andragogy” (p. 36). By using Knowles’ theory as the beginning and endpoint of comparison, and the gauge by which other andragogical work is measured, Henschke posits that the those in the field may have limited their thinking. He recommends that a more global stance be considered with regard to andragogical discussions.
In order for adult learning to be transformative, it must embrace the characteristics of sound andragogy (Hawkins, 2008). The concept of andragogy is of particular interest to this study since the ISG may be categorized as an adult learning opportunity. Utilizing Knowles’ (1980) andragogical theory as a point of reference and as it has been refined in the past several decades, the ISG may be categorized as an informal, voluntary teacher learning group that fulfills the fundamental premises of adult learning in that it is self-organized, self-directed, recognizes the expertise of participants through prior experience, and allows for the immediate incorporation of inquiry discoveries into practice (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). These ideas continue to be extended by other authors.

Through their research, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) conclude that it is the learner, the context, the learning process, and the unique convergence of these three essential components in each new learning opportunity that frame our understanding of adult learning. The authors also posit that demographics, globalization, and technology are significant contextual factors to be considered reminding that “adult learning does not occur in a vacuum” (p. 25).

Also recognizing the presence of a myriad of factors that might influence learning, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) base their “funds of knowledge” theory on the belief that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (pp. ix-x). While the authors present this concept as a pedagogical framework, I posit that it may be extended in theory to andragogy as well since it legitimizes the expertise that any learner brings to learning. Not unlike traditional
pedagogy, many adult learning practices, such as teacher professional development, mistakenly approach adult learning from a deficit perspective. Appealing in the “funds of knowledge” theory is the notion that shifting perspectives from one of deficit to one of promise automatically empowers rather than disadvantages the learner. I am particularly interested in ways in which this “knowledge perspective” may serve to legitimize a “teacher-as-professional stance” (Whitford & Wood, 2010) for ISG participants.

While Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) acknowledge the capital that learners bring to learning, York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, and Montie (2006) discuss the process by which teacher learners engage in individual and collegial reflective practices in order to apply knowledge in action, so that they may transform their classrooms. Reflective practices in adult learning have also been studied by Mezirow for over thirty years through his transformative learning theory. Mezirow (2009) defines transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). He further posits that:

Transformative learning may be understood as the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves—advance and assess reasons for making a judgment—rather than act on the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings, and judgments of others. Influences may include power and influence, ideology, race, class, gender differences, cosmology, and other interests. (p. 23)

Mezirow’s ideas are grounded in the concept of emancipatory education, i.e., “an organized effort to precipitate or facilitate transformative learning in others” (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi). He challenges traditional epistemological thought regarding acceptable bases of knowledge by citing major influences to his work from “expert” sources such as
Freire and Gould, as well as, the experiences encountered by a lesser known “expert,” Mezirow’s wife, Edee, who returned to college as an adult (Mezirow, 2009).

Cervero (1991) offers another adult learning framework that suggests four positions describing the interaction between knowledge and practice. These four positions express the interrelatedness between informal knowledge and practice, formal knowledge and practice, intuitive and reflective action from a critical stance, and the emancipatory notion of “what counts as knowledge and how, where, and by whom this knowledge is produced” (p. 31). These four concepts of the relationships between knowledge and practice with regard to adult learning theory lead to a discussion of relationships between knowledge and practice that provide a framework for extending the work of ISG participants as “builders of knowledge” (Whitford & Wood, 2010).

The relationships between knowledge and practice.

In the field of education, there traditionally has been a great divide between knowledge and practice, with those engaged in the pursuit of knowledge perceived to have greater influence both inside and outside of the profession (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Shön, 1995; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Historically, the introduction of “practical” study within colleges and universities was an unwelcome notion for the liberal arts establishment of the late nineteenth century since practical areas of academic pursuit were not viewed as legitimate or appropriate for university education (Schön, 1995). The idea of an intellectual hierarchy based on the division of knowledge and practice still maintains its influence and remains highly institutionalized on many college and university campuses. Within the field of education even doctoral degrees carry the
knowledge/practice distinction, i.e., PhD awarded to the "researcher" and EdD to the "practitioner."

In attempting to shift this paradigm, Schön (1995) encouraged educators to "think about practice as a setting not only for the application of knowledge but for its generation" (p. 29). As is further recommended by Schön, my study of the Instructional Strategies Group highlighted how participants "[made] room for the practitioner’s reflection in and on action" (p. 34) within individual teachers’ classroom practices and in relationship to participation in a teacher learning group.

Rather than viewing knowledge and practice as separate and exclusive entities, my study of the ISG sought to demonstrate the interdependence of these concepts as they relate to improved individual and collective teaching and learning practices. The relationships between knowledge and practice are explained by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) through the identification of three theoretical conceptions: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice. These three conceptions are distinguished by underlying differences in their assumptions of knowledge, teachers, and teacher learning.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) described knowledge-for-practice as "formal knowledge" generated through empirical study for the good of the profession and applied to educational practice and problem solving. By means of teacher education and ongoing professional development, teachers are expected to learn and utilize expert best practices. These practices may be determined by university-based or teacher researchers and are transmitted to teacher learners. The second concept, knowledge-in-practice, represents
the relationship between “practical knowledge” gained by teachers engaging in and reflecting on day-to-day experiences, and the application of this knowledge to improve classroom practice. This concept further suggests that those who have been in practice longer (the expert) possess wisdom of practice to be modeled and shared through observation, coaching, or mentoring with those who are just entering the profession (the novice). Lastly, knowledge-of-practice encourages ongoing collaborative inquiry addressing local problems or issues of practice identified among educators at all levels of expertise and tenure. This concept acknowledges teachers as generators and critics of knowledge in relation to practice, and offers opportunity for knowledge-of-practice to extend more broadly beyond local application to contribute to larger social transformation. It further recognizes the importance of engaging in and modeling lifelong learning.

Aligned with the knowledge-of-practice concept, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) further encourage the deliberate adoption of an “inquiry stance,” so that teachers may “work within [their] communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others” (p. 289) in order to “make consequential changes in the lives of teachers and, just as importantly, in the lives of students, and in the social and intellectual climate of schools and schooling” (p. 295). Teachers embracing an inquiry stance leave the isolation of their classrooms and work in collaboration with other professionals as discussed in the following section.
Professional/teacher learning communities.

Although it is acknowledged that there may be distinctions in the definition and execution of each, for the purposes of this discussion, the terms professional learning community and teacher learning community will be used interchangeably. The abundance of literature relative to professional/teacher learning communities presented a challenge as I attempted to situate the ISG in this enormous theoretical discussion. Definitions of the learning communities in which teachers participate abound as do the references and lexicon relative to the origins of and nuances inherent in learning community establishment and sustenance (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Whitford & Wood, 2010). I was not able to locate one particular definition that completely represented the formation and development of the Instructional Strategies Group at BCHS. I posit, therefore, that the ISG is a contextualized teacher learning group incorporating selected features of professional/teacher learning communities as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009).

Using Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) as a basis for analysis, although the ISG has not shown evidence of engaging the whole school community in an inquiry cycle, ISG participants have articulated ways in which they are aligned with the mission and values of the school and consider themselves a teacher learning community. However, the ISG does not represent the basis of a professional learning community as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) who suggest that:

The current emphasis on professional learning communities is based on the argument that many teachers today lack the capacity to teach in ways that meet
the demands of the knowledge economy and meet the learning needs of diverse student populations. (p. 48)

As stated, this professional learning community premise speaks from a deficit perspective of adult learning and stands in opposition to a sound andragogical approach for transformative learning as previously noted. The ISG, self-organized and self-directed, arose from the desire of a group of BCHS faculty members to share experiences and expertise in order to engage themselves and their students more fully in the educational life of BCHS. This teacher learning group did not emerge from a perceived deficit, but rather from a perception of the value of the collective knowledge of the group and a desire to share this knowledge.

Furthermore, the ISG does not represent the disempowerment of individual teachers resulting from the establishment of school or districtwide commonly shared “values and beliefs” as suggested by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). The implication in this position is that shared values may not be aligned with the values of the individual teacher and therefore, serve as an imposition upon a teacher’s individual practices. Since the ISG is positioned within a Catholic high school setting, it should be noted that teachers have consistently expressed strong agreement with the values, beliefs, and mission of the school both in faculty discussions and classroom practices. Rather than serving as a point of weakness to the work of the ISG and a barrier to the advancement of teacher and student learning, I would suggest that this common core strengthens the work of the group and provides a strong foundation from which ISG participants are empowered to express their diversity of expertise and style thus enriching the school curriculum. In so stating, I must also acknowledge that the perceived strength of the
Catholic high school mission may prevent some individuals from openly sharing their neutrality or opposition to the school’s core values and beliefs. Still, it seems unlikely that an educator possessing strongly opposing viewpoints would opt to teach at a school like BCHS.

Above all, the professional learning community and teacher learning community represent opportunities for educators to gather in groups (like the ISG) where they may work in collaboration with colleagues, become “co-constructors of knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), and advance the professionalism of educators by creating spaces “in which teachers view themselves as professionals with specialized expertise, ...hold high expectations for themselves and students, foster learning communities among students, and participate in self-critical communities of practice” (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 32).

Taken together, these conceptual frameworks set the stage for understanding the work of the Instructional Strategies Group and my relationship, as the school principal, to that work. They provide four lenses through which to view the ISG. Instructional leadership points to the overarching theme of teaching and learning, and the relationships among all of the teachers and learners at BCHS. Adult learning theory offers insight into the characteristics that may impact teacher participation in this particular type of teacher learning. The relationships between knowledge and practice speak to the core concepts of knowledge generation and application, and the ways in which this theory encourages the professionalism of the teaching profession, specifically among ISG members. The professional/teacher learning community discussion addresses the popular concept of
collaborative teacher learning that is now taking place in the ISG. It also serves as a point of synthesis for the three previous concepts since professional or teacher learning communities incorporate characteristics of instructional leadership and adult learning, and are built around a set of relationships between knowledge and practice. These four main concepts are now expanded through a discussion of empirical studies that extend the above frameworks.

**Literature Review**

This study sought to explore ISG members’ perceptions of their participation in this ongoing, school-based teacher learning group, and how these perceptions contribute to my understanding as an instructional leader of teaching and learning at our school. Furthermore, it is a discussion of the work of the ISG and my relationship, as the instructional leader of the school, to that work. The following areas of inquiry have informed this investigation: 1) the foundational concept of trust; 2) instructional leadership for teacher learning, including principal and shared leadership practices; and 3) teacher learning groups including the importance of context, the work of the group, and the impact of teacher learning groups on classroom practice.

**Trust.**

Fundamental to a teacher’s willingness to participate in an ongoing professional development activity such as the ISG is the existence of *trust* in the school (Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Fenwick, 2004). Given the increasing complexity of their role within schools, educators are being challenged to assume more responsibility and embrace more
accountability for student learning than ever before. These current realities are universal and require that teachers step beyond the comfort of their classrooms to engage in ongoing and critical reflection and learning. For educational institutions steeped in multiple layers of personal relationships, understanding the concept of trust is especially vital during a time of shifting paradigms.

Although difficult to positively define, trust is described by most individuals in terms of what it is not, or incidents of when it has been betrayed (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Trust is highly contextualized and individualized since what may constitute a breach of trust in one context with one individual may not be seen similarly with a different individual or context. In a school, trust may be described as the relationship between teachers and administration, teachers and students, teachers and parents, and teachers and other teachers (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). Bryk and Schneider (2002) posit that “relational trust represents an intermediate case between the material and instrumental exchanges at work in contractual trust and the unquestioning beliefs operative in organic trust” (p. 21). The importance of establishing relational trust in organizations desiring improvement, such as schools, is discussed extensively by Bryk and Schneider (2002; 2003). “Relational trust” may be defined as the interdependencies and mutual agreement of stakeholders relative to their respective roles in an organization. Within a school setting, Bryk and Schneider (2002; 2003) note several factors found to positively influence relational trust among school stakeholders: centrality of principal leadership, teachers who reach out to parents, small school size, stable school community, and voluntary association. The absence or presence of these
concepts significantly impacts the success of improvement efforts in schools according to Bryk and Schneider (2002; 2003). Wood (2007) echoes the importance of a safe and secure professional environment where trusting relationships exist, and in which educators may confidently go about their work of “discussing, analyzing, and critiquing everyday practices in a collegial learning community, especially those practices that may not be working well for all students and perhaps even failing some” (p. 723).

Research conducted across 84 secondary schools in Flanders found that organizational culture, value, and size were significant factors in establishing trust among school stakeholders (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). In a supplementary conclusion, it was determined by Van Maele and Van Houtte (2009) that due to the greater likelihood of a shared vision and mission, there was a higher degree of trust in private (Catholic) schools than in the public schools studied. In addition, these researchers found evidence that schools that represented a higher percentage of immigrant students and lower socioeconomic status demonstrated lower degrees of relational trust. The authors cite this finding as an area in need of further research and attention. Van Maele and Van Houtte’s (2009) research is particularly relevant to my study since this inquiry is situated within an urban, Catholic high school serving a growing percentage of students of color and/or lower socioeconomic status. Although these two significant indicators will not be explicitly studied at this time, they suggest a need for future research into their impact on our school stakeholders.

Catholic schools have historically enjoyed deep levels of relational trust among stakeholders (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Sadly, however, events within the Catholic
Church in the past decade seem to have rocked many families’ and educators’ belief in the foundational trust traditionally held between Catholic schools and their stakeholders. Although beyond the purview of my inquiry and extremely sensitive and complex in scope, I believe that this may be another area of study aimed at assessing the current level of trust that exists among stakeholders and Catholic schools.

Tschannen-Moran (2009) posits that trust between school leaders and teachers, and among teachers, is both fundamental to the establishment of a professional learning community and improved student achievement. By creating a professional rather than bureaucratic orientation toward education, administrators have the opportunity to encourage trust among all school stakeholders, including students and parents. In addition, teachers who felt valued as professionals by their respective principals report greater levels of trust in their principal and colleagues (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). While studying the teacher professional growth plan enactment in Alberta, Canada, Fenwick (2004) also found that teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-principal trust was essential to the success of an individualized plan for professional development. Principals in Fenwick’s study emphasized that in the absence of this multilayered trust, “teachers’ vulnerability in sharing personal goals (i.e., revealing one’s ‘weaknesses’) with any colleague, especially the principal who has the power of evaluation and promotion” (p. 273) would likely result in teachers’ reluctance to take risks while engaged in their personal learning practices.

Through inquiry into ISG participants’ perceptions relating to the individual and collective work of the group and perceived principal support of the ISG, the importance
of trust among and beyond ISG membership emerged as a vital characteristic of the group. This discussion of trust will be extended in subsequent chapters when discussing the findings of this study.

Since instructional leadership is the window and mirror (McIntosh & Style, 1994) through which I sought to deepen my understanding of the Instructional Strategies Group, the following review seeks to offer additional insight into ISG participants’ and my own roles as instructional leaders at BCHS specifically with regard to teacher learning.

**Instructional leadership for teacher learning.**

With regard to principal leadership for teacher learning groups, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) note that “because of their positional authority and control over school resources, principals are in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in their school” (p. 56). Since the development of teacher learning communities requires overcoming cultural and structural obstacles, principal support is a necessity. However, it is also important to note that principal support and oversight of teacher learning groups does not translate into bureaucratic and hierarchical expectations for the group. The development of shared leadership among faculties must also be supported by the principal in order for participants in a teacher learning group to engage the “empowerment and agency” (Wood, 2007, p. 731) necessary for the success and survival of the group. Teachers and administrators must join together in demonstrating the shared and instructional leadership practices that will guide improved student achievement (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Therefore, two separate
discussions are presented here in order to highlight the need for both principal and shared instructional leadership practices with respect to teacher learning.

**Principal leadership for learning.**

The positionality of the principal is critical for the success of school-based teacher learning groups. While the principal does not retain sole responsibility for the success or failure of the group, the politics of education dictate that the principal has the power to determine, first and foremost, whether a group will even exist within a school and/or to what extent. Even in the case of districtwide initiatives, the principal has the ability to control structural and cultural resources that will either support or impede the work of the group (Wood, 2007; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Printy & Marks, 2006).

Drago-Severson (2007) has conducted extensive research into the role of principals as professional development leaders. Her inquiries emphasize that principals who have been able to encourage successful professional development among teachers have utilized within school teacher learning that is situated on four pillars: 1) teaming, 2) providing adults with opportunities for leadership roles, 3) engaging in collegial inquiry, and 4) mentoring (p. 115). While Drago-Severson acknowledges that not all four pillars may be present within each teacher learning opportunity, and principals should not try to implement all four pillars at once, her research suggests that the most effective principals create structures that include each of these facets of professional development and allow for teachers to select a learning activity that corresponds to their individual learning style. It is important, therefore, that principals provide a variety of learning opportunities from which teachers have the ability to choose. With this in mind, I hoped to gather
information through my inquiry regarding ISG participant feedback of the factors that either encourage or impede their participation in the ISG and my support of their learning.

**Shared leadership for learning.**

Sharing leadership responsibilities through teacher learning groups allows opportunities for educational professionals at different stages in their respective careers to develop and utilize skills and expertise valuable to the organization that are aligned with individual strengths. Furthermore it serves to advance the mission of the school by encouraging collaboration and school wide buy-in of goals and vision. Establishing a shared leadership model in schools encourages the development of communities of practice whereby teachers build reciprocal personal and professional relationships based on common knowledge, and designed to share and expand expertise (Printy, 2008). It is through shared leadership practices that teachers develop a sense of individual responsibility for the success of the school and its students, and work with the principal to advance the school. It is a collective effort. Within a school, the principal and teachers must work together to improve instructional practices and to navigate the tensions between stability and innovation that will likely arise out of collaborative work (Printy & Marks, 2006; Achinstein, 2002).

While most of the research cites the positive implications of sharing leadership duties in an educational setting, Storey (2004) notes that the decision-making surrounding this model of organizational governance is nested within questions of power and conflict that are implicitly evident in its execution. The influences of power and conflict may
restrict the ability of certain individuals within the organization to participate in this
distributive model. Storey further cites difficulties that arise subsequent to the execution
of this leadership model when educational leaders, both formal and informal, find that
individual interpretations of school improvement and school effectiveness may elicit
conflicting goals when invested parties possess dissenting opinions of best practice. It is
within and for these contexts that teacher learning group norms regarding conflict
resolution, along with strong principal support and leadership, will work to move the
group past deterrents to advancement. Looking toward research conducted with respect
to teacher learning groups provides additional insight into understanding the work of the
Instructional Strategies Group.

Teacher learning groups.

Presupposing that sufficient trust exists in the school to support teacher learning,
collaborative inquiry is seen as a relevant and effective means to engage in ongoing
professional development with the ability to be structured in such a way as to bypass
commonly restrictive professional development practices. These site based groups may
be organized to meet the needs of any formal or informal group of teachers engaging in
collaborative reflective practices. Like other teacher learning groups, the ISG “offers a
context-sensitive methodology for learning our way out of workplace difficulties” (Bray,
2002, p. 84). It is valuable to look at teacher learning groups from their context, work,
and impact on practice to better frame the data and analysis of this study.
**Teacher learning groups – the importance of context.**

It is the unique ability of each teacher learning group to establish norms and to determine the work of the group that makes it highly relevant within the setting. I suggest that Fullan’s (2002) discussion of the importance of contextual learning with regard to developing and sustaining effective school leaders may be extended to teacher learning groups as well:

Learning in context has the greatest potential payoff because it is more specific, situational, and social (it develops shared and collective knowledge and commitments). This kind of learning is designed to improve the organization and [original emphasis] its social and moral context. Learning in context also establishes conditions conducive to continual development, including opportunities to learn from others on the job, the daily fostering of current and future leaders, the selective retention of good ideas and best practices, and the explicit monitoring of performance. (pp. 19-20)

Conversely, this same ability to individualize professional development practices makes the specifics of teacher learning groups unlikely to be generalizable outside of a particular setting (Maxwell, 2005). Admittedly, however, there may be theoretical findings present within a study of teacher learning groups that are useful in other settings. One example may be found in the work of Birenbaum, Kimron, Shilton, and Shahaf-Barzilay (2009) who conclude through their analysis of three separate case studies of teacher learning groups in six elementary schools that “professional development needs to be situated in the local context, continuously dealing with authentic issues and problems faced by the school” (p. 146). Through my work with the ISG, I sought to add to the understanding of these contextual practices within our school and to look for ways to extend the knowledge to colleagues both within and beyond BCHS.
Additionally, research points to changes in school climate and culture that take place as a result of or as a prelude to the work of teacher learning groups. Bray (2002) articulates that “the presence of collaborative inquiry in our school has changed the school culture and climate” (p. 91). Wells and Feun (2007) further indicate that structural and cultural changes must take place in order for significant and sustainable change to occur within a school setting. The authors further posit that cultural changes present even greater challenges than structural. “Developing a learning community demands attention at a conceptual level (i.e., being able to look reflectively at what currently exists with a vision for a preferred future of improved student learning)” (p. 144) and is extremely difficult to encourage in highly resilient secondary school climates. The deep level of commitment to and agreement of shared beliefs that is required by learning group participants helps to define the identity, practices, and ultimate success of the group (Westheimer, 1999). By studying the ISG, I hoped to discover the factors that participants believed either encouraged or impeded the work of the group, including participants’ reported evidence of cultural and structural supports.

Achinstein (2002) discusses conflicts that undoubtedly arise when teachers are seriously engaging in critical practices. Achinstein notes:

The challenge then is how to conceptualize a community that maintains the ties and connectedness of a caring and stable community while sustaining the constructive controversy of a learning community.... Conflict generates opportunities to strengthen communities, for in the conflict lies an occasion to examine differences of beliefs, solicit alternative voices, bridge across differences to find common ground, and seek opportunities for change and growth. (p. 449)

Since high schools generally employ larger and more diverse faculties than elementary schools within a district or diocese, and these faculties work in greater isolation as a
result of subject matter specificity, conflict in teacher learning groups is likely and, according to Achinstein (2002), may be generative rather than prohibitive.

The process of establishing and sustaining teacher learning groups in a secondary context tends to be “a slow and deliberate journey” (Wells & Feun, 2007, p. 155) that likely involves alternating periods of advancement and regression (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008). In addition, “success is often very small and it takes an extreme length of time before you see a real change” (Fenwick, 2004, p. 271). I sought to learn ways in which I, as principal, can support and promote the work of the ISG by helping to create appropriate cultural and structural frameworks as determined in conversation with ISG participants and in response to survey data. It is also through the contextual lens of our school that I hoped to gain insight into the factors that ISG participants consider important to teaching and learning.

*The “work” of teacher learning groups.*

Participation in many teacher learning groups is mandated as part of district or school reforms. While required participation may result in individual and collective advances in teaching practices and student achievement, mandated teacher learning groups are paradoxically more likely to receive appropriate system support and also more likely to be impeded by system goals (Wood 2007).

Additionally, it is important to understand whether or not participants in the teacher learning group consider the “work” to be done as the responsibility of teachers or students. Unfortunately, discussions in some groups deteriorate to the external reasons for why our students don’t learn while “leaving [our] own practice unquestioned”
(Achinstein, 2002, p. 434). Ultimately, our schools will not change or advance until we each take responsibility for our own practices. Wood (2007) writes about her work with districtwide learning communities and cites “empowerment and agency” as two essential components for establishing opportunity for teachers to engage in real professional development work. Wood notes:

> If teachers are to take seriously their responsibility to ensure all students’ learning, then they need opportunities to discover for themselves how collaboration can develop professional judgment and expertise and to rid themselves of habitually looking to those outside their profession for answers.  

(p. 731)

In order for teachers to truly take ownership of the work of the teacher learning group, school administrators also must make a conscious effort not to impose processes and content on goal and agenda setting.

As principal of the high school, I have made a deliberate decision not to direct the participation or work of the ISG. For some teachers, this caused a great deal of tension because they were looking for me to direct their learning. However, I firmly believed that the work of the ISG should be directed by its participants. This stance is supported by researchers like Wood (2007) and Chandler-Olcott (2002) who recommend that “self-extending system[s] for teacher research and teacher education” should include among other things “teacher...choice about inquiry topics” (p. 34). Since I have chosen not to have a voice in the direction that the ISG has taken, I was keenly interested in learning how participants perceived the individual and collective work of the group. By analyzing teacher perceptions of the ISG, I hoped to be able to gauge participant perceptions of the
work accomplished by the group and the reasons participants cited for their willingness to engage in this work.

Teacher learning groups’ impact on practice.

The explicit rationale for establishing and participating in a teacher learning group is to improve teacher practice in order to advance student achievement. Several studies articulate the advantages documented by teacher learning on student performance. Supovitz and Christman (2003) in their work with small learning community initiatives in Cincinnati and Philadelphia conclude that although participation in the communities did not necessarily translate to changes and improvements in instructional practices, ongoing conversations and investigations into “the relationships between instructional practices and student work produced significant gains in student learning” (p. 5). Visscher and Witziers (2004) in a study of mathematics departments in Dutch secondary schools concluded that professional communities with strong horizontal and vertical articulations of curriculum within subject area departments, explicit teaching goals, student assessment policies, and regular feedback in the form of formative assessment for differentiating instruction had a positive impact on student achievement.

Interestingly, however, in much of the research reviewed, there is very little quantifiable evidence to suggest that teacher learning groups improve student achievement. Most of the literature discusses process rather than student-centered outcomes in specific terms. Generalizations and rhetoric such as “In order for their [i.e., teachers’] students to achieve more, they knew they needed to be constantly learning” (Wood, 2007, p. 290) abound, but detailed analyses of student achievement data are not
discussed. This may be due in part to the complexity in establishing and sustaining teacher learning groups. Or perhaps the difficulty in obtaining comparative student data for analysis lies in the inherent challenge of providing consistent study and discussion in these groups over time.

Clearly, however, the literature indicates that teachers are looking for ways to collaborate with colleagues in a safe setting with the goal of improving their practice and having a positive impact on student achievement (Wells & Feun, 2007; Fisler & Firestone, 2006; Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Simon, Seidel, & Rubin, 2004; Youngs & King, 2002). Specifically, Battey and Franke (2008) conclude that "we must work to provide opportunities for teachers to work together...to make sense of their knowledge, skills, and identities in relation to norms in both professional development and classroom practices" (p. 147) while also acknowledging that teacher’s personal identities and school context “differentiate how teachers participate in and make sense of professional development practice” (p. 127).

**Conclusion**

Identifying conceptual frameworks and reviewing literature in an effort to tell the story of the Instructional Strategies Group was a true labor of love for me. The difficulty in unraveling the mystery of the ISG moved in and out of my work like the tide. Some days, I thought I was able to see the story clearly; it presented itself to me without prodding. Other days, I sat and looked and waited, and looked some more, and waited some more...then, I ran into one of the ISG participants at school, and we talked about
their recent meeting. What did they do? They were watching *Waiting for Superman* together as a group. They had already watched half of the movie and were anxious to finish it and start discussion. There was an excitement in his voice as he talked about the meeting, the movie, and the fun he was having coming up with new ideas for invitations to the “ISG Hoedown!” I was reminded that these conceptual frameworks and empirical literature reviews are about people; teacher people; student people; principal people; people. Instructional leadership, adult learning theory, professional/teacher learning communities, trust, leadership for teacher learning, teacher learning groups are all conceptual tools, mechanisms for understanding people; understanding the Instructional Strategies Group.
Chapter 2
Methodology and Methods

Practitioner Research

As principal of the high school, my desire to better understand the work of the Instructional Strategies Group prompted me to begin asking questions about the group to ISG members long before this dissertation research. At the time, I had not been introduced to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) who posit that “practitioner action research translates this type of informal questioning of practice to one of more intentional and systematic inquiry that lends itself to problem solving” (p. 60). However, after learning more about this form of inquiry, I elected to undertake a qualitative study as a school leader/practitioner researcher so as to gather, from an insider’s perspective, study participant perceptions of their work in ISG, its impact on their classroom practices, and my support of the group as the school’s principal. As principal of the high school I was allowed a privileged position from which I had immediate access to participants, and the ability to reflect upon how the perceptions shared by participants might inform my understanding of their understanding of teaching and learning at BCHS. This chapter discusses the tools used in this study for the purposes of data collection and the rationale for the selection of these instruments and the analysis of data collected.

Assuming the roles of practitioner and researcher is aligned with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) who assert that “many educators still believe that deep and significant changes in practice can only be brought about by those closest to the day-to-day work of
teaching and learning” (p. 6) and “central to the concept of inquiry as stance is the presumed potential power of collective practitioner knowledge and agency” (p. 125). These assertions represent a paradigm shift to practitioner research from the traditionally held beliefs that researchers positioned within colleges and universities are the only legitimate sources of professional knowledge. However, the “significant changes” in educational practice to which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) refer can only take place when the expertise, experience, heart, soul, and intellect that teachers and school leaders bring to their work are acknowledged and elevated to a legitimate professional level. Consequently, implicit within this “new” professionalism is an obligation for teachers and school leaders to take a more active stance, a practitioner as researcher stance, in the development of educational theory and practice. Through collaboration with the participants of the ISG, I hoped to model the unique and rich opportunities available through practitioner research for empowerment and increased engagement in our individual and collective work as educators.

Furthermore, although working within my own school setting as a practitioner researcher offered an emic perspective facilitating access to individuals and information, it simultaneously presented obstacles to the validity of the study. The qualitative paradigm acknowledges that there are challenges presented by the reactivity that may have occurred as a result of the duality of my roles inherent in the design of a practitioner research study. However, in a common parallel to the theories of practitioner research, Maxwell (2005) points out that “the goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence, but to understand it and to use it productively” (p. 109). By carefully selecting
and employing a variety of data collection methods and validity checks, I hoped to acknowledge and account for the subjectivity that undoubtedly surfaced in data collection and analysis, and to utilize it to enrich the study and tell the story of ISG. The following sections seek to articulate my role as the researcher in this study and the ethical issues anticipated through this work.

**Role of the researcher.**

I have a lifelong history at Barresville Catholic High School. In addition to my personal affiliation with the school, I have served in the two administrative roles (director of studies and principal) that are directly responsible for the teaching and learning, instruction and curriculum at BCHS. Working in these positions has afforded me total access to the people, places, and things vital to teaching and learning at our school. I consider my position as “school leader as researcher” as the most important perspective of this study since it offers the opportunity to contribute to an expanding corpus of work further legitimizing “knowledge-of-practice” [original emphasis] (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 48) demonstrated by educators in a variety of roles. As principal of the school, I was highly invested in the outcome of this practitioner research and with finding appropriate ways to balance my day-to-day and research roles. An additional complication to this positionality is my third role as a doctoral student benefitting personally from the culmination of this study in a successfully defended dissertation. However, managed properly, these same complexities and complications sought to lend credibility and legitimacy to the role of school leader as researcher and continue to push academic understanding of this “new source of knowledge with potential to create
powerful cultures of inquiry that promote individual, organizational, and social transformations” (Anderson & Jones, 2000, p. 457).

Ethical issues.

Recognizing that it would be impossible and undesirable to assume an objective stance to this study, it was essential that I considered the ethical implications of engaging in research with teachers over whom I am able to exert power and influence. In her book, Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research, Zeni (2001) defines ethics as “the branch of philosophy dealing with decisions about right and wrong actions” (p. xv). It is within the tensions of the multiple positionalities of practitioner research and at the point of intersection of these roles and relationships that decisions become even more complicated and integral.

One of the initial steps in conducting university research is the necessity to obtain local school district/diocesan and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Prior to seeking IRB approval from the University of Pennsylvania, I obtained permission from the Secretary for Catholic Education for the Diocese of Barresville to conduct research at my school and to solicit participants from the Instructional Strategies Group. Once local permission was received, I requested and was granted approval for my study from the IRB of the University of Pennsylvania. IRB approval requires that the researcher provide well-articulated documentation of the design of the study in order to determine whether or not its scope and context are ethically constructed and possess the potential for ethical execution. Zeni (2001) succinctly outlines the process stating:

Before launching a project, most would-be researchers must analyze the potential risks as well as benefits to participants. All universities and a growing number of
school districts require that a proposal be presented to an institutional review board (IRB), which decides whether human subjects will be protected and whether the researcher has an adequate plan conforming to ethical standards. (p. xvi)

Although Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) remind that “there is no foolproof plan to avoid ethical dilemmas as the research develops” (pp. 133-134), every effort was made to design this study to ensure this avoidance wherever possible. Unfortunately, even with the best made plans, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge. One of the ISG participants, Beth, shared here about her reluctance to openly enter into discussions at a meeting because “the principal” was in the room:

I didn’t talk about it because the principal was in the room...it’s political. How do we maneuver in this political climate we’re in? We didn’t go there at all. And I know I didn’t bring it up because the principal was in the room. I don’t know if anyone else had something to say and didn’t because the principal was in the room.

Beth’s repetition of the fact that “the principal was in the room” highlighted the challenge of being a school leader as practitioner researcher. Although difficult for me to acknowledge, it is true that I cannot go anywhere in Barresville Catholic High School without the climate changing by virtue of the fact that I am the principal. I call it the ex officio effect. Even in my fifth year as principal, it still surprises me a bit. I suggest it is precisely for this reason that it was important for me to pay attention to the ways in which my position may have effected participants and the ethics of my decision-making throughout the study. As Beth shared in the quote above, there were things she didn’t discuss at an ISG meeting because I was in the room. She alluded to how my position, power, and authority as school leader influenced her participation. My responsibility throughout this inquiry was to “resist refusing to see” (Dinkins, 2005) the ways that
others may have been impacted and influenced by my presence and position and to listen deeply to Beth and the other study participants.

Mohr (2001) notes that as practitioners and researchers “we are doubly bound to ethical behavior” (p. 5) Throughout my inquiry I tried to remain attentive to the myriad ways that my leadership role could, and most likely would, affect all aspects of this study. But as the inquiry unfolded, I became more and more aware that my role as school leader/researcher was impacting and highlighting relationships in ways that I had not anticipated. I had given considerable thought to the manner in which I communicated the integrity of my research as well as my own personal integrity in order to avoid any feelings of coercion, conflict, or powerlessness for study participants. However, I had not anticipated my concern about the impact of my research on members of the faculty who did not participate in my study either because they are members of the ISG and simply chose not to participate, or because they have not participated in the ISG. I wondered about non-participants’ feelings and perceptions of this practitioner inquiry. I became concerned that these teachers may have felt pressured in their day-to-day relationships with me as a result of their non-participation, or that they may have perceived my attitude toward them and communication with them was different as a result of my study. I worried that non-participants perceived a change in my relationships with them, or that there indeed may have been a change in my relationships with them. Although I would like to think that these relationships have not become any more complicated than normal, I must acknowledge that the dissertation research and writing process is such an intimate, deep, humbling, exhausting, and life-changing
experience, that I don’t know how it hasn’t impacted each and every personal and professional relationship in my life.

I was grateful that I was able to have the support and assistance of critically constructive colleagues who generously reviewed instruments, data, analysis, and reporting with me at various points throughout my study. By seeking assistance from these individuals, I sought to add to the ethical execution, as well as to the validity and reliability of my inquiry. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) recommend soliciting assistance from a “critical friend” who is “willing to push on the researcher’s assumptions, biases, and understandings” (p. 153). I was fortunate to have a number of these critical friends, whom I have termed critically constructive colleagues, as members of my cohort in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. These colleagues challenged me to think more deeply and deliberately about important issues in my research.

Research Context

Research site.

Barresville Catholic High School (BCHS) is a co-educational, grades 9-12, secondary school located in an urban setting in southeastern Pennsylvania. The high school serves approximately 800 students representing 701 families. Enrollment at BCHS is derived principally from ten diocesan feeder schools supported by their Catholic parishes representing urban and suburban congregations. In recent years, there has also been an increase in students requesting admission to BCHS from public middle schools in and
around the city of Barresville. However, these students still account for a relatively small but growing percentage of the student body; approximately 9-10%.

Barresville Catholic has a strong, traditional academic culture that spans its 80+ year history and is considered a solid, college preparatory high school. Consistently, 98-99% of BCHS graduates continue their post secondary education at either four-year or two-year colleges or universities. The remaining percentage of BCHS graduates enter the work force, attend trade or technical schools, or choose to enlist in one of the branches of the armed services.

As of the 2010-2011 school year, the faculty at BCHS numbered forty-six full-time equivalent teachers who represented an amazing commitment to the school, with 61% having served the students of BCHS for 10 years or more, and 22% for over 20 years. Additionally, 17% of the teachers were alumni of Barresville Catholic. The strong, traditional academic culture of the school has transferred to the school’s professional development practices as well. Prior to 2007, most professional development practices were in the form of one-day or after-school workshops on a particular topic where an outside “expert” would make a presentation to our teachers. Since 2007, I have made a concerted effort to offer more opportunities and choices to teachers during time set aside for teacher learning. However, to date, it has been the administrative staff, usually the principal, who makes all plans for teacher learning during school wide sessions.
**Participant selection.**

Participants for this study were solicited from ISG members (see Table 1). Study participants represented six of nine areas of major academic study at Barresville Catholic High School, i.e., Theology, English, World Languages, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Missing among study participants is representation from the departments of Health and Physical Education, Business and Technology, and the Visual and Performing Arts. Two of the original members of the ISG were serving as co-facilitators of the group at the time of the study.

Table 1

**ISG Study Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>ISG participation</th>
<th># years at BCHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zack</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>1-4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>1-4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>20-25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>1-4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All ISG members were sent a letter inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix A). Although individual participation has changed over time, the Instructional
Strategies Group has attracted consistent attendance by approximately 20-25% of the faculty since March 2009.

Participation in this research study of the ISG was voluntary, and participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were not compensated for their involvement in the study. All information gathered from participants was kept confidential, and every attempt was made to ensure the anonymity of study participants. Participants selected their own pseudonyms for use throughout the study and for ease of identification during data collection and analysis.

All participants were asked to complete a brief, anonymous, online survey at the onset of the study. In addition to survey completion, participating ISG members were asked to provide their perspectives through personal interviews, short questionnaires distributed via e-mail and at intervals throughout data collection. ISG participant perceptions were also documented through personal communications, i.e., informal conversations or e-mails, which were recorded in a research journal. A specific agreement between the researcher and study participants was drafted outlining the characteristics and expectations of participation as noted above (Appendix B) and as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 47-48).

As I endeavored to honor the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the reporting of this study, I found that a complete de-identification of study participants minimized their perceptions and sterilized their responses in de-humanizing ways that I had not anticipated. Therefore, while participants selected their own pseudonyms for use in data recording and analysis, I subsequently and arbitrarily assigned alternate
pseudonyms for use in writing this dissertation. I selected names that typically correspond to participants' respective gender.

Future research may include an analysis of personally descriptive data as it relates to participation in collaborative teacher learning. An extension of this study would be to investigate the correlation between and among individual characteristics such as age, race, gender, level of education, number of years teaching, number of years working at the school, subjects taught, etc., and participation in the ISG and/or other teacher learning groups.

**History of the Instructional Strategies Group.**

What follows is a detailed description of the history of the Instructional Strategies Group at Barresville Catholic High School for the time period March 2009 through August 2011 as it was recorded in my research journal. It is important to note that before I obtained IRB approval for this study, I was documenting the group as part of my practice as principal of the high school. Since the conclusion of data collection, I have also continued to record information about the group; again as part of my daily practice as principal.

Through analysis, I identified three distinct phases in the life of the ISG:

Phase 1–Getting Started–March 2009 through December 2009

Phase 2–The PLC Coach–January through June 2010

Phase 3–Re-grouping–September 2010 through August 2011

By including descriptive information of the ISG divided into these phases, it is my intention to provide a more complete portrait of the group, including group membership
over time, meeting frequency, content of group meetings, and communication between the group, individual members of the ISG, and me, the principal.

**Phase I—Getting started.**

In March 2009, I was approached by two faculty members at BCHS who expressed an interest in providing opportunities for our teachers to meet on a regular basis to collaborate and to share instructional improvement strategies. The original idea was for the group to meet after school every other week and have teachers volunteer to present a lesson to their colleagues. The lessons they were encouraged to present were those that had been successful in accomplishing their classroom curricular goals and engaging students. Teachers decided that they would take turns bringing in snacks to share with the group. I arranged for the teachers to have a room for these after school sessions and to be awarded Act 48 (continuing professional education) hours for their participation in the group.

As the teachers began meeting, they developed a set of informal group norms. They soon began reporting to me that it was interesting to note the different instructional styles of their colleagues, and that they were enjoying the adaptation and experimentation of new ideas in their classrooms. Although their original plan was to have two teachers present per session, they quickly discovered that one presenter per session was sufficient. They covered such topics as: journaling across the curriculum, historical figure jigsaw cooperative learning, learning styles with *Jeopardy*, student use of individual white
boards, how to set-up an electronic grade book using Excel spreadsheets², and review techniques.

The group met 7 times from March to June 2009. During Phase 1, participation in ISG meetings ranged from 6-13 participants with a total representation of approximately 14% of the faculty.

ISG meetings resumed in September 2009 but without one of the original organizers who took a job in private industry during the summer of 2009. Another teacher who had been a presenter and faithful attendee in the spring of 2009 volunteered to assist the original facilitator with the organizational details of the group. By November of 2009, some group members had met with me to express concern that the group was losing momentum as a result of depleting their pool of possible faculty presenters. They were looking for direction and ideas.

In late December of 2009, I was notified by the Barresville School District (BSD) that Title I monies had been allocated to BCHS. We had just a few days to decide how we wanted to dedicate the funds which had to be spent by June 2010. I met with the Director of Government Grants and Programs for the school district and the Assistant Superintendent for Government Programs and Instructional Technology for the diocese on December 21, 2009. After much discussion, we decided that the best use of the Title I money was in professional development for our staff. I immediately thought of the request of the ISG for assistance with new ideas and direction for their meetings. I proposed offering an opportunity to the ISG to further develop their group and to learn

² This session was held prior to the implementation of the school wide electronic grade book that is now in use.
more about structuring the group to address specific instructional methods and ideas in order to focus their efforts on how instructional strategies might link to and improve student achievement. The BSD director offered the name of a colleague who had done considerable work for the district in the development of professional learning communities at several of the district’s schools. The idea sounded like a good one to support the ISG and to take advantage of the one-time funding being offered by the federal government. I informally discussed the idea with the two ISG facilitators and it was extremely well-received. They agreed to take the idea back to the group and later reported that the ISG had approved the idea. I then contacted the professional learning community (PLC) coach to set up a time to meet early in January to discuss the possibility of working with our faculty to extend the work of the ISG.

**Phase 2- The PLC coach.**

At the meeting with the PLC Coach on January 8, 2010, I shared the history of the ISG and spoke about providing additional support to this group for continuation, increased participation, and advancement of teacher learning. He presented me with a “to do” list for starting a PLC (Appendix C). Many of the items regarding the self-organization and self-management of the group had already been accomplished through the Instructional Strategies Group. Additionally, because the ISG was already in place, it was possible to complete several more items before the first meeting of the professional learning community with the PLC coach.

The PLC coach agreed to make a short presentation to all of our teachers about professional learning communities at our January 18, 2010 in-service day. He also
arranged to meet with the co-facilitators of the ISG to discuss the ISG from their perspectives and to establish a general direction for their meetings. I made room for the PLC Coach on our in-service schedule and arranged for four different teachers to present ISG instructional strategy sharing sessions after the coach’s discussion of professional learning communities. Three of the four sessions had already been presented during ISG meetings. They were selected for presentation to the entire faculty based on feedback from the ISG facilitators. I solicited assistance from another faculty member who offered one additional, new session for those members of the faculty who had attended all previous ISG meetings. Teachers were permitted to sign-up for the workshop of their choice the morning of the in-service although it was necessary to limit participation to 15 teachers per workshop so we were assured that each presenter would have an audience. My goal for this in-service was to demonstrate some of the expertise that we have in our building and to encourage more teachers to participate in the PLC venture. I was hoping to increase participation to 20-25% of our faculty from the 14% that seemed to be in regular attendance at the ISG meetings.

At the in-service session, the PLC coach was not well-received by our faculty. Unfortunately, even though we had discussed at length that some of our faculty had already been actively engaged in the ISG, the PLC coach made his presentation as if he were speaking to a group of teachers who had never worked collaboratively. He mistakenly approached our teachers as if he had to convince them of the need to share expertise and information. Although his presentation was professional and well-

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3 The one hour workshops offered were: Historical figure jigsaw cooperative learning, Learning styles with Jeopardy, Student use of individual white boards, and What I've learned since being diagnosed with Adult ADHD.
organized, he neglected, in a very significant way, to recognize the “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) already present in the room. In particular, the teachers who had been participating in the ISG were put off by his manner and the fact that he took them back to ground zero.

The PLC coach met with the group’s two facilitators and the first PLC meeting was held on February 2, 2010. Ten teachers attended; 17% of the faculty. The first meeting, like the in-service, was not warmly received by the ten participants. While they were establishing group norms, one informal leader emerged from among the teachers present exuding a great deal of counterproductive energy according to the other participants. Several teachers came to see me to express concern over the strength of this individual’s negativity. In addition, the “new” facilitator of the group stepped down as a co-organizer as a result of this meeting. In retrospect, I have wondered if this meeting to develop group norms was seen by some as a put-down of the ISG. Although group members expressed an interest in establishing these norms for the “new” group, some may have felt that the PLC coach was implying that the ISG hadn’t been “doing it right.” Even though this was not the case, it was a powerful perception. There also seemed to be some lingering confusion as to whether or not it was the group or the coach that developed the list of norms referenced in Appendix D. Furthermore, there arose confusion and some controversy as to the group’s name; were they the ISG or the PLC? The teachers in the group decided for purposes of their spring study to call themselves PLC.
I contacted the PLC coach to discuss his impressions of the first session, and we spoke at some length about how to proceed. I shared with him the feedback from several meeting attendees and stressed that it was important for the coach to assure the group that they were on the right track while guiding them to focus their attention on the instructional topic of their choice. The PLC coach remarked that he was somewhat surprised by the level of expertise and reflective practices of the members of the group. He also confirmed that he had scheduled regular meetings/conversations with the now lone ISG organizer after each PLC session in order to better gauge the group’s response to the session and to plan next steps before each meeting.

During February 2010, the group distributed a survey to all teachers asking for their input to determine the types of presentations that would be most beneficial to the group. The survey items were taken from brainstorming ideas presented at the first PLC meeting. From the surveys, it was determined that teachers wanted to focus their attention on learning more about differentiated instruction during their Spring 2010 sessions. Informally, teachers shared with me that they were implementing some of the differentiated instruction ideas into their classrooms and were reporting back to the group on what worked, what didn’t work, what needed to be adjusted, etc. At the end of the year, teachers felt as if the group was just beginning to gain momentum, and they were looking forward to continuing discussions in 2010-2011.

It was encouraging that subsequent to the February 2, 2010 inaugural meeting, the group met on five other dates throughout the spring semester: March 9, March 20, April 22, May 20, and June 9, 2010. By the end of the spring semester of 2010, seventeen
teachers, based on their schedules and/or interests, had moved in and out of the PLC coaching meetings. Ultimately, 29% of the faculty had attended some or all the ISG/PLC sessions during academic year 2009-2010, and most teachers indicated at the end of the year that they were looking forward to continuing participation in 2010-2011. However, participants also indicated that they were interested in returning to their former ISG name in the fall of 2010.

**Phase 3–Re-grouping.**

ISG meetings were delayed in starting up in the fall of 2010 due to the birth of a child of the ISG facilitator. Thankfully, another teacher who had been attending ISG meetings and PLC coaching sessions stepped up to help with facilitating ISG meetings as of October 2010. I met with both co-facilitators on October 14, 2010 to discuss the ISG. The teachers asked what direction I wanted the year’s meetings to take, and I explained to them that it was important to me that the teachers decide what they would like to study rather than have me impose my ideas on the group. I emphasized that as long as they linked their work in the ISG to teaching and learning at BCHS, I would be pleased with the work of the group.

The facilitators asked about teacher access to professional publications, and we discussed the school’s subscriptions to two educational journals. Both publications were available for our teachers in the library. We discussed several of the topics for ISG meetings the facilitators had brainstormed, e.g. using a descriptive process for group discussions, bringing in outside presenters to do small group work with the ISG, setting up roundtable discussions with teachers from other diocesan high schools to share lesson
plans and instructional strategies, to name a few. The facilitators decided to send out another survey to the faculty to see what topics were currently of interest to the teachers. We also discussed that any resources needed for ISG meetings were to be arranged by the two facilitators. The availability of funding was discussed and I explained again that last year’s Title I funding was a one-shot deal and provided to us from the federal government via the local school district. I explained to the teachers that I had confirmed with the public school district that no additional funding was available.

The first meeting of the ISG was tentatively arranged for October 27, 2010 but had to be re-scheduled due to calendar conflicts and the end of the first marking period. Meetings resumed on November 18, 2010 and continued through the end of the academic year. Participation fluctuated between 3 and 10 participants. ISG members decided at the initial meetings of the year that each meeting would be divided into two parts. Part One would be a discussion on an assigned reading from an educational journal. Part Two would allow opportunity for participants to share their experiences and ideas about the topic as it related to their individual work. ISG participants also talked about working with the instructional technology coordinator of the school to develop online curricular data bases for sharing successful lessons, assessments, and links to useful web sites.

On April 27, 2011, I received official notification that my dissertation study had been granted IRB approval to proceed. At that time, I prepared invitations for all members of the ISG to participate in my research study and began preparing for data collection.
At the urging of the facilitators of the ISG, I attended three meetings of the ISG between April 19 and May 26, 2011. During the meetings, participants expressed interest in extending ISG meetings to summer book study. The group selected three books that I arranged to purchase by securing benefactor funding specifically dedicated for teacher professional development. As is the practice for all of the ISG meetings, the ISG requested that an invitation be extended to all teachers, so any interested faculty members would have the opportunity to participate in the summer reading and discussions. Consequently, several teachers took part in summer reading who had not been regular ISG attendees.

On May 31, 2011, the two ISG facilitators asked to speak with me. They started the conversation by citing my feedback to them about my pride in the ISG and my many statements encouraging the group. To that end, they mentioned that they noticed a change in the dynamic of the group during the past several meetings. They attributed the "change" to my attendance. I asked them if they could share with me what they meant by the "change." They noted that several of the ISG participants had remarked to them privately that it was awkward for them when I was in attendance because I am not a teacher; I am an administrator. For those participants, it changed the informality of the conversation and their ability to speak without reservation. The facilitators suggested that I attend every other ISG meeting. I assured both teachers that I understood their concerns and appreciated the insight they were sharing with me. I reiterated that my goal was to support their group in whatever ways were appropriate, and that I was committed to taking my cues from them. I thanked them for their candor and asked them if they
thought it would be appropriate for me to “NOT” attend the first book study group on June 20. They said that they thought it would be okay for me to attend that meeting but to step back from the July 7 date. I assured them that even with my dissertation study, my goal was to support the group and to help it advance, not to change it into something that wasn’t theirs. I assured them again that I was not trying to re-create the ISG. I further commented that I appreciated that they came to speak with me right away.

Teachers met on three occasions throughout the summer 2011 to discuss their impressions of three different books that the ISG had selected for professional reading. Scheduled concurrently with these three dates were half-day instructional technology sessions conducted by the instructional technology coordinator at our school in an effort to offer additional Act 48 opportunities, and as a way to support teachers on technology topics, strategies, and tools of particular interest to individual teachers. Twelve teachers indicated an interest in the summer reading groups and were provided each of the three selected titles. There was a different configuration of teacher participants at each of the three meetings. Due to scheduling conflicts and as a result of my conversation with the two facilitators at the end of May, I only attended the first book study group.

On June 20, 2011, I brought bagels and donuts to school and asked the main office to put on an extra pot of coffee. Six teachers and I attended the meeting which lasted from 9-11:30 and offered an in-depth conversation using Nieto’s *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (2003). The book recounts Nieto’s study of a districtwide teacher inquiry group. To get our discussion off the ground, we shared about our general impressions of the book. Our conversation quickly gained momentum as we made our
way around the table. At one point the discussion turned to a critical question that one teacher was struggling with about whether or not to stay in the teaching profession. Immediately, the teachers in the room circled the wagons and started to affirm the teacher who was sharing about her struggle. One comment made was particularly poignant for me. The struggling teacher shared that she is conflicted and questioning her call to the teaching vocation since her background in counseling comes through so strongly in her classroom management and instructional styles, and seems to complicate her work in particular ways. Another teacher quickly offered that he felt that each one of us has a strong personality trait, tendency, or background that critically informs the way we do our job. He called it our “shadow” and explained to the struggling teacher that he felt the teacher’s “shadow” was her strength. I was drawn to his insight and so were other members of the group. We spent a while away from the book discussion and on this concept as each one at the table reflected on his or her own personal “shadow.”

Teachers enthusiastically approached reading, reflecting, and sharing about Nieto’s book. It was interesting to note how many of our teachers identified with the feelings and experiences described in the text. Teachers further expressed affirmation of their job as professionals and as participants in the ISG after having read about a similar group.

Although I did not attend the next two book discussion groups, participants reported varying degrees of connection with the texts but similar participation rates. July’s group had six teachers in attendance and in August, five teachers attended.
Overall, nine of twelve interested teachers actually participated in at least one of the summer book discussions. These teachers represented almost 19% of the faculty.

**Research Methods**

Utilizing a variety of formal and informal data collection techniques in an emergent design, the study solicited participant perspectives as the main data source. Unlike quantitative research that “seeks to explain causes [original emphasis] of changes in measured social facts,” qualitative research is “concerned with understanding [original emphasis] the social phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 12). By gathering teacher perception data as the main vehicle leading to greater understanding of ISG participants’ making their way in a teacher learning group, this study aligned with qualitative ideologies and strategies in its methods and purpose.

Data were collected using a variety of qualitative tools in order to answer the research questions and to provide appropriate triangulation of data through analyses. Analytic memos were written periodically to assist data analysis and interpretation. Surveys were distributed to all ISG participants and analyzed at the onset of the study to provide general feedback and context to the research questions. Survey analysis also informed the design of other instruments. The use of surveys, interviews, ISG meeting notes, questionnaires, and my research journal all related directly to participant perception of the ISG, its impact on practice, and support received from the principal. Additionally, all of the data collection methods were used as data points for deepening
my own understanding of teaching and learning in our school. Scripted data collection instruments, i.e., survey items, interview protocol, and e-mail questionnaires, were piloted with individuals who are representative of, but not members of, the participant group. In addition, these instruments were vetted by critically constructive colleagues. Instruments were edited and revised as necessary. The data matrix detailing how the data collection methods for this study map onto the research questions may be found in Appendix E.

With the exception of my research journal, it must be acknowledged that the data collected was self-reported by study participants. Furthermore, it was possible that some participants may have intentionally misrepresented their perceptions although one would hope that this scenario would be unlikely within a professional setting. Through member checks and the periodic review of data analysis by critically constructive colleagues (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994), I sought to improve the validity of this study.

Surveys.

Before developing interview questions and other research tools, I determined it was important to hear briefly from ISG participants about their perceptions of the group. Since a “survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2009, p. 145), it was logical that to start this study, ISG participants were asked to voluntarily complete a brief, online survey. Six of the seven participants completed the survey while the seventh survey was partially completed.
The survey was designed to gauge overall perceptions of participation in the ISG, the individual, and collective work of the group, its perceived impact on individual teacher practices, and principal support of the ISG. By allowing anonymous and confidential survey responses, I hoped to inform the context for this study in order to “see the next step in the research” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 181) and better articulate more explicit data collection to be conducted with ISG participants. The survey consisted of a combination of 10 closed and open ended questions which were constructed using an online tool, Survey Monkey. Survey invitations were sent to ISG participants via e-mail. The survey may be found in Appendix F.

**Interviews.**

The use of interviews allowed me the opportunity to engage in dialogue with participants about their perceptions of the Instructional Strategies Group. Rubin and Rubin (2005) assert that “qualitative interviewing is both art and science” (p. 15). They propose the use of a responsive interviewing approach for qualitative studies, wherein the “questioning styles reflect the personality of the researcher, adapt to the varying relationships between researcher and conversational partner, and change as the purpose of the interview evolves” (p. 15). This approach provided the framework for my interview protocol. As such, the protocol reflected open-ended questions and was revised as needed.

Interviews were designed to last between 30-45 minutes and were conducted at a site of the interviewee’s choice, either within or beyond the school setting. The interview protocol referenced in Appendix G was used along with follow-up questions in an
attempt to align with Maxwell's (2005) principle regarding questioning, wherein he reminds the researcher that "(y)our research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview [original emphasis] questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding" (p. 92). Three of the interview questions were adapted from a study conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education in July, 2007. These questions are identified in Appendix G with a double asterisk [**]. Interview questions changed slightly over time in response to information that emerged through other interviews and/or data collection methods. One round of interviews was conducted with seven ISG participants during June-August 2011. The number of interviews conducted was dependent upon volunteer willingness to participate and time available. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded. Member checks were conducted as necessary and a critically constructive colleague partially reviewed interview transcripts and coding.

**Instructional Strategy Group meeting notes.**

ISG group norms traditionally involved the distribution to all BCHS faculty and staff of a meeting summary via a Word document attached to an e-mail. In this way, I hoped to learn more specifically from a primary information source (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), i.e., meeting notes/minutes, about the work performed by the group within their meetings without the imposition of my presence at every meeting or through video or audio recording. However, meeting note distribution became increasingly sporadic at the time of this study. For the few meeting minutes that were distributed by the facilitators to the faculty and staff of BCHS, this data collection method, not only served
as written data to be analyzed and coded, but also as a form of "observation" into the working of the group. By utilizing these notes chronicling ISG meetings and cross-checking events with participant perceptions of group meetings through interviews and questionnaires, I had hoped to be better able to improve the trustworthiness of the study (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). In practice, however, there were so few meeting notes distributed by the facilitators of the group during this study that this data source was used to add to the understanding of meeting content and not as a significant means of cross-checking events. Meeting notes were analyzed, coded, and member checks were conducted as needed.

**Short e-mail questionnaires.**

Questionnaires serve as "interview by proxy" (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 180) and are therefore another method by which ISG participants offered their feedback on their ongoing participation in the ISG. Since the ISG meeting notes were distributed to the entire faculty, I e-mailed two to four short, open-ended questions to ISG participants after their meetings in order to allow the opportunity for participants to share either additional general or confidential feedback relative to participant impressions of the work of the group specific to the most recent meeting and the direction of the group in general. Response rates varied but generally represented approximately 50-75% of meeting attendees. Questionnaire responses were analyzed and coded. Member checks were conducted as needed. Questions for the questionnaire are presented in Appendix H.
Research journal.

As part of my practice as principal of the high school, I kept a research journal specific to the work of the Instructional Strategies Group. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) suggest that utilizing a journal offers a place for the researcher to record events, and reflect upon those events and practice. Ultimately, the journal became a rich data source for me. Since I routinely documented in my research journal those conversations, e-mail exchanges, ideas, observations, and reflections relative to the ISG, I hoped to improve the analysis of my study by utilizing this important tool. My research journal was especially helpful in assisting the analysis of the data collected with regard to principal support of the ISG, and what I learned about teaching and learning in our school. By journaling, I was able to wonder aloud in a safe place. Selected excerpts from the journal were included in the reporting of this inquiry.

Data Collection

As a practitioner research study, data collection has taken place within and as a result of my work at Barresville Catholic High School. Background, contextual information relating to the work of the Instructional Strategies Group was being documented prior to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of this study and as an ongoing element of my practice as principal of the high school. Once I received official notification from the IRB on April 27, 2011 that this specific inquiry had been approved, I began more deliberate data collection with regard to answering the research questions guiding this work. The data collection targeted for this study utilized the qualitative
methods outlined earlier in this chapter and were conducted from May-September 2011. However, due to the nature of this research, it is important to note that “both data gathering and analysis are immediate and ongoing” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 168). Although data collection for this particular study ended in September 2011, it will likely continue in some form throughout my tenure at the high school and/or the life of the ISG so that, as the instructional leader of BCHS, I may continue to advance my understanding of teaching and learning at my school.

**Data analysis.**

As I began data analysis, I felt as if I was standing outside of a room that contained nothing and everything at the same time. All my data was in the room but when I cracked open the door, it was all dark; black; I could not see anything. Through data analysis, I began to illumine the pieces of this puzzle, one by one. I started by defining the Instructional Strategies Group as the unit of analysis for the study. Using the ISG as the focal point allowed me to create a collective portrait of the group through individual participant perceptions and to further my understanding of my role as instructional leader deeply interested in teaching and learning at my school.

The first collection method I used was the ten item anonymous survey that I asked participants to complete using an online survey tool, Survey Monkey. I reviewed participant responses three different ways before analysis. The first was a general read through to gauge overall context and sentiment. What followed was a more extensive twofold inquiry conducted first by survey, i.e., by each participant’s total responses, and then by survey item in order to inform interview questions. The former provided an
opportunity to learn more about individual participant perceptions, while the latter
allowed for initial understanding of the breadth of perceptions and possible areas of
consensus and dissensus among participants. By utilizing the survey responses to help
inform main interview and follow-up questions, I hoped to go beyond any superficiality
that otherwise might have emerged in initially reported responses. Probing further into
interviewee responses and referring back to anonymous survey data when appropriate
during an interview sought to allow for deeper understanding of the work of the ISG and
my relationship to that work.

Throughout the study, survey responses also provided a triangulation point for
data. When analyzing the entire data set, I used survey responses as a point of referral for
participant perceptions for the purpose of enhancing the trustworthiness of the study.
Trustworthiness is a term used in practitioner research to indicate validity. In noting the
difference between trustworthiness and validity, however, Zeichner and Noffke (2001)
note that:

We have chosen the term trustworthiness [original emphasis] as an alternative to
the term validity [original emphasis] for its invocation of relational terms...the
idea of trustworthiness better captures the need for practitioner research to justify
its claims to know in terms of the relationships among knowers and knowledges.
(pp. 314-315)

As I proceeded through data analysis, I considered the value and possibility of
surveying study participants again at intervals in the future to see if/how their perceptions
of the work of the ISG and principal support of the group might change over time. It is
important to me to continue to encourage the relationships between our teacher learners,
knowledge, and practice. I also believe that future research providing additional
longitudinal data would be valuable since sustaining school-based teacher work over time is particularly difficult in a secondary setting (Wells & Feun, 2007).

I next analyzed and coded interviews, and available ISG meeting notes and short e-mail questionnaires. I first read through all of the data several times, then returned to annotate interview transcriptions, notes, and questionnaires. Admittedly, at first many of my annotations were personal reactions to what was happening in the data rather than descriptions of what was happening in the data. However, by continuing to return to the data over time, I became better at “reading the data” rather than “reading into the data.” I developed the habit of acknowledging and documenting any personal responses through my research journal, so as to hold them in a safe place for possible future use and, more importantly, to remove them as much as possible from data analysis.

In order to begin coding the data, I looked for participant responses to two essential questions: 1) What is the work? and 2) What is my relationship, as principal of BCHS, to the work? (S. Lytle, personal communication, July 12, 2011). Utilizing ATLAS.ti 6.2 software, I returned to my data set with those two questions in mind and focused on the words (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the language used by participants, and coded accordingly. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) remind that coding is about reading the story of the data and “thinking creatively with the data” (p. 30). Admittedly, this can get very complicated very quickly while conducting practitioner research; therefore, I continued to utilize my research journal and the software comment editor to record my additional wonderings while working diligently to maintain a descriptive rather than interpretive stance to the coding. I quickly developed five meta codes as I was working
through the transcripts. These codes described the work of the group or my relationship to the work and are as follows: Work-individual, Work-collective, Other professional learning experiences, Principal support, and Why, i.e., reasons teachers gave for participation. These codes referred back to the research questions and described participant individual and collective perceptions of the work of the ISG, participant perceptions of principal support of the ISG, their reasons for participation, and other experiences that participants may have had with professional learning.

Following this meta coding, I conducted queries through the computer software for each of the five meta codes and reviewed their respective quotation sets individually with an eye toward refining them in preparation to reduce the data further into more specific, descriptive codes. I took my time with this process and found that it was easier for me to put my personal reactions aside when I looked at sets of data outside of the interviews. Running the queries and analyzing the data from those five larger piles allowed me to be more objective and less inferential. I read through the queries several times and annotated them with word or phrase descriptors utilizing participants’ own words as much as possible since it was important to retain the integrity of the data without too much initial interpretation. These descriptors were reviewed and reduced to a set of twenty-three descriptive codes (see Appendix I) which were then used to code each data set again through the ATLAS.ti 6.2 program. I then displayed this data on a matrix detailing the frequency of the descriptive codes within the data sets and mapping their relationship to the original five meta codes. Through this process, I began to develop a
clearer picture as to the collective perceptions of the group with regard to the research questions and to generate meaning from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finally, my research journal was a dynamic, living data source, and vital to the interpretation of the data collected and conclusions reached. Throughout data analysis, I referred to the journal for information about the study and its participants in order to make the story more complete and coherent. Additionally, I used the journal as a way to record and process some of my thinking about the ISG and teaching and learning at BCHS. It remains an essential place of inquiry and thought as my relationship with the ISG continues.
Chapter 3

The Culture of a Voluntary Teacher Learning Group

“So that we can become better teachers.”
—Beth

The small group of teachers who initiated meetings of the Instructional Strategies Group did so without a roadmap or template. These teachers, working from a common belief that the professional faculty at BCHS had considerable “knowledge-for-practice” gained through their scholastic studies and formal professional development opportunities, along with a “knowledge-in-practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) afforded by our experienced faculty, had the desire to broaden their instructional repertoires. They willingly and alternatively assumed the roles of “expert” and “novice” as they worked together to take the first steps toward building a collaborative learning community. The tenacious desire of ISG members to continue to offer a place for teachers to meet and “talk shop” has enhanced teacher learning opportunities at BCHS, but has not been without challenge.

As may already have been evident from the history shared in the last chapter, the group has met obstacles and experienced periods of growth and recession throughout its lifetime (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Fenwick, 2004). It was not entirely surprising, then, when study participants shared that these realities have contributed to the struggle for the group’s identity. What was perhaps somewhat surprising was the ongoing enthusiasm about the group that was consistently shared by ISG members. In
spite of membership, scheduling, and identity challenges, the unified perception of study participants was that within a profession that is always evolving, the ISG offered the opportunity to co-engage this dynamism in important ways. Tim shared his perception that “the whole thing’s sort of moving on through time. It’s not the same group it was three years ago. It’s changed, we’ve changed and will continue to.”

This chapter attempts to make visible my sense-making of their sense-making of the work of the ISG, and how they perceived themselves as teachers and as teacher learners. It has been my intention to re-tell participant perceptions made explicit through their own words, or perhaps made evident through what they chose not to say. I have also attempted to represent ISG members’ perspectives with attention to the discrepant cases that emerged during my communication with participants. Furthermore, it should be noted again that the descriptions and analyses presented in this chapter are not representative of all members of the ISG, but only of those teachers, the 7 of 9 regular attendees\(^4\) as of the spring of 2011, who agreed to participate in this research study. It is also important to note that my position as principal of the school conducting this practitioner research has no doubt added additional layers to this analysis that would not be evident or possible without my relationships with individual teachers and the ISG that extended before and after the IRB approved timeframe for data collection.

ISG participants who agreed to assist with this study readily shared their ideas, thoughts, opinions, hopes, and disappointments with regard to the ongoing work of the group. What follows is their story, a snapshot of their perceptions at a particular moment.

\(^4\) Of the two ISG members who did not volunteer to participate in this study, one teacher was unable due to a serious health concern and the second shared that he had concerns about the time commitment for participation.
in the group's history, as they related it to me through survey responses, interviews, post-ISG meeting notes and questionnaires, and informal conversations recorded in my research journal. I will argue that ISG participants articulated the culture of the group by describing membership, focus, relationships and context through participant perceptions of participation, the evolution of the focus of the group, the importance and challenges of intra-group relationships, and finally, the relationship of the group to the larger BCHS community.

**Attendance and Participation**

This research afforded the opportunity to witness the ongoing commitment of study participants to the work of the ISG. Even in the midst of uncertainty about meeting format and discussions, participants identified characteristics that they indicated were common to all ISG attendees and speculated as to reasons why other BCHS colleagues may not be interested in participating in the group. At times, by describing what they were not, in essence, they described what they believed they were. A discussion of group norms is included in this section since participants repeatedly referred to the informality of the group as a key factor in their ISG membership. Participants also consistently referred to the importance of the emotional, physical, and temporal "spaces" impacting their attendance and participation in the Instructional Strategies Group. As I indicate later in this chapter, the emotional space described by participants was clearly established and enhanced the work of the ISG, whereas the physical and temporal spaces in effect during this study were described by members as obstacles to the work of the group.
Group membership—All are welcome!

E-mail Subject: Mount Up! ISG Hoedown This Thurs!

Hi Everyone, There will be an ISG Hoedown this Thursday, May 26th at 3 pm in room 206. All are welcome. We will be selecting a book for the group’s summer reading and sharing our personal plans to improve practice over the summer. And as always, if there’s time at the end, Tex will recount the harrowing exploits of the Dalton Gang. Have a great day, Tex and Giuseppe

Every three to four weeks, similar invitations appeared in the e-mail inboxes of every member of our staff at BCHS. Without exception, every faculty and staff member at BCHS was and is invited to every meeting of the ISG. During Phase 3, one of the ISG facilitators started to include humorous Spaghetti Western references with each meeting invitation. Announcements also included meeting time, place, and topic information for all teachers and staff members. As reported by participants, the humor, openness, and welcoming demeanor of these e-mail invitations added a great deal to the culture and climate of group meetings. Along with other participants, Beth mentioned that “sharing everybody’s culture or personality [helps to show that] we’re a bunch of real people meeting to talk about our profession.” The benefits of self-organization and self-direction within effective adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011) along with the ability to reveal something about the personalities of participants were apparent in the ways in which the ISG invited members and conducted its meetings.

Attendance varied throughout the three phases of the group. Phase 1 occurred from March 2009 until December 2009. Phase 2 took place during the spring semester of 2010 when the group was facilitated by the PLC Coach. Lastly, the ISG began to re-group during Phase 3 beginning in the fall of 2010 and continuing throughout the
duration of this study. During Phase 1 when the ISG was just getting started, the group enjoyed fairly consistent attendance of approximately 8-14 teachers per meeting. These meetings were presentation style, and the focus was to provide time for one or two teachers per session to share a successful or interesting instructional strategy or lesson with colleagues. The newness of the group and having a place to go to “idea share” brought a variety of teachers to meetings during this phase. By November of 2009, some group members had met with me to express concern that the group was losing momentum as a result of a depleting pool of possible presenters. They were looking for direction and ideas. Therefore, when I became aware in December 2009 of Title I funding for professional development, I suggested offering an opportunity to the ISG to further develop their group by addressing specific instructional methods and ideas that would assist the group to focus their efforts on how instructional strategies might link to and improve student achievement. I informally proposed the idea to the two ISG facilitators and it was extremely well-received. The facilitators agreed to take the idea back to the group for discussion and approval. Subsequently, the facilitators indicated that the group was interested and plans were made to move ahead. The idea of inviting an outside facilitator to work with the group sounded like a good one to me as a way to support the ISG and to take advantage of the one-time funding being offered by the federal government.

During Phase 2, ISG attendance peaked while the group was under the direction of a professional learning community coach (PLC). In addition to the continuing professional education credits that were always available to meeting attendees, financial
stipends available from Title I funding were also directed to the group’s 17 attendees during Phase 2. However, study participants tended to downplay any membership increases during this phase since they did not perceive group members’ as having ownership of the ISG and its direction at that time. The ability to self-organize and self-direct both the Instructional Strategies Group in general and meetings in particular was something that was valued by study participants and was notably missed by most participants during Phase 2. During Phase 3, the semester following the professional development sessions with the PLC coach, study participants noted a decline in ISG membership from the previous two phases with an average meeting attendance of 4-6 teachers while achieving overall attendance of 12 different teachers for the time period.

Participants could only speculate as to why more of their colleagues were not attending ISG meetings. Beth was the only participant who mentioned that she occasionally extended a gentle nudge to colleagues encouraging them to try out a meeting by sharing with them her experience of the ISG. Without exception, however, participants stressed the importance of attracting interest in the group rather than openly recruiting new members. Participants agreed that they did not want to entice more ISG attendees with a major marketing campaign, and spoke of the importance of a no-pressure, open approach to group membership. Mark was quick to point out, “I’m not a real advocate for promoting or pushing. I’m just there, I enjoy it, I’m benefitting from it, I’ll put my input. But I’m not the real instigator, advocate, get out there and push it.” Participants also hesitated to make the group mandatory for all teachers as a way to increase participation, since as Tim stated, “it would kind of feel more like work. People
will resist and get offended; if they have to do it they’ll do the minimum, and that’s not what you want.” Other study participants agreed that “mandating the [group] can indeed undermine its usefulness” (Jones, 2010, p. 154). While participants all acknowledged that having “more voices, more ideas” would be beneficial to the group, most also admitted that they are pleased with the informality that the group enjoyed because of its relatively small number of participants.

While none of the non-participants were interviewed, when asked about their thoughts on how the ISG was perceived by non-participating teachers, study participants consistently perceived their colleagues as belonging to one of three categories: 1) those that would like to attend but for whom the scheduled dates and times conflict with other obligations; 2) those that are still “on the fence” about participating and “are still figuring [the group] out;” and 3) those that have made a deliberate decision not to attend and for whom “it’s not a priority” or who are “mailing it in” and do not see the benefit after their personal cost/benefit analysis. Although participants were reluctant to categorize their colleagues who fall into the latter group of non-participants, they spoke to me about these teachers with a nod and a nudge and a “You know who they are.” Participants spoke of colleagues who are “thirty years into it [and] they haven’t done anything new for the last twenty-five years.” They are teachers who are “set in their ways and they’re satisfied with the product they’re putting out. And that’s their business, it’s not mine. But you know it, you can see it. And they figure I don’t need that, I’m good.”

While discussing the reasons why some colleagues chose not to participate in the ISG, Kathy briefly revealed an incident not reported by any other study participant. In
one of her interview responses, Kathy referred to the possibility of reluctance on the part of some non-participating teachers to engage with certain “personalities” who are regular attendees of the group. She alluded to lingering uneasiness between a few current and former attendees. Kathy mentioned that during the second meeting of fall 2010, “things fell apart a little bit. And we had a falling out of a couple of people.” She recalled several former members who have not attended meetings since that time and indicated that, to her knowledge, no one from the ISG has approached these teachers about returning to the group. Although Kathy was reluctant to go into any further detail, her comment highlighted the inevitable conflict that arises when well-meaning professionals are engaged in critical conversations and are not in agreement about best practices (Storey, 2004; Achinstein, 2002). The fact that the ISG did not have any formal leadership or formal norms in place to address conflicts that arose may also account for the group’s difficulty in responding to these conflicts, thereby leaving the group vulnerable to possible changes in membership and the potential for lingering hard feelings. By allowing this unresolved conflict, the group may have worked against its efforts to strengthen the professional and personal ties of BCHS faculty and ultimately, may have inhibited the work of the group (Achinstein, 2002). Furthermore, rather than reducing the isolated practice of teachers at BCHS, it may actually have encouraged further isolation for some. Although participants cited the informality of the group as one of its strengths, Kathy’s disclosure certainly prompted me to pause and consider unforeseen consequences from my and the ISG’s separate, yet parallel decisions to deliberately avoid formal group leadership and norms. The trade-off was that the group avoided conflict but
also lost the potential contributions that may have benefitted the group by the members who dropped out.

In speaking about their own reasons for participation, most participants expressed their commitment to the ISG as a way to honor their professional responsibility to their students. Zack summed up his own and most participants' reasons for ISG membership in the following quote:

I feel obligated to my kids to stay on the cutting edge. I feel obligated to meet as many of them on their levels as possible, at once. To me, the group helps me to fulfill that responsibility that I'm always aware of what's out there in so far as what's available to me here [at BCHS]. I think it shows that I'm not sedentary in my approach to teaching and that I want to get better. And it helps me approach my job and face the kids with confidence, knowing that I'm doing everything I can with what's available to me to make their experience in my class better.

In explaining their desire to improve, participants metaphorically described the need to acquire as many “arrows in the quiver” or “pitches to throw” as possible. Beth, however, extended her thinking to also include her social and emotional need for participating in the group. She stated:

For me it's a priority. So that ugly things don't get stuck in my head. We all do it. We can keep saying, 'this isn't working, this isn't working, this isn't working.' You just get real negative about students. And somebody in the room will remind you of why you're here. Somebody in the room will remind you that they are children. Someone in the room will remind you that summer's coming, or something. And you just need that recharge to your battery. I think this group does it.

Beth's honest comments offered a powerful witness to the value of participation and the important work of the group beyond staying on the “cutting edge” of promising practices. Her response also pointed to the deep relational trust (Bryk & Schneider,
2002) that participants perceived as the foundation underlying and, in essence, allowing the depth of their professional discourse.

**Group norms.**

It was apparent that ISG participants deliberately decided to have very few norms guiding their group. Included among the few formal processes was a meeting at the beginning of each academic year where participants decided on the frequency and length of their meetings. Establishing a meeting agenda had also become one of the few formal group norms for the ISG; however, participants reminded me often that they were free to wander from the meeting agenda as needed. Finally, the distribution of meeting minutes was also intended to be a formal group norm. However, facilitators did not feel they had developed an acceptable way to distribute minutes that would honor the confidentiality of group discussion while also giving enough information to non-participants regarding meeting content and value. It seemed that for each of the formal norms, except for the establishment of the meeting schedule, ISG members also had informal structures and expectations in place that countered the effects of any formality. Without question, there was a deliberate and concerted effort on the part of ISG participants to keep away from anything “formal,” be they norms, structures, or language. Echoing the sentiments of other participants, Beth noted that “as of right now, I’m enjoying how informal it is. And that’s key, too, because we’re formal all day long, and I don’t want to go to another meeting.”

The ISG prided itself on its informal norms which were very few in number. The most salient of the informal norms was the group’s ability to respond to participant needs
by allowing the flexibility for meeting discussion to focus on the day’s concerns for teachers rather than the announced agenda items. Mark noted:

There’s been benefit in knowing that even if we do have an agenda, there’s a feeling among the colleagues that if someone has a question or issue, we can deal with that and make that the focus for the evening. So it’s not like we have an agenda that we have to finish points A, B, and C before we leave or we’re in a dither about that.

Participants also spoke of the importance of allowing the opportunity for everyone to share their thoughts at every meeting. When asked what happens if a particular member goes off on a tangent, participants indicated that they “wait it out” and find ways to gently re-direct conversation back to the topic rather than directly addressing the offending member.

Members were quick to point out that if the membership of the ISG were to increase, it would probably be necessary to establish more formal group norms. Although they admitted that it would be beneficial to increase teacher participation in the ISG, they seemed content with the current size of the group. For right now, they appreciated that they “never set rules [and] that’s the cool part” clearly enjoying the mutual respect and flexibility afforded by the informality that smaller membership numbers allow.

In addition to the positive outcomes discussed by ISG members relative to their participation and the flexibility afforded by few group norms, Kathy voiced a concern expressed by other participants as well when she shared that attending meetings over the course of the past two school years, “at times [has] been confusing because I don’t think we had direction. It’s been choppy.” She believed that the identity and direction of the
group have been somewhat haphazard. Kathy specifically cited the change in names from ISG to PLC and back again to ISG as just one indicator of the way that the group has floundered in defining itself and its direction over time. Even with this uncertainty, Kathy remained committed to the group and stated that “some of the personalities” are what keep her coming back. Interestingly, she also had cited “some of the personalities” as the reason that conflict had emerged in meetings. However, Kathy seemed able to navigate these personality differences and to pull from meetings and colleagues that which she found most helpful while respectfully disengaging with those aspects that she did not find beneficial to her personally or professionally.

Spaces.

Emotional space.

In spite of the incident Kathy reported as having occurred in the fall of 2010, it was clearly evident from study participant feedback that ISG members viewed the group as a “safe” space where they could go to “talk shop,” to advance their professional practice, and to give and receive collegial support. Participants described the ISG as a confidential space, safe from criticism, judgment, evaluation, and gossip. Implicit in their discussion was a deep and profound understanding of and appreciation for the relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) that is so necessary for the work of a group of this type. Participants spoke of “letting [their] guard down” and feeling free to discuss daily challenges as well as successes. They spoke of creating this space through their mutual respect for each other and passion for their vocation. The supportive nature of
ISG meetings is revealed in Beth’s comments about participants’ ways of showing respect for one another:

We respect each other. We really do respect each other, I think, for showing up every day and we respect each other for coming to the meetings. I think just the fact that [we] made it a priority to come that day. We’re grateful to [each other] and there’s just that level of respect. Thank you for coming. Thank you for being here for me, and we’re saying that to each other unspoken by listening to each other and responding to each other. That’s just very refreshing.

Throughout all responses offered by study participants, it was clear that these teachers honored the respective work they were doing in their classrooms, and “the idea that everyday life in classrooms demands on-the-spot professional judgments” (Wood, 2010, p. 145). Jessica noted that the ISG offers professional support on a personal level by recognizing when a colleague needs “a pat on that back [or] a holding of the hand. That’s what we do [for each other].” Each of the study participants commented that the safe emotional space that they experienced within ISG meetings extended beyond the meetings to everyday interactions and conversations with other group members.

The creation and articulation of these safe spaces provided a strong and essential relational foundation for the vulnerable work (Wood, 2007) of the ISG. The autonomy enjoyed by the ISG to create these spaces was noted by each participant as an important component of the group member’s ability to co-create the culture of the ISG. In these places the freedom to self-direct and to be responsive to attendees’ interests and needs were noted as key characteristics to participation. During Phase 2, these aspects of an andragogical approach to learning were perceived by some participants to have been diminished by my invitation to a professional learning community coach to work with the ISG. I attempted to offer the group another model for teacher learning and, through their
work with the PLC coach, to model another form of group inquiry in response to ISG participant requests for ideas to advance the work of the group. However, it was apparent from study participant responses that the presence of a consultant altered and confused members’ understanding of the purpose of the ISG and the role expected of them at meetings. In essence, the presence of the PLC coach was perceived to have taken away some participants’ safe space.

Most participants freely noted that Phase 2 with the professional learning community coach was a significant point in the history of the ISG. ISG participant perceptions ranged from an indulgent acceptance, to indifference, to a notable disdain for the involvement of an “outside” colleague in the work of the ISG. In the following quotation, Kathy was thinking out loud as she made her way to a fuller understanding of the rationale for the PLC coaching sessions. She began by sharing that she felt pressured and unprepared to share during meetings with the PLC coach. Kathy then admitted that investigating techniques for differentiating instruction actually did make sense for an instructional strategies group. Ultimately, however, she concluded that these meetings did not reflect her understanding of the purpose of the ISG, and that the PLC sessions did not appropriately reflect the group’s casual and informal nature that allowed her freedom to share at ISG meetings.

[ISG conversations can be] intimidating...especially last year, when we started, they would talk about different teaching techniques and what we would like to discuss and it puts you...they would say all right, what do you feel? And I was not ready to respond...I didn’t feel that it was as casual and that I could sit down and say, okay, this is what my feelings are. I didn’t get that feeling when the outside guest was here. That whole thing was not something that I envisioned the group about. And [yet differentiating instruction] would go along with the ISG
group. That was more of an ISG. That concept. The more I think of it. More of a formal instructional strategies [but] I don’t think that’s what we’re about.

When I pressed Kathy further, she continued that the group is “more sharing ideas. What the ideas are about could be based on a book, based on instruction. It’s more being teachers sharing ideas.” It was apparent by Kathy’s response that the PLC coach was not perceived as a “teacher sharing ideas” even though she referred to outside knowledge as being a valid point of group discussion and learning. Kathy seemed to be making sense of Phase 2 of the ISG as she pondered her own ideas about the purpose of the ISG. She moved among Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) theoretical conceptions about the relationships between knowledge and practice. Kathy advocated for a knowledge-in-practice stance at the same time that she acknowledged the value of the knowledge-for-practice shared by the PLC coach who she thought had also tried to move the group into a knowledge-of-practice mode of inquiry. In other words, while Kathy indicated that she was more comfortable learning from insider “experts,” she acknowledged that the PLC coach brought relevant outsider knowledge to the group as he encouraged them to create their own understanding together. Although she struggled to identify the purpose of the ISG, Kathy’s thoughtfulness highlighted her own personal ability to interact with other members of the ISG to enhance her reflective practices and to navigate the confusion and uncertainty that often arises for adults engaged in legitimate learning (Johnson, 2006).

Like Kathy, Beth also expressed confusion and dissatisfaction with the PLC coaching sessions. So much so that she took herself out of the group for a time. Within her interview responses, Beth referred to Phase 2 as “the big break” and “the big change.”
Although our conversation took place over a year after the spring 2010 sessions had concluded, the emotion in Beth’s comments remained strong:

There was a time last year when an outsider came into the group, and I didn’t like it…that’s why I stepped out. Because I didn’t know this person and I didn’t know their agenda other than what they were bringing from the outside and that just frightened me to be honest with you…I just felt that I no longer had a place to go when he started coming. And his presentation was such that he was one of us. When he came to that in-service and tried to do a PLC experience, this is not at all what we do in our rooms. And we called [the group] ISG and we changed it to PLC because it was the politically correct thing. It was like, this is not who [we are]…I just felt like we were doing something good and someone came in to try to [change us]…I don’t know what the goal was. So that took me out, I did miss it…Like you said, it’s open to all teachers, this was an outsider who started to come in and make presentations. I just didn’t go. So I shouldn’t talk about it. I didn’t go because an outsider had come in.

It was clear that Beth took offense to the PLC coach who acted as if “he was one of us.” She perceived that the coach was engaged to “change” the group into a more “politically correct” entity, and noted the change in the group’s name during Phase 2 from “ISG” to “PLC” as evidence of the group members’ lack of control of the vision and direction of the ISG. Beth did not directly suggest that she felt that I had engaged the PLC coach to “change” the ISG, but her frequent use of the term “outsider” in the above quote along with wording such as “frightened,” “politically correct,” and “agenda” clearly communicated Beth’s suspicion as to the motive behind offering the PLC coaching sessions. Beth also referred to feelings of isolation when she stated, “I no longer had a place to go when he started coming.” Her words alluded to feelings of abandonment and betrayal as she expressed a lingering uncertainty and distrust as to why the coach was brought in to work with the ISG.
While Beth used the term “outsider” throughout her responses, Kathy referred to the coach as the “outside guest” and went on to describe him further as the “outside consultant” and “outside instructor.” The connotative distinction between these word choices suggested a great deal regarding the way these two teachers perceived and expressed their feelings about the PLC sessions. Kathy’s use of the term “guest” implied her understanding that the PLC coach was invited to work with the group and that his role was that of coach, “consultant,” “instructor.” All of these terms suggested that the PLC coach was welcomed and that his presence was intended to be constructive for the group and its members. Even amidst her uncertainty about the PLC coach, Kathy continued to attend meetings throughout Phase 2, while Beth completely removed herself from the group. Beth’s repeated usage of the term “outsider” related something very different.

While other participants were not quite as openly articulate about their perceptions of Phase 2 as Beth and Kathy, there was a common thread running among all of their responses which indicated their ongoing interest in balancing the knowledge available to participants from “outside” experts with the knowledge available to participants from “inside” experts. I recognized their ponderings as participants’ journeys toward the redefinition of knowledge, “privileging local as well as public knowledge generated by school-based as well as university-based researchers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 62).

*Physical space.*

Lack of adequate meeting space was discussed by study participants as one of the obstacles to the effectiveness of ISG meetings. At the time of this study, meetings were
taking place in a distance learning lab that had tiered levels for student seating. Although the lab was one of the few air-conditioned locations in the school, the lack of appropriate space to arrange seating in a circle conducive to group discussions was a restricting characteristic of the room. In the few meetings that I attended during Phase 3, I noted that attendees tried to compensate for the awkward room structure by setting up chairs in the limited space available in the front of the room in an attempt to create a circular discussion area. Although attendees made it work, it resulted in a very cramped environment and was less than ideal. Study participants speculated that having an appropriate physical setting would make a difference for group discussions. Their speculations supported the ideas of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) who stated that “ecological psychologists also suggest that the size and layout of physical space affects learning quality (p. 118). Subsequently, I was able to offer the ISG a more comfortable and confidential meeting space as a way that I could “convey respect for them as learners” (Bentham, 2008, p. 72).

Temporal space.

Study participants also consistently voiced the need to consider structural changes in the school calendar to schedule teacher learning/ISG time within the school day and year. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) note the importance of allowing for “sufficient chunks of time” for teachers to meet and engage in substantive inquiry. They posit:

When the pace of a community’s work is unhurried and members of the group make a commitment to work through complicated issues over time, ideas have a chance to incubate and develop, trust builds in the group, and participants feel comfortable raising sensitive issues and risking self-evaluation. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 91)
Kathy shared that her experience with the first book discussion held during the summer prompted her to think more about the impact of having additional time would have on group discussions and learning. After her experience with the two-hour summer book discussion, she wondered whether energy levels and time constraints of after-school meetings were inhibiting group work.

As a group, the members of the ISG made a concerted attempt to vary meeting days in order to accommodate individual teacher schedules as much as possible. Unfortunately, finding the ideal day for ISG meetings remained a challenge and most members indicated that their availability for after-school meeting attendance was dependent upon their extracurricular responsibilities at the school or personal commitments outside of school. However, study participants also commented that they were comfortable moving freely in and out of periods of frequent and/or sporadic meeting attendance as Frank described:

It’s funny, but I feel welcome every single time...it’s always...’We’re really glad you’re here.’ From everybody. It’s never ever you know, sort of raise your eyebrow, ‘Here he is for one meeting of the year.’ I always feel welcomed at the meetings. Always. And even if there is a gap [in my meeting attendance],...’Glad you can make it. Here’s what we’ve been doing.’

In addition, Tim believed the openness to group attendance also translated to an openness in members’ approach to group discussions:

If you have some other things on your agenda, a change in priorities, you don’t have to worry or think about ‘I really got to be there.’ So it’s a no pressure situation. I think that’s good because it allows people to freely express their ideas and not come with any fears or trepidations about anything. So it kind of opened people’s minds up.
Again, the establishment of a “safe” emotional space and ability to move in and out of the group undoubtedly contributed to the perception of interested teachers that their attendance and ideas were always welcome.

**Evolution of the Focus of the ISG**

Initially, the title of the group, the Instructional Strategies Group, closely identified the work and culture of the group. As ISG meeting focus, membership, and group name have changed over time, participants reported a lingering concern over the identification of the group and its relationship to the ongoing work of the group.

While all study participants acknowledged that the initial format of the group’s formalized sharing of effective pedagogies was valuable and a good place to start professional discussions, most participants indicated during this study that this type of meeting structure inhibited discussion among teachers. The majority of participants expressed an evolving desire to honor the collective rather than individual knowledge of members of the ISG, and showed evidence of a desire to move the group toward more discussion based learning while maintaining an informality and flexibility of group norms.

**Who do we say we are?**

A very strong Catholic, academic, college preparatory culture exists and has been the known and expected tradition of BCHS throughout its long and storied history. As members of this well-established and academically successful culture, the struggling identity of the ISG has been an obstacle identified by several study participants who
noted that each of the three phases of the history of the group have prompted a change in name of the group. There is little doubt from participant responses that these changes have contributed to some misunderstandings regarding the purpose and direction of the group. Kathy shared there is a need to “[get] the group an identity right now,” and further believed that group participation would improve “if we knew what we’re about; I don’t think we knew what we were about...[but] if the group gets more of an identity, we’ll pick up more [participants].”

During Phase 1, the group aptly named itself the Instructional Strategies Group, or ISG. This name correctly corresponded to the work of the group which was sharing instructional strategies among colleagues at BCHS. As the group was learning about professional learning community practices during Phase 2, they decided to work under the professional learning community or “PLC” name in order to align more closely with the work they were doing with the PLC coach. At the end of Phase 2, however, group facilitators advised me that participants were considering a return to the ISG name at the start of Phase 3. The group made the name change back to the Instructional Strategies Group or ISG after the departure of the PLC coach. During Phase 3, the group also began publicizing their “ISG Hoedown” events in an attempt to show the lighter side of the group’s collaborative work.

Most of the time during Phase 3, I observed participants using the initials, ISG, in correspondence and conversation as opposed to the full title of the group. On one hand, this may be interpreted as a way in which the group has intentionally moved away from as much formality as possible. On the other hand, however, it has also led to some
confusion as to the full name of the Instructional Strategies Group. Frank recalled a recent group discussion centered on whether or not the group’s name correctly reflected its purpose. While his understanding of the meaning behind the title, “ISG,” aptly reflected one aspect of the work of the group, it did not correctly reflect the group’s name. Frank shared:

We talked once about should it be called ‘ISG’ or just ‘Teachers Talking About Teaching,’ you know. I mean it is an instructional support group. Support is the key. And teachers supporting teachers... the instructional support group, I mean it’s just support, support, support, support. Teachers need support. I think teachers need to talk about teaching; teachers need support from other teachers.

I would suggest that there is a considerable difference between the titles “Instructional Support Group” versus “Instructional Strategies Group.” The denotations and connotations between the words “support” and “strategies” are significant. “Support” suggests more of an informal, relational stance as opposed to “strategies” which suggest a more formal, professional, technical approach to group discussions. Although Frank misrepresented the words that corresponded to the letters I-S-G, he clearly and emphatically articulated his understanding of the support that the group offered.

Frank’s remarks, however, led me to wonder about other comments that were made by study participants with regard to the language used during ISG meetings. Several participants indicated that they preferred to use simple language when talking about professional topics. Beth commented that “we have to keep [our language] simple...we need it informal, but still professional.” Comments like this one were intriguing in their contradictory stance since they seemed to stand in contrast to participants’ expressed desire to read current professional literature and to stay “on the
cutting edge” of professional practices. Yet, these comments remained consistent with the group’s desire to maintain an informal, flexible, and responsive stance to its members.

**Changing foci.**

Without exception, study participants indicated that they looked forward to meetings and regretted when their respective schedules prevented attendance. Even though meeting content and format have changed along with the group’s name throughout the history of the ISG, study participants remained committed to the work of the group and to their individual learning.

The group began as the result of a lunchtime conversation between two faculty members who shared an interest in acknowledging and benefitting from the instructional resources present within colleagues’ practices and expertise. Their idea was to allow a forum for teachers to share successful instructional strategies with their colleagues in the building. One of the original facilitators who still serves the group in that capacity wrote:

[The other original facilitator] and I began talking about the group in March of ‘09. We wanted to expand our instructional repertoires by observing teachers here and in other schools. Since leaving the building is inconvenient, tapping into the resources already in place here seemed logical. In early April, we surveyed the faculty to gauge the level of interest. Out of 50+ surveys, 16 responded positively. Next we drew up plans for a group including the group purpose, focus and the structure of the first meeting. The opening agenda established the purpose of the group and we solicited input from those gathered regarding the structure of the meetings, length, format, frequency, and types of presentations.

The consensus was to meet every other week for 45 minutes after school in a set room. Faculty members signed on to be presenters. Two members would present instructional strategies during the first half with a question and answer session during the second half. In all, the meetings were very well attended and productive.
It was not surprising that the original members of the ISG established a group around an expert/novice or presenter/attendee modeling of instructional strategies since the majority of professional development experiences offered at BCHS over time have represented this type of professional "training." The language that participants used to describe this phase indicated these sessions were "helpful" and many of the ideas shared were implemented anew in participants' respective classrooms. Absent from the discussion of Phase 1, however, is any reference to "conversation" or "discourse." While I was pleased that the group was acknowledging the expertise of "insiders" at our school, as the instructional leader, I struggled with the urge to step in and move the ISG beyond their demonstrated tendency to want to learn "from" each other to more deliberately learning "with" each other. The hierarchical distinctions, although informally established by the presentation format utilized during Phase 1, diminished the opportunity for the group to develop the "empowerment and agency" (Wood, 2007) that, at the time, I believed were necessary to move the ISG toward more substantive inquiry. However, it was a start.

ISG meetings during Phase 2 moved to a study group format under the direction of the professional learning communities coach. The PLC coach facilitated the group during this phase according to more formal group norms established at his first meeting with the group in early February 2010. The content of Phase 2 meetings encouraged the application of differentiated instruction within all of the different academic disciplines represented by attendees. The PLC coach encouraged teachers to try out techniques for differentiating instruction in their classrooms and report back to the group. Participants shared that due to the wide representation of academic areas among attendees, it was
difficult to engage in true collaborative discussion. Professional discourses were subject-area specific and, therefore, the conversation felt very disjointed according to attendees. This initial foray by the PLC coach demonstrating study group processes around a single instructional topic was intended to provide another framework upon which teachers at BCHS could learn with each other and “begin viewing themselves as true professionals...see themselves as contributing to the knowledge base that defines the profession” (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999, p. 126). Although some participants acknowledged spending considerable time experimenting with differentiated instruction strategies in their respective classrooms during Phase 2, not one participant indicated utilizing these strategies moving forward even after acknowledging an increased awareness of the importance of these practices as a result of Phase 2 study.

The strong, traditional academic culture at BCHS may have played a role in the lack of sustainability of these instructional changes in participants’ classrooms. Some teachers shared about the difficulty of moving to more student-directed classroom learning, and their comments underscored the difficulty many teachers have in breaking away from more traditional instructional methods, perhaps those that they were accustomed to as students themselves, and relinquishing instructional, or more accurately, learning power to students. What I began to see as a result of the difficulty that participants had with Phase 2 work was that some teachers felt as if they were not doing their jobs by shifting their focus from teaching to learning. Allowing students to assume more responsibility for the direction of their learning during class time was perceived by teachers as “time off” presumably because they were not engaged in direct
instruction. Consideration of this subtle, yet profound paradigm shift highlighted the difficulties of co-creating knowledge with all learners in our school (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) and of moving a strong, traditional scholastic culture to a new way of thinking and being.

ISG members decided to abandon the study group format during Phase 3 when the group returned to a meeting by meeting determination of their agenda. At some point in the beginning of this phase, as a follow-up to a suggestion by a fellow ISG member, meeting attendees made the decision to read and discuss professional literature together. Participants agreed that having an assignment ahead of time allowed for additional consideration of the meeting topic and preparation for discussion. They appreciated that current literature offered the opportunity to reflect on contemporary themes in education and to consider the potential or realized impact of this new knowledge on their respective classroom practices. Interestingly, however, the group returned to consideration of “outside” expertise to initiate discussion and personal inquiry in what was described by Tim as individuals engaged in “reflective thinking where you can kind of kick back and brainstorm.” In support of this idea, participants used language to describe Phase 3 that was markedly different from Phases 1 & 2 in that it contained multiple references to professional conversations and support. Although they appreciated the collegial conversations, most participants indicated that they could not remember “taking anything from the group” during this phase.

Participants also reported an interesting expansion of group discussions during Phase 3 to include not only instructional and classroom management strategies, but also
tactics for dealing with a variety of administrative issues, mostly specific to our school, that teachers perceived as interfering with their work. Participants alluded to the importance of these conversations within the confidentiality of the ISG and acknowledged the value of this collegial support as noted here by Zack:

Those conversations are what helps the group grow and what people need to have...that this thing stinks and I’m really struggling with that. Because you’ve got some pretty good and bright sincere people there whose hearts are in the right place and they help.

Beth also shared that “the ISG gives us the opportunity to sound things out to other people who are doing the same thing.... Being able to sound off to other professionals who are really doing [the same work] I think is always worthwhile.”

During Phase 3, the culture of the group continued to vacillate between the paradigms of “knowledge-for-practice” and “knowledge-in-practice,” bordering at times on a professional self-help group. While each of these positions represented valid and valuable work for the group, it seemed as if the ISG continued to return to comfortable and more known practices rather than moving toward “knowledge-of-practice” inquiries (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Interestingly, it was to the “practical” that participants moved as they spoke about the work of the group, and to which they perceived a return within this phase. Among the members of the ISG, there seemed to be consensus that the group should focus on the practical rather than the theoretical. Mark shared that, moving forward, increased participation could lead to “more practical ideas,” and Tim and Beth indicated that conversation was most helpful when it stayed on the “practical” level, with Beth extending the notion to an even more immediate benefit, “What can I use tomorrow?”
**Intra-Group Relationships**

Undoubtedly, the members of the ISG created an environment, a “safe space,” in which mutual respect existed among group members. Time and again participants referred to this characteristic of the group as one of its core strengths and the foundation for the democracy evidenced by group dynamics. Furthermore, it emerged as one of the essential tools for reducing the teacher isolation which often pervades teachers’ work.

**Democracy in the ISG.**

Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest.... A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. (Dewey, 1916, p. 87)

Although Dewey is speaking of the democratic ideals of a society in the above quote, it is possible to extend his notions to a microcosm of society, particularly as they are made evident in a community of teacher learners like the ISG. Like Dewey’s democracy, the ISG enjoys “voluntary disposition and interest” and “repudiates the principle of external authority.” In essence, since the group was formed by the teachers and for the teachers, ISG participants have enjoyed the freedom to direct the group’s learning and conversations without the imposition of a higher authority. Although they may have felt that some of these freedoms were imposed upon during Phase 2, even then participants were encouraged to work with the PLC coach to select a topic of inquiry and to establish group norms.

According to several participants, each member of the BCHS faculty and staff has had equal opportunity to participate in the group, and each member of the ISG has had a
voice in the working of the group and the opportunity to direct group discussion. Mark reminded that topics “more relevant to the group [have] been brought from the group.” Even though an undisclosed number of previous participants may have chosen to disengage with the ISG, each member of the BCHS faculty continued to receive invitations to every meeting of the group.

Although the ISG has had two facilitators responsible for organizing meetings, every member of the group was quick to negate any reference to group leadership. Participant understanding of the facilitators’ role was clear. Tim observed, “you need a point person; just a point person. They don’t have to be the leader of the group and frequently he’s not the one who leads off the conversations.” Each study participant indicated in some way that the group did not want somebody to be in charge, rather that it was important for the members of the ISG to share leadership of the group. In this regard, I began to question my own understanding of the role of the facilitators in the group. It became clear to me that I had approached the facilitators as the informal leaders of the group, especially with regard to my communication with the ISG regarding whether or not to extend the invitation to the PLC coach during Phase 2. This misunderstanding no doubt contributed to the additional confusion expressed by participants about the work of Phase 2.

The second part of Dewey’s quote refers to the necessity of the social dimension of shared experiences within a democracy. Likewise, ISG participants referred to the need to interact with respected colleagues as a way to receive valuable feedback, and to gauge their professional and personal dispositions toward their work. The need for this
collegial democracy has been so strongly demonstrated by study participants that Tim believes that “if we didn’t have [the ISG], some of us would just go find something else. I think the same people would still be searching out.”

**You’re not alone.**

Teachers readily shared feeling that ISG members “watch out for each other.” As was discussed earlier in this chapter, the group enjoyed a high level of relational trust and unanimous confidence in the mutual professional respect freely given and received by ISG attendees. Kathy shared that “you really get to know the teachers better at this group, and that’s why it would be great to have more take part in it.” The ability to interact with and get to know colleagues from different parts of a very physically disjointed building was another of the benefits of ISG participation cited by each of the participants. Participants referred often to the departmental isolation typically present at BCHS due to the age and design of our three buildings awkwardly joined by a seven story, internal staircase.

There was a common desire by participants to connect with other faculty members who may be teaching some of the same students but who work in different departments and different parts of the building. The following comments made by Beth reflected the feelings articulated by other participants as well:

I think that’s what attracts me to this group, that you can go and share what you’ve done, but also to receive from your colleagues what they’re doing with the same students, what’s working or not working, or with the parents. That’s what keeps me coming, and from teachers I wouldn’t have otherwise been in contact with, because of the makeup of the building or the different subjects, we just don’t cross paths.
Clearly, ISG participants were interested in advancing not only their individual practices, but also the work of the group and the school. Beth articulated the value of the ISG simply when she said that “it’s not about one person. It’s about each of us becoming better teachers, and then collectively, we’re a group of good teachers.” Each participant kept returning to the notion of wanting to learn and improve in order to be the best teacher possible for their students; for BCHS.

**Relationship of the ISG to the BCHS Community**

The relationship of the ISG to the larger BCHS community reflected many of the dynamics already detailed in this chapter. Perhaps the most salient aspects of this relationship, however, were represented by participant descriptions of the ways in which the strong learning culture of the ISG mirrored the strong learning culture of the school, especially with regard to the overall mission of Barresville Catholic High School amidst changing demographics.

**The culture of BCHS.**

It is fair to say that every incoming freshman at Barresville Catholic High School expects to graduate from high school and college. Along the way, some students decide to enter the work force, the military, or a trade school, but almost every graduating class has a 100% high school graduation rate and a two- or four-year college matriculation rate of 98-99%. We expect, then, that in an average class of 200 students, there may be 2-4 students who do not immediately seek post-secondary education upon graduation. As a private, Catholic, college preparatory high school that prides itself on a long tradition of a
strong academic curriculum, our students expect to go to college year after year. It is the power of this expectation that continues to fuel the strong academic culture at our school.

The strength of this culture was made evident through the participants in this study. Participants openly and repeatedly spoke about the valuable role that the ISG played in their own individual learning. They shared that the primary purpose for ISG meetings was to learn with and from each other. Every single study participant positioned themselves as a learner within the context of their participation in the ISG. Without exception, participants shared multiple times about their ongoing learning in ISG meetings. Jessica noted “There’s always something to learn...[and] we learn from one another.” Frank mentioned meetings gave him the opportunity to talk with colleagues and to reflect upon his own practice by answering the questions, “What am I doing? Is anybody learning?” In addition to many references to his own learning, Zack also highlighted the importance of sharing with colleagues at ISG meetings and the manner in which these conversations enhanced the reflective and recursive nature of his learning when he shared, “even if I had to go back to the drawing board, it was okay because I learned; now I know to look out for this. There was growth, is the bottom line.” Within the strong academic culture at BCHS wherein traditional educational practices continue to be the primary tool for learning, ISG participants consistently spoke of working together to share and explore knowledge, but from my perspective stopped just short of imagining alternate ways to learn and construct knowledge together.

During interviews with study participants, they shared about their experiences with other professional development practices that were similar in scope to the
Instructional Strategies Group. Without exception, they described activities and groups that were guided by governing bodies of their former institutions. Participants described experiences with groups in health care, social work, and other educational settings where inquiry had been directed by individuals in authority and not necessarily in alignment with participant goals. Throughout their discussion, participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity for teachers to direct the work of the ISG. Beth spoke candidly about her belief in the importance of individual goals and mission driving professional learning:

Over time, coming from a public or for-profit organization professionally, other groups have been very corporation driven to meet the goals of the institution. The goal of this group is not to meet the goals of the institution. The focus of this group is so that we can become better teachers for our students. That’s how I see it. ...Although when we meet, we are not going against the institution’s goals, we never have. And none of us would...being at a Catholic school, we all know that there is an overall mission. And being with other Catholic school teachers, we get that. And I think that’s who is in the group. That’s probably what makes the school cohesive. We do have to have some things in common. So I think it’s not being driven by the institution, but we’re being supportive of the institution.

The shared mission and beliefs that are important to successful teacher learning communities were articulated by Beth as characteristic of the relationship between the ISG and the larger BCHS community. Since the ISG has the ability to self-direct, Beth noted her belief that “the goal of the group is not to meet the goal of the institution,” while at the same time, she acknowledged that one aspect of our Catholic school is its strong mission. Beth did not seem to consider alignment with the mission of the school as an essential component for the success of the group; however, she also noted that alignment with the mission of the school is probably an understood and unquestioned aspect uniting individuals who work at BCHS. Beth clearly articulated that the “focus of the group is so that we can become better teachers” which, although obviously beneficial
to the mission of the school, is “not being driven by the institution.” This distinction seemed to be an important one to Beth as it further demonstrated her desire for the group to maintain its autonomy from formal authority.

Changes.

One of the most important factors noted by participants as impacting the current culture at BCHS has been the shifting demographics of the student body. Although the majority of BCHS students are Caucasian (82%), there are a growing number of students of other ethnic groups requesting admission to the high school. Most participants indirectly acknowledged this reality by noting that “our students have changed,” or “I’m teaching different students.” However, Tim was more direct and shared that the ISG acknowledged the school’s changing demographics by facilitating an honest conversation on this important topic:

As we go through the years, there’s a core group of teachers getting together and doing some self-assessment. How are we stacking up to what’s going on out there in the real world? We know our demographics are changing. That was a topic a while back, a year and a half ago. With the change in demographics and the shrinking of the number of students we have as a total, the mixture of kids changed. I think it requires you to sit down and have a conversation about it or you can’t do the best that God asked you to do.

For Tim and other members of the ISG, the group offered a place to go to reflect and self-assess in response to the changes they were experiencing in their classrooms. Engaging in important conversations with respected colleagues who share the same beliefs and values has helped teachers like Tim to make sense of their own personal and professional feelings about students in our school and about changes “out there in the real world.” For a predominantly Caucasian, Christian faculty, it was important for members to talk about
how “those of us teaching today are ‘products’ of schooling, which embedded in us deep imbalances or obliviousness in regard to matters of cultural positioning and power” (McIntosh & Style, 1994, p. 128). As Catholic educators, the 21st century offers new challenges especially in an urban school where, like other points in history, our faculty is called to educate the children of families unlike our own.

**Conclusion**

The participants of the ISG constructed the culture of the group by making intentional decisions during Phases 1 and 3 to direct the group and to maintain its informality. Participants cited the importance of the ability of the group to self-direct and to be responsive to the interests and needs of the members of the group. By creating a safe emotional space where participants were able to engage in the vulnerable work of sharing daily successes and challenges, ISG members unanimously reported that the group was integral in maintaining a positive and enthusiastic attitude toward their work with students.

Phase 2 was a significant point in the group’s history. Most participants perceived that I had imposed the PLC coach upon the group and that they had lost the ability to self-direct their learning. ISG participants’ perception of the coach was that he was an outsider who was engaged to change the group. Although participants were mistaken in their understanding of the rationale for the coach, they were correct in their assumption that I had hoped that the coach would advance the group by encouraging
more participation and guiding the group to more collaborative, substantive learning and knowledge construction.

The identity and focus of the ISG went through several iterations as it moved from Phase 1 to Phase 3. However, the importance of the relationships established within the ISG, and between the ISG and the larger BCHS community, grounded participants in this learning group and kept them coming back.

The strong academic culture of BCHS was mirrored in the way in which the teachers of the Instructional Strategies Group directed their collective learning. Participants consistently described greater comfort with traditional learning practices such as learning from outside experts (knowledge-for-practice) and learning from inside experts (knowledge-in-practice) rather than establishing an inquiry stance (knowledge-of-practice) (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). ISG participants acknowledged that changes in student demographics were presenting new challenges as teachers worked to serve an increasing number of students from families unlike their own. Post-study, ISG members indicated this was likely to be an ongoing topic of conversation in their meetings and they hoped these dialogues would extend beyond the ISG.
Chapter 4

Is the ISG Making a Difference?

"There is a mutual value for my colleagues and for myself, as well as for my students and my school."
(Anonymous survey response, May 12, 2011)

Admittedly, I grappled with understanding the "So what?" of the Instructional Strategies Group at points throughout this research study. What difference did the ISG make? Jones (2010) poses similar questions when he asks, “What if teachers meet together and create a collaborative community, but there is no demonstrable impact on student achievement? Is this a legitimate use of teacher time?” (p. 155). Participants repeatedly shared that their ultimate reason for participating in the ISG was to benefit their students by way of their own, teacher learning. While anecdotally participants believed that the group had a positive impact on teaching and learning at BCHS, they all referred to a lack of quantifiable data to support this belief. They seemed uncomfortable with this lack of "evidence." Zack represented responses from other participants when he said:

Well I can only speak for myself. I think based on the response I got, it was an informal response from my kids, they liked what I put into practice. I didn’t see if their test scores improved. If that’s going to be the indicator of success…. The same teachers come and they say it helps them, I can only go on what they say. There’s no data to support my conclusions.

The inability to quantify the impact of the ISG in their classrooms suggested to Zack that the legitimacy of the ISG may be questioned. However, Zack and other participants
were confident as they talked about the legitimacy of the work of the ISG and suggested a positive relationship to student achievement. For me, substantiation of the impact of the Instructional Strategies Group required a broader and deeper look at the qualitative data. It was important for me to develop an understanding of what it meant to ISG members to “make a difference” or have a “positive impact” and the ways in which participant understanding aligned with or differed from my own understanding as the instructional leader.

As the principal of the high school, one of my primary roles is to support the learning of all members of our school family. The ISG was an example of one type of learning for our teachers. At first, I had no real expectations for the group. After all, the teachers proposed the idea to me; not the other way around. The ISG started meeting in March of 2009. I began my doctoral studies in July 2009. It was no coincidence that it was after I began to explore the concepts of literacy and learning more deeply that I began to develop different expectations for the group. However, whenever asked by ISG members, I continued to encourage the advancement of teaching and learning as my only goal for the group. In retrospect, I think I really did expect more. Now, I realize that I expected the members of the ISG would begin to expand their learning beyond their own classrooms, and to view teaching and learning from a more whole-school perspective. Throughout the analysis of the data, I was able to identify multiple examples of single-loop learning while at the same time I hoped for double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In other words, I see now that my expectations for the group were to extend their question posing and problem solving to include challenging the assumptions that underlie
the policies and programs that have traditionally guided our practices at BCHS. I wanted the ISG to make more of a difference for whole-school challenges, rather than engaging in work that was limited to individual classrooms.

The members of the ISG, on the other hand, were excited to advance their personal professional learning and to pose questions and solve problems directly related to their individual classroom practices. They shared these single-loop practices in their descriptions of the impact of the ISG on their classrooms and acknowledged that the school wide impact had probably yet to be realized. However, collectively they believed that the more individual successes they were able to achieve, the greater the potential for advancement of the whole. Of course, their thinking was not wrong, but it did not represent the depth or breadth of learning for which I had hoped.

Nonetheless, I found evidence of the intensely personal journey of the teacher learners represented in this study as many of them revealed the vulnerability, courage, and discomfort necessary for “engagement in dialogue with the self and others” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9) to foster critical reflection and transformative learning (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009). Of particular interest to me in their responses was the argument participants made for what counts as teacher learning. Similarly, I was intrigued by their discussion of how teacher learning was extended and expanded to make a difference with and through their relationships with self, students, colleagues, and the larger BCHS family. It was in these interrelationships that I found evidence of the synergistic impact of the ISG, for it was often difficult for participants to isolate their descriptions solely in relation to self, or students, or colleagues, or BCHS. Instead, they expressed ways in
which the interrelatedness of these groups enhanced the impact of ISG participation in unexpected ways.

I listened carefully to descriptions of the ways in which their heads and hearts showed evidence that the ISG made a difference for them personally. I admired the commitment of participants to the group as they shared about the difficulty in finding the right time to hold meetings, yet all but two participants indicated that they attended most if not all ISG meetings. I have attempted to illustrate the perceptions of the teachers represented in this study as they wove their desire to elevate and validate their individual professionalism through ISG participation throughout their descriptions. They described their positive perceptions of the potential value satisfaction (Dwyer, 1991) of their ISG participation and how it contributed to their “security, fun, achievement, or success” (Dwyer, 1991, p. 73) as educational professionals. They made a case for expanding the definition of professionalism “to include the social and intellectual needs of the adult learners” (Jones, 2010, p. 156).

This chapter will present the results of my “listening” to survey, interview, and short e-mail questionnaire responses of ISG participants who shared their perceptions of teacher learning in the ISG on four important and reciprocal relationships between, and interrelationships among, ISG members and self, students, colleagues, and BCHS. In addition to listening to what participants had to say, as the instructional leader of BCHS, I also utilized my research journal, which provided access to ways that these important relationships impacted teaching and learning at our school.
Making a Difference for Self

ISG participants who took part in this study unanimously indicated on the initial survey that teacher learning was one of the key reasons for participation in the ISG. Although there was complete agreement with regard to this factor, participants noted a variety of ways in which they engaged in their own learning. It was apparent that “learning” meant different things to different members of the study. Beth supported this finding when she shared that she believed each participant attended ISG meetings for their own unique set of reasons: “I think we’re all there selfishly. We all have particular things we want out of the group. And in a way, my impression is everybody is working to get their needs met.” Referring to the ability of members of the ISG to self-direct, Beth acknowledged a basic andragogical characteristic (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011) in her observation. Zack also shared that his reasons for attending ISG meetings differed from other professional development he had experienced, and in thinking about the ISG in comparison to those other experiences he remarked:

This one did the most to help me. A lot of the classes in college for example, it’s the best example I could use, talked about theory and concepts in teaching. And a lot of them were kind of impractical. And this, you seem to get down to the nitty gritty with your fellow teachers as to what really works and what doesn’t work. And you find out that their concerns are the same as yours, so it affirms your position in the class. What I mean by that is, you’re not going through anything different than someone else is going through.

Zack referred to the intellectual and relational benefits of his membership in the group as well as the affirmation he received from participation. Throughout the study, other participants also described their personal reasons for participating in the ISG, and shared their thoughts on how the group had made a difference for their intellectual and
emotional selves and, perhaps most poignantly, the validation of their self-concept as professionals.

In the next two sections, I have presented participant descriptions of teacher learning in terms of both its intellectual and relational aspects, and how these two factors impacted participant learning. For the purpose of this discussion, “intellectual benefits” refer to teacher learning with regard to specific techniques and practices shared in ISG meetings which directly impacted classroom teaching; while “relational factors” may be described as the aspects of teacher learning in the ISG that highlighted social and emotional factors that participants described as having impacted their teaching and learning. I have also attempted to present evidence of ways in which participants described the interrelatedness of these two factors and their impact and validation of participants’ professional self-concept.

**Intellectual.**

Participants described different ways in which the ISG supported their personal intellectual growth. Sharing promising practices through lesson presentations, professional conversations, and literature study, along with the Phase 2 differentiated instruction study group, were all mentioned as particular points of teacher learning, especially with regard to instructional and classroom management strategies. As a relative newcomer to the school, Tim was interested in participating in the ISG to gain ideas:

I’ve always been aware for a long time that good listeners get good ideas. So I was interested in listening to what everybody else was doing. And being relatively new to the school, learning how they were doing things and if I could glean some of those things and maybe use them in my classes.
Kathy spoke about the increase of her awareness of her students and their learning needs as a result of meeting attendance, “I’m more aware of the different levels of learning in the classroom.” Jessica kept a record of ideas from all ISG meetings she has attended so she can refer to them as needed:

I have a folder that has everything in it from the Instructional Strategies meetings. And I keep everything. I write notes down. There are times when I forget to go to it, but when I’m really looking for something that can spark up the class, I’ll go through my whole little list of things.

Throughout the study, participants were able to articulate specific ways in which the ISG helped them approach their classrooms differently by expanding their professional repertoires of techniques and promising practices. These descriptions represented examples of the group’s single-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Mark spoke about the value of the group’s ability to respond to individual teacher interests when he said, “there have been a variety of topics that have pretty much been related to what we see we have a need for; help in improving our own skills.” Again, this clear reference to the ISG’s ability to engage teacher learners highlighted andragogical assumptions, i.e., the learner’s need to know, self-concept, prior experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to and motivations for learning (Knowles, Holt, & Swanson, 2011).

It was especially interesting for me to note how participants described ways in which the ISG enhanced their intellectual growth and validated their self-perception as professionals. The affirmation of participants’ professionalism through their membership in the ISG seemed to have a particularly positive impact on their professional self-concept and one that was woven throughout participant reflections and responses. Zack’s
desire to create a positive educational environment in his classroom and to learn new strategies for his students, i.e., “to learn a new pitch and to use it,” directly addressed his willingness and readiness to expand his intellectual, professional repertoire:

Well I think it’s important to stay on the cutting edge to respond to the needs of your learners, because they change year to year. [It is important] to offer them a variety of learning styles and activities. What motivates me, and I think what motivated me for this group is, I never want a kid to leave my class and think, ‘Man that was a waste of time; that was boring.’ I want to know everything that’s out there, and I want to be able to pick and choose what I want for that day, depending on how the unit is going and depending on who the kids are. I want to be the absolute best I can be. And I think it’s important to keep learning, to learn a new pitch and to use it so to speak.

Zack spoke often about his desire to keep searching for learning opportunities that would allow him to deepen his professional understanding. By sharing that he worked to “stay on the cutting edge,” Zack indicated he was able to validate his own professionalism by participating in activities that align with his personal ideas about professionalism.

Mark, too, shared about individual professional responsibility and his perception that he was fulfilling that duty to himself and others through his ISG membership when he stated that, “I feel like we’re benefiting, I am personally, because I see it’s important as a professional to keep current dialogue with others and learn things and just to be hopeful that we can make application.” Mark identified dialogic practice as a key component to teacher learning. He further expressed hope that the knowledge gained in the ISG might be applied to his and others’ classroom practices highlighting the knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice relationships (Cochran-Smith &
Lytle, 1999) to which participants in this study consistently turned for expanding and corroborating their professional understanding and practice.

Jessica shared on the subject of the professional reading she engaged in with other members: “I think it’s good for us to read professional books and see what’s out there. And there is a lot out there. I joined one of the professional organizations.” Jessica’s desire to extend her professionalism to membership in a national education organization was another example of how the ISG has impacted her thinking about and relationship to herself as a professional.

**Relational.**

ISG participants consistently paired the social and emotional support they received from meeting attendance with the intellectual support expressed earlier when speaking about ways in which the ISG has impacted them personally. Participants affirmed how the relational support they received positively impacted their attitude toward their work. Mark shared that the group has increased his enthusiasm for teaching and hoped that other teachers would consider participating in order to “catch the enthusiasm” as well:

It’s improving my attitude about teaching, my enthusiasm about teaching... I think that’s beneficial. And even if we can get one new teacher a semester, a year, to join in, to kind of catch the enthusiasm, I think it would be beneficial.

Mark clearly described here the reciprocal energy he experienced through ISG participation along with the individual benefit of an improved attitude and zeal for his work. Zack also spoke of the positive influence the ISG has on his attitude: “I’m a pretty
happy person, and I think it’s important as a teacher, and this is also part of the group, it helps you keep your sense of humor as a teacher.”

The ability to maintain a positive outlook was described by several participants as an important personal benefit of ISG participation. As noted earlier, Beth said she appreciated the opportunity to go to the group “so that ugly things don’t get stuck in your head.” Beth’s honest acknowledgment that teaching can sometimes be “ugly” and that she participated in the group to counteract these negative thoughts, provided evidence of her self-awareness and her acknowledgment that interactions with trusted colleagues led to her improved understanding and attitude toward her work. Through her participation, she believed that “teachers are feeling successful. And in this profession, where you just don’t know if you’re doing a good job, I think feeling successful is so important now.”

Mark went as far as to suggest the support exchanged between himself and the group was a valid reason to participate in the ISG:

It’s been a positive experience. I look forward to it, and I hope that I’ve been able to have a positive contribution, to encourage the other teachers in the group. So I see it as something important to me, and beneficial and valuable. Even if I don’t walk away with one strategy that’s changed in my classroom, just meeting with peers and having that encouragement has been beneficial and valuable to me.

These positive perceptions about the impact of ISG participation are aligned with Nieto’s (2003) findings that teacher participation in a teacher inquiry group is enough of a “positive incentive [for teachers] to keep going” (p. 121).

In addition to the benefit of supporting and being supported by colleagues through her participation in the ISG, Jessica also shared that her ISG membership encouraged her personal growth. She believed “you have to be creative, you have to be able to reinvent
yourself. You know, if you don’t, you’re going to be stuck or without a job.” This acknowledgment not only spoke to Jessica’s intrinsic purpose for ISG participation, i.e., to renew and “reinvent” herself, but also to the extrinsic benefit of keeping her job. She perceived this increased job security as directly related to her willingness to engage in personal and professional growth.

As will be discussed in the following section, study participants shared about the significance of creating a meaningful rapport with their students, and their hope that participation in the ISG would have a positive impact on these important relationships.

Making a Difference for Students

ISG participants described the impact of participation on their classrooms and their students through informal, anecdotal and relational evidence. Study participant perceptions highlighted the ways in which ISG members believed teacher learning benefitted student learning, and how their vocation of teaching was impacted by ISG participation.

Teacher learning to benefit student learning.

Participants shared about the ongoing challenges they faced working with and for adolescent students. Several participants shared about the need to teach students who are at various levels of learning between being taught (pedagogy) and being guided to learn (andragogy). These developmental ideas were considered in addition to the realities of building relationships with students from markedly different socio-ethnic backgrounds.
An anonymous survey response from one study participant stated, “the support the members of the group provide gives validation for what I try to do in the classroom.” When discussing the impact of the ISG on their respective classroom practices, most participants immediately began recounting specific strategies they had learned from one another: the use of individual white boards, assessment practices, differentiating instruction, review activities, daily record keeping strategies, and classroom management strategies, to name a few. They also described an enthusiasm for learning new ways to assist students. Zack expressed this notion thusly:

I was able to take the ideas that other people use successfully in their classrooms and incorporate them as is, or modify them to meet my needs, and some teachers had some excellent ideas, which didn’t surprise me, I just wasn’t exposed to them. And the way the first few meetings went where people just jumped in and asked, ‘how would I adapt this to a science class?’ or ‘how would I adapt this to that?’ I thought that was great. It was just teachers sitting around talking shop about our trade.

Zack’s description of “teachers sitting around talking shop about our trade” gave insight into his desire to highlight the professional conversation of teachers for the benefit of students. Mark echoed Zack’s comments when he shared that the ISG is “positive talk among colleagues who want to learn and grow and be positive.” Yearwood (2003) expressed a similar belief and posited:

Our profession is a noble one and our students expect and deserve to be the beneficiaries of the proficiency, skill, and respect that our profession demands.... As teachers, we must practice what we strive to impart to our students. (See Nieto, 2003, p. 111)

The concept of practicing what he preached was an idea to which Frank returned several times. He stated, “learning to me has always been growing...you know, if we want our students to grow, we have to be willing to grow, too.” Frank believed that one way
teachers might demonstrate the importance of ongoing learning to students was through ISG participation. He spoke about his desire to model specific learning skills for his students through his participation in the ISG, and noted that “the [ISG] encourages [questioning] as well. You know, let’s teach [our students] how to ask questions, so they get the answers they need to be successful human beings, successful individuals.”

Frank’s remark implied that his own ideas about “success” are validated by his participation in the ISG, a place where he was free to bring his own questions to the group for discussion and feedback. Frank continued sharing his ideas about ways his ISG participation reminded him to allow time for students’ reflective practices and co-construction of more meaningful learning in his classroom:

The other key that I just love that I forget about all the time [is], let them reflect. Let students reflect after a test or after we’ve had a really, really intense unit. You know, ‘what’s working for you?’ Ask them, ‘what’s working, what’s not working?’ And I do think, it’s been my experience if you ask students to evaluate how you, how I can be a better teacher, they try. They try to help ... And so to have three or four [ISG] group members say, ‘Don’t forget reflection on the students’ part, what’s working, what’s not. Don’t forget to say it. You get to evaluate them, they should be able to evaluate you, too.’ And they’re right.

Frank’s disclosure that other ISG participants reminded him to include regular student feedback in his classroom, demonstrated another way in which ISG participation assisted teachers by noting the recursive nature of ISG learning and the value of the collective knowledge of the group.

Study participants very clearly expressed that they hoped their ISG participation was benefitting their students’ learning. Frank acknowledged, “Teaching’s always evolving, and evolution’s not always fast. I mean, that’s how I see the success of the group. We’re changing in our own classrooms, and I hope that’s helping students. I
certainly hope it's helping students.” Jessica stated, “I keep coming back because...there’s always something to learn. No matter what, there’s always something I can learn to help myself and my students.” Tim also referred to the ongoing potential for ISG participation to impact students when he shared that “the impact is positive. Everybody in the group has taken something positive back [to their classrooms] and done it, and they continue to search for more.” All three of these teachers spoke of the need for perseverance with relation to their learning and its potential for impact in their classrooms. They noted that “teaching’s always evolving and evolution’s not fast,” but teachers “keep coming back” because they are “continu[ing] to search for more;” more knowledge, more ways to benefit their students.

**A vocation.**

It is not uncommon to hear teachers at BCHS refer to their “vocation” of teaching, rarely do they describe the work as a job or career. Teachers and students alike refer to the Barresville family; not the Barresville community. Jones (2010) posits that “successful teaching is about maintaining an uplifting sense of purpose. It is about building caring relationships—this is a human enterprise, more like a family or neighborhood than like a business” (p. 155). Participant responses with regard to their relationships with students aligned with findings of Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) who concluded in their study of Catholic high schools that teachers’ “language and behavior bespeak a strong sense of commitment to individual students and to a school life permeated with Christian personalism” (p. 95). At the time of this study, over eighty-percent of BCHS faculty served BCHS students as advisors or coaches in a myriad of
extracurricular and co-curricular activities, many of which do not receive any additional monetary compensation. As for ISG participants who volunteered for this study, one hundred percent of these teachers were mentoring, advising, or coaching students in at least one, sometimes multiple, extracurricular or co-curricular activities.

There is something unique about the bond between a teacher and her or his students. Nieto (2003) writes, “teaching involves trust and respect as well as close, special relationships between students and teachers. It is, simply put, a vocation based on love” (p. 37). There is no doubt that the participants of the ISG cared deeply about their students and were dedicated to their students’ success both inside and outside of the classroom. Perhaps one of the most salient examples of this affection toward their students was the willingness of this group of teachers to voluntarily devote several hours a month to participate in the Instructional Strategies Group beyond all of their other personal and professional responsibilities.

While most participants were not as frank about their feelings, Kathy put it right out there when she simply stated, “I love the kids.” She further reflected on how her own interactions with students have changed through her participation in the ISG as a result of observations of and conversations with her colleagues:

Seeing some of the teachers just interact with the kids, you know. I try now more than ever to say, ‘hi,’ and you know, from a professional stance, but just being more open to them. Some of the teachers really are great [with the kids].

Kathy’s description of the ways in which her colleagues have helped her to grow in her relationships with her students underscored the synergistic impact of participation in the ISG. Just by getting to know her colleagues better and more closely observing their
interactions with their respective students, Kathy was encouraged to improve her own interpersonal relationships with her students. Although careful to maintain “a professional stance,” she implied a softening toward her students by “being more open to them.” In addition, Kathy’s increased awareness of her openness to her students in some ways mirrored her increased awareness of students’ different learning styles that she spoke of earlier. She continued to credit her participation in the ISG as a key factor in her deepening understanding of her students and appreciation for her colleagues.

Even amidst the frustrations that may occur when working with adolescents, ISG participants reported they were careful to respect the integrity of each of their students, even when bringing specific student-related concerns to the group for discussion. Beth said, “We try not to use student’s names so that it’s not, we’re not, tearing down other human beings.” Modeling appropriate and respectful conduct during conversations about students within the ISG was another way participants felt they were honoring their relationships with their students and colleagues, and demonstrating a professional stance toward their work. In addition, there was an implied reference to the Catholic Christian mission of the high school in Beth’s response when she shared that the group was not about “tearing down other human beings.” A possible inverse interpretation of her comments might suggest that the teachers of the ISG tried to be conscious of “building up” their students even when discussing the disappointments that sometimes occur in relationships with students.

It was heartening to hear almost every participant share about having fun with students, and describe their genuine excitement in and for the classroom. Zack
specifically spoke about how much fun it was for him to watch his students having fun learning. Tim noted that working with students through challenges and sharing in their success was very gratifying:

You pat them on the back, and mentally hug them a lot, and they seem to do better for a while. There’s a lot of social interaction [between students and teachers] that goes on in our school...I haven’t seen a single kid in three years that I would call a ‘bad kid.’ We talk about that [in the ISG].

Having the opportunity to share positive student experiences with colleagues had a powerful effect on ISG participants as well. Beth shared that ISG meetings have afforded participants the chance to meet and talk about “motivating the students, or us as teachers staying motivated to motivate the students.” Beth also noted another interesting reciprocity between teachers and students:

Teachers feeling successful, I think, is creating an environment for the students to be successful. You’re willing to try something because you feel it’s possible that it will be successful. I think when teachers are excited about something, students will get excited too....And that’s what every teacher looks for. It really is about the students.

Beth’s comments demonstrated her belief that it is reasonable to extend the positive impact of ISG participation perceived by teachers as mutually beneficial for students.

**Making a Difference for Colleagues**

Listening to participant perceptions of the ways in which ISG attendance impacted their relationships with colleagues, it did not take long to hear evidence of an increase in relational trust, improved communication, and deepening relationships with other ISG members. Participants shared about the many times interactions, sharing, and
collaboration extended beyond ISG meetings and took place at times before or after school, or at various times throughout the school day. Zack shared:

There's a little more talking after school, during free periods about things. It's nice to know there's some collegiality there, there's a cohesiveness. There's a feeling, or at least I feel, I don't know how they feel...it's not a kumbaya thing, but you feel like a little sense of community with these people. It's just good. You've gone above...You feel a certain way about helping kids, and you've acknowledged that with each other and affirmed it within each other, and there's a sense of collegiality there, I feel more so than with teachers who don't go. I'm on a good level with [teachers that don't go], but this is an advanced level.

Although Zack maintained that he had good relationships with all of his colleagues at BCHS, he stated very clearly that he felt his relationships with colleagues in the ISG were different, deeper, more collegial and "advanced" than his relationships with non-participating teachers. He was quick, however, to downplay any overly emotional dimensions to ISG participation when he stated that "it's not a kumbaya thing." Like other study participants, Zack was committed to maintaining an appropriate professional approach toward ISG meetings. Zack's perception that ISG participants exceeded professional expectations again was made evident in his comments. In the above quote, Zack referred to his belief that through ISG participation "you've gone above...you feel a certain way about helping kids, and you've acknowledged that with each other and affirmed it within each other."

Jessica also mentioned the respectful and professional manner in which ISG participants approached colleagues within the group. She alluded to the relational trust present within the group that enhanced relationships with colleagues and allowed participants:
To support other people. If somebody’s having a problem, and you know, with anything, teaching, their personal life, maybe something that’ll come up, we’re there to support them. And I think that’s the most important thing, you know, that we support each other, and we learn from one another.

Having the opportunity to get to know colleagues that one might not naturally gravitate toward has yielded some unexpected results and forged some unexpected relationships within the ISG. Frank shared about his pleasant surprise when he first heard a colleague speak at an ISG meeting and was treated to “a pearl” that he had not anticipated:

One of the members has been at the school for a very, very long time. And the feedback that she gives everybody is just really, really [great]. The first time, I just remember the first distinct time I can remember this colleague saying anything about teaching practice, I was like ‘wow!’ I never, never expected it. Never, ever, ever expected it. And then every meeting that we’ve been together, there’s always something. There’s always a little pearl that comes out.

Study participants frequently mentioned the impact of relationships with colleagues as a key factor in reducing the isolation so often associated with teaching in a secondary setting and to which participants referred in Chapter 3. Frank passionately shared his belief about the collegial impact of the group:

We’re all in this together, you’re not on an island by yourself, you know. We know that there are struggles. We know that there are positives. We know that there are successes. Let’s share everything and help make us better teachers so students are better learners.

His collegial call to action aligns with Nieto (2003) who asserts “it is time to challenge teaching as a private effort. If teachers are to improve what they do and gain more satisfaction from their work, building critical and long-standing relationships with their colleagues is essential” (p. 78). The members of the ISG have found this to be true as evidenced by Mark’s remark:
The group is small, but I think for me, the important thing is the collegiality in sharing with other teachers, other colleagues, who want to learn and share and grow and improve in our ability to teach and to connect with students and to reach the students and help the students.

Again, shared ideas of professionalism and similar goals for student and teacher learning underscored Mark’s comments about the interrelated impact of ISG participation on self, colleagues, and students. These relationships and the ways in which they keep connecting on many different levels was a theme that naturally kept surfacing in participant comments.

In addition to collegial relationship-building within the ISG, study participants shared that the ability to use the ISG as a form of “think tank” and “professional laboratory” where teachers were free to come to “try out” ideas with colleagues had a significant positive impact on participants. Beth shared:

As a professional, I feel an impact that I can try something and if it doesn’t work, it’s okay. And it’s that ‘safe’ word again. I can try something and I know I can go back to other teachers [in the ISG] and say, ‘I tried this, it didn’t work, why?’ Kind of like we did in student teaching.

Beth’s expressed desire to return to a professional experience similar to the expert/novice structure of student teaching was another demonstration of her familiarity with, appreciation for, and gravitation toward knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) relationships within the ISG.

Participants also shared about the very natural ways in which ISG participation seemed to impact collegial relationships. Acknowledging that group members were deliberate in their desire and design to remain informal in order to be as responsive as possible to its members, the ISG also provided an unofficial corridor through which
exciting, interesting ideas could travel from one professional to another. Frank noted that:

It just starts with this little germ of an idea there in the ISG meeting or with an ISG someone, another colleague who’s at the meetings that you see at lunch, that you see in the hall,...’try this.’ And it goes from there and to the classroom.

It was impossible to ignore the depth of excitement for, and commitment to, learning in a professional community as expressed by study participants. This love for learning transcended the relationships within the ISG and classrooms taught by ISG participants, and began to grow and embrace the larger Barresville Catholic High School family as will be discussed in the next section.

**Making a Difference for BCHS**

Time and again, study participants wondered about the impact of the ISG on the larger high school population. To some like Mark, the overall impact did not seem to be as much of a concern since he felt that ISG participation allowed him to “learn something [him]self even if it doesn’t make a big change in the school or what’s happening in our department.” To Mark, the personal impact was sufficient for his satisfaction with participation. Beth believed that the group was still too young to determine what impact, if any, it would have on the larger school family when she shared, “I don’t think we’ve done it long enough to quite see an impact,” while at the same time, she believed that a larger benefit of the ISG was “globally, having more positive teachers.” However, Beth was able to project her ideas about the long-term impact of the group when she shared that:
Being in a room of like-minded people who have the same passion for teaching, long term will be phenomenal for our students... Maybe foster future excited teachers to keep this going and not just have this ‘those who can’t—teach’ attitude that we work so hard to get away from.

Beth’s comments expressed a desire for the ISG to foster greater enthusiasm, professionalism, and optimism for current and future teachers.

Tim immediately went to numbers to gauge the impact of ISG participation for the school. Since the BCHS faculty numbered forty-six at the time of the study, Tim calculated a rough statistical estimate of the impact of the group:

Forty-six. So we’re probably about 20% of the teachers actually doing it. So its impact won’t be dramatic because there’s too few participating. But I think in those areas... since it is in pretty much every department, you’re going to have an impact on 10-20% of the student population. So maybe we’re reaching, touching a little bit more... if we’ve got 800 kids, maybe 80 kids are getting a little bit more out of it. So that would statistically be my guess of the impact. Probably not too far off.

Several study participants mentioned that their participation in the ISG has helped them to understand and navigate the culture of the school with greater ease. Although mistaken about the longevity of some of the members of the group, Frank was grateful for the ISG and the support group members gave him as he learned about our school culture:

I think everybody but me in the group has been here for, you know, at least five or six years. They know the culture, they know the students, they know and it’s something that I’m still [learning]. Just from that standpoint alone, it’s so, so, so helpful. It’s been wonderful.

Even though participants may have wondered about the impact of the ISG on the larger school family, I did not. My research journal pointed to times throughout the study where the work within the group was spilling over to other areas of the school. The
instructional technologist who also worked in the BCHS library noted an increase in professional reading among BCHS teachers and, as a result, she requested additional professional materials for the library. This same faculty member provided instructional technology sessions that coincided with ISG summer book discussions as a way to offer additional learning opportunities for teachers. I also observed significant evidence of an increase in cross-curricular conversations as a result of ISG meetings and, as has already been shared by Frank, the ISG played an important role in acclimating new teachers to the culture of BCHS. But perhaps for me as the principal of the high school, some of the most important conversations I had in department or faculty meetings throughout the duration of the study were initiated by ISG participants. The particular conversations to which I am referring addressed ways for our administration and faculty to enhance the learning environment at BCHS and to support our students. Study participants revealed that these constructive conversations were born directly from conversations held within the ISG. These events occurred within the time of this study from April 2011–September 2011 and although they may not have represented broad cultural or structural changes, they were positive cultural and structural changes that were directly attributed to the ISG and indicated a move toward double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Conclusion

As I conducted my analysis of the impact of the Instructional Strategies Group as told through participant perceptions, it was necessary for me step back a moment and to be honest about my own expectations for the group. Although I had been intentional and
deliberate in encouraging the group’s self-direction, I realized that I had actually expected the group to move toward more of an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). However, I never articulated this expectation to the members of the ISG, nor did I assist them in learning more about inquiry and understanding its benefit to their respective classrooms as well as the school as a whole. Overall, participants indicated that their expectation was that ISG participation would give them “a place to go so that [they could] become better teachers.” The general nature of their expectation allowed them to create and re-create important professional sharing spaces; however, it did not encourage a more deliberate inquiry process. Making decisions about whether or not the ISG made a difference at BCHS became quite complicated as a result of the misalignment of expectations between the members of the group and their school leader.

Participants described the impact of the ISG in terms of their relationships and interrelationships among self, students, colleagues, and BCHS. ISG members repeatedly shared that their participation in the ISG affirmed their self-concept as professionals and helped them to have a more positive and enthusiastic attitude about their work. Participants noted that along with the sharing of professional strategies and academic discussions, the reciprocal benefits of the social and emotional support given and received were integral to their ongoing membership in the group. They described ways in which their teacher learning benefitted student learning and how their vocational stance reflected a genuine respect and affection for their students. By reducing the isolation so often associated with classroom teaching, ISG participants spoke of benefitting within and beyond meetings from relationships with ISG colleagues with
whom they might not otherwise interact. The utilization of the Instructional Strategies Group as a safe place where professionals could freely take ideas, challenges, and successes, and use the group as critically constructive colleagues was described by participants as another valuable characteristic of the group. Beyond ISG meetings, members could not identify ways in which the group had impacted the larger BCHS family. However, within my research journal, I was able to describe several ways in which the group had brought forward cultural and structural ideas aimed at advancing teaching and learning at BCHS. For the members of the ISG who participated in this research study, the ISG did indeed make a difference.

The synergistic impact of the ISG on relationships between, and interrelationships among, self, students, colleagues, and BCHS often made it difficult for participants to isolate their descriptions and thinking with regard to just one of these relationships. Rather, their interrelatedness released additional professional energies that continued to propel the group forward, and which I came to understand as important groundwork for future inquiry.
Chapter 5

Finding the Right Balance

“I’m very satisfied with having our principal involved, but also recognizing that there’s value in letting it kind of fly on its own.”

— Mark

As the principal and instructional leader of the school, I have searched for the right balance of leadership of the Instructional Strategies Group. Thinking back to the initial meeting with the original facilitators, I remember the excitement and inspiration in our conversation. At the time, I did not think about how I should or would support the group beyond giving permission for teachers to meet and approving classroom space for after-school meetings. As the ISG evolved through its different phases, I became more conscious of my relationship with the group. I have already described (Chapter 4) the challenges I experienced as a result of the misalignment of expectations between the group and me for the impact of the ISG on teaching and learning at BCHS. Except for my attendance at four meetings during Phase 3, I intentionally positioned myself as an outsider, not attending meetings, and only checking in periodically with group facilitators in order to allow the insiders to self-direct. I made this deliberate decision in order to show confidence in the ISG and the professionalism of member teachers and their ability to advance the instructional leadership of the individual and collective efforts of the group. Although my intentions were meant to give power to the members of the ISG, they [my intentions] have complicated my relationship with the group and its members. These complications were evident in the dissensus in the group with regard to my
participation at ISG meetings, and in the vacillation in some participants’ responses about their understanding of “principal support” as will be described in this chapter.

As Mark’s quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates, at times it was difficult for study participants to describe definitively their expectations of principal involvement and support of the ISG. It appeared that they were unclear about whether or not they wanted the principal involved. A combination of factors may have impacted some participants’ tentative responses: most notably the role ascribed to the principal of the school as a whole, participant uncertainty about the role expected of the principal with regard to the ISG, prior experiences with professional learning that ISG members brought to the group, as well as external factors beyond the control of the principal or the ISG such as the current social and economic climate surrounding diocesan, Catholic education.

One of the primary reasons I decided to pursue a study of the Instructional Strategies Group for my dissertation was to gain insight and feedback from participants as to how, as principal of BCHS, I might better support the work they do in the group. Not surprisingly, just as each participant brought their unique set of life experiences and “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) to the Instructional Strategies Group, each also had their own distinct way of describing how they perceived my support of the group and/or principal support of a teacher learning group in general. Although their responses varied, when study participants spoke about the role of the principal in supporting the ISG they consistently highlighted three fundamental areas: trust,
leadership, and communication. Across study participant comments, it was clear that these three factors, identified distinctly from one another, were very much interrelated.

I use first person pronouns as well as the title “principal” in writing this chapter from the perspective of the principal. When reflecting upon and analyzing participant perceptions, I have utilized my emic knowledge and understanding gained by virtue of my position in the school. Data collected through survey and interview responses along with my research journal have informed this analysis.

Engaging in this inquiry has not only afforded me the opportunity to understand a specific phenomenon within my school setting, but it also has offered another way to promote positive relationships and relational trust within my school. Important to understanding participant perceptions of my support of their work was their talk of trust embedded within the perceptions shared and explored in the next section.

**Trust**

The concept of “trust” was mentioned frequently in relation to principal support of the ISG and, most specifically, principal attendance at ISG meetings. Due to the many interdependent, social and professional relationships within a school setting, it is not surprising that trust emerged as an important factor in participants’ perceptions of principal involvement in the ISG. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998) define trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (p. 395). The “positive expectations” of ISG study participants, with regard to my “intentions or behavior” as
their principal, were most likely affected by external events as well as internal events. I believe the recent downward enrollment trend at BCHS, as was discussed in Chapter 1, requiring the furlough of a teacher in June 2010 for the first time in the school’s over eighty year history had a debilitating impact on faculty morale and prompted an increased concern about job security. Although establishing any clear correlation among these factors is beyond the scope of this study, I think that it is important to note that a climate of uncertainty exists around Catholic education nationally and locally. These external factors may have affected faculty trust at BCHS and, among other things, participant perceptions of principal support of the ISG.

The following sections discuss the wide range of responses study participants gave when describing “principal support” of the group. They spoke specifically of their understanding of and expectations for my attendance at ISG meetings and the identity of my presence at meetings. Although participants did not openly discuss trust issues with their principal, their responses suggested that, while participants may have been willing to be vulnerable to colleagues within the group, the potentially evaluative response of the principal to group discussion was a concern for some.

**By invitation only vs. open invitation.**

Before each ISG meeting, an open e-mail invitation was extended to every member of the BCHS staff. Although there has been a core group of participants in the ISG, open invitations have been a consistent characteristic of the group, and have allowed for movement in and out of meetings by different teachers throughout the life of the ISG. Participants indicated that these fluctuations in meeting attendance were not an obstacle
to the group and, in fact, served to expand group discussions. However, study participants offered a complete range of responses and did not agree on how many, if any, ISG meetings the principal should attend. Some participants noted that my non-attendance may have been perceived as a lack of support of the group while, for other ISG members, my attendance was viewed as intrusive and controlling. Some acknowledged that having the principal attend some meetings would show support and affirmation of the work of the group and its members. Additionally, many participants expressed that, as principal, there was a need for me to share insight into school wide and diocesan issues that may be beneficial to ISG members and, furthermore, to serve as a professional resource to the group owing to my position within the school and my own ongoing learning. However, participants were not in agreement as to how these communications should take place.

Kathy and Frank were the two ISG participants who stated that they openly welcomed my attendance at meetings. Neither of these participants interpreted my presence at ISG meetings as having impacted the group in an undesirable way. Kathy shared, “I don’t see a difference [in discussion] with you there versus not there. I wouldn’t say it made a difference during the year. I mean, everybody was looking for you last time.” The “last time” to which Kathy referred was the second summer book discussion group that I intentionally did not attend after receiving feedback from ISG members that my presence was perceived as changing the group’s dynamic.

Frank noted that he was a little confused by feedback from other participants relative to my attendance at meetings. He said, “I don’t understand. So you don’t have anything of value that could help us?” I explained that other participants did not question
the value of sharing my expertise and experience with the group, but rather they expressed discomfort with the power dynamic. Frank wondered aloud, “But you know what’s odd? To me, what’s odd is, with social outings like the school picnic...I feel awkward in that situation with supervisors. I always have, I always will. But something like the ISG? No, I don’t.” For Frank, it made more sense for the principal to attend a professional gathering than a social one. For me, as principal, it has been a struggle to understand how best to assume an appropriate stance with regard to participating in social events particularly within a school that makes a deliberate decision to refer to ourselves as a “family” rather than a “community.”

Like several other study participants, Tim noted that he was “on the line” with regard to principal attendance at meetings and shared that:

If the principal was there at every meeting, I think too much is expected of her and a percentage of the people will be looking to the principal for leadership. And I think the group is diminished....[However.] I do think it is important that [the principal understands] that if they never come, that might be interpreted by some as a lack of support.

Tim was the one participant who wondered about the impact of my attendance at meetings by describing my presence as taking away from the power of the group rather than as an imposition of my power on the group. Tim understood my leadership dilemma. If I attended meetings, I might interrupt and diminish the group. If I didn’t attend meetings, the perception was that I was not supportive of the group and its participants.

Like Tim, Mark and Zack did not express a personal discomfort or dissatisfaction with principal attendance at meetings. However, after talking with other ISG members,
they both indicated they were sensitive to the possibility that principal presence at
meetings may have had an adverse impact on ISG participation by reducing the level of
comfort of some participants, thereby inhibiting open conversation. Both Mark and Zack
had encouraged my attendance at meetings prior to beginning this study. However,
during the study and after I had attended several meetings, their feedback indicated they
had concerns about the overall perception of ISG participants with regard to my meeting
attendance. Zack shared:

[Your attendance is] good in certain respects and in others, it inhibits some of the
conversation. I don’t mind saying what has to be said in front of you, maybe
because I’ve worked with you for seven years. But with some, it inhibits the
conversation. Because some of the conversation, I’ll be honest with you, delves
into, is the administration hindering progress or is it advancing progress? It’s just
the way teachers talk in any organization.

Striking for me in Zack’s comments was the notion that instead of inviting me to attend a
meeting to discuss administrative decisions that may have been perceived as “hindering”
progress, the position of some ISG members was that my presence would “inhibit”
discussion. As he commented on participants’ ability to discuss administrative decisions
at meetings, Zack seemed to have reconciled that “it’s just the way teachers talk in any
organization” and yet, I wondered about participant expectations with regard to my role
in the resolution of teacher concerns. While Zack advocated for allowing this “safe
space” for teacher talk, he and other study participants continued to emphasize the need
for ongoing communication between the ISG and the principal without suggesting an
appropriate way to accomplish the goal. It was also interesting that Zack alluded to
length of service at the high school as a possible explanation for discomfort with my
meeting attendance for some participants with lesser tenure than Zack. I continued to
question what was at the core of discomfort among participants who were hesitant for me to attend ISG meetings but who continued to articulate that my support of the group was important.

While speaking with some study participants, it very quickly became apparent that my brief attendance at ISG meetings during Phase 3 was perceived to take away the “safe space” in the room. Jess and Beth shared that it was difficult for them to overlook the supervisory aspects of my role as principal. In particular, Beth talked briefly about how she might be influenced by previous experiences she has had in other settings and her concern that my participation may adversely affect her yearly evaluation:

I was probably the one who doesn’t want the principal at the meetings. I think I alluded to that earlier, just not having good experiences with supervisors being at a professional consortium...[having] a supervisor in the room, people do and should act differently. But it takes away the safety of how is this going to be used? How is my time going to be used so someone else can present their issues? Do I have to speak more professionally? Say all the right things in all the right ways so I don’t look like an idiot so that for my evaluation, I can maintain my professionalism. Whereas, we can let our hair down a little bit [in the ISG].”

Within Beth’s comments, she shared two separate areas where it appeared to be difficult for her to trust my attendance at ISG meetings. First, she wondered about how I might use my attendance at meetings to advance my own agenda when she asked, “How is my time going to be used so someone else can present their issues?” Interestingly, Beth was also one of the participants who noted that it might be beneficial for the principal to periodically attend a meeting with the ISG so that I might serve as a resource to the group. Beth noted:

I do see value in you knowing what’s going on, especially if we’re trying to move forward and progress...because you’re in the mainstream of what’s cutting edge for educators [and] you’re seeing above all of us what’s going on in the school.

138
Beth articulated very clearly that she preferred my attendance at ISG meetings be by invitation only and specifically scheduled to address a concern or request brought to me by the members of the ISG. Her second reason for not wanting to extend an open invitation for me to attend ISG meetings was in her expressed concern that, essentially, I would use the information in an evaluative way at a later date:

   It’s not bad for the principal to be in the room, I just want to be able to say out loud what I’m thinking to see if it holds any validity. Because if it’s a non-entity, the group can tell me.... But if I’m going to say that the first time out loud and the principal is in the room, depending on who the principal is, that could be held against me later. [For example,) I’m not a team player. I’m not working for the greater good.

Striking in her comments was the assumption that the principal would use her ISG participation in a negative, not a positive way. Jess also shared that:

   I probably will agree with the side that believes that your presence at the meetings, hinders the meeting. Right now, we have people who will say anything and nothing leaves there. What goes on there, stays there. I think having an administrator there does hinder that.

Tim also shared that “not everybody says everything they’re thinking when [the] boss is there. I’ve been the boss before. I know what that’s like.” These comments underscored the relational trust built up among participants of the ISG, which allowed participating teachers to work with their colleagues beyond the vulnerability that might inhibit the work of teacher learning groups. At the same time Beth, Jessica, and Tim pointed to a lack of trust on the part of some participants toward principal involvement.

   It is difficult to know if the other members of the ISG who did not participate in this study have similar perceptions about the implications of principal participation in the group. It was interesting, however, to note that within this study, there were two ISG
participants who welcomed my open participation in the group; three participants who remained undecided; and two participants who opposed open principal participation in the ISG. Obviously, the group was not able to arrive at a consensus and all members indicated during their interviews that the topic of principal participation should be discussed and decided upon by the group at a future meeting. At the conclusion of the study, I was not aware of any ISG discussion relative to the group’s decision about my attendance at meetings. However, the findings of this study suggested that it might be difficult for the group to arrive at consensus with regard to this question.

The issues of safety, security and trust kept emerging either explicitly or implicitly within participant comments and pointed to an overarching, although not unanimous, hesitancy to have the principal attend meetings. The implications of my role during meetings are explored in the following section as I remained acutely aware that both ISG participants and I had difficulty in understanding the identity that I brought to ISG meetings.

**Who am I, teacher or principal?**

During Phase 3 data collection, I wrote in my research journal:

I attended my first ISG meeting today as a participant. I felt awkward....I think that the group would be better served in another location. I will speak to the organizers about this when appropriate. I don’t want them to think that I am walking in and trying to take over....When everyone in the group had shared, one participant turned to me and asked, ‘Yvonne, what do you do to motivate students?’ I was caught off guard a little although I know that his question was an honest attempt to include me in the conversation. However, it’s been five years since I taught a class at the school, and I did not feel that I had a lot of timely or constructive feedback to offer. I came up with something after I opened with, ‘Well, as you know, it’s been a while since I taught a class, however, what I have been learning is...’ and tried to share some of the insights I have gained through my [doctoral] studies.
It was no wonder participants described their uncertainty about my role as an ISG meeting attendee since I was not aware myself of where and how I fit in. In the above journal entry, I acknowledged discomfort in participating in group discussion. During the study, Beth shared that when I attended ISG meetings, I was “the elephant in the room.” I must admit that at the first ISG meeting, I certainly felt like the elephant in the room.

Tim offered, “the principal has to watch and remember that they are the boss. You’re perceived as the leader, whether they like it or not, and you are no longer just one of the team.” It was interesting to note Tim’s change in pronouns from “you” to “they” within this quote as he gently offered his feedback on the importance of my relationship with the ISG. His intuition was correct, however. First and foremost, I think of myself as a teacher. Still, some participants did not recognize me in that role and shared that they perceived my attendance at meetings as somewhat of a pretense about which they were skeptical.

Beth was outspoken in this regard and shared with me her perception that “when you have come to the meetings, you’re just another group member; that that is the purpose of you being there. When, in reality, you’re not another group member. So let’s not pretend you are.” On the other hand, Kathy noted that, “When you came to that meeting, you offered suggestions as part of our group. You were in the circle. You weren’t, you know, the principal.” What was striking in participant comments and reflections from my own research journal was the notion that I had to decide whether I was going to attend ISG meetings as a teacher or the principal. My identity as a teacher had somehow been subsumed (but not forgotten) by my administrative self. Certainly,
the obvious distinction between the two roles speaks to the dynamic of power and deeply embedded hierarchy that is present within school cultures.

Possessing the heart of a teacher, one of my primary reasons for electing to study the ISG was to have the excuse to spend time on instructional leadership for the duration of the inquiry. It is this intentional dedication of time that so often is taken over by the necessity to react to daily challenges. Yet, time is so fundamental to the development of meaningful and lasting trust among school stakeholders. Undoubtedly, external factors and the recent emphasis in our diocese on the principal serving as both chief executive officer and chief operating officer in our high school has significantly limited the amount of time available for me to spend in classrooms with teachers and students throughout the school day. These restrictions also have impacted my ability to serve as the school’s instructional leader, and to serve our students and staff as head teacher. It is no wonder, then, that confusion persisted with regard to my role in and leadership of the ISG.

Leadership

As has been discussed previously, one of the characteristics of the ISG that was most valued by participants was the ability of the group to self-direct. This factor has been expressed by participants as vital to the life of the group, and is noted by Knowles, Holt, and Swanson (2011) as an essential component for effective adult learning.

Participants have articulated that self-direction of the group was achieved through shared leadership among members of the ISG. Some study participants questioned my role in the leadership of the group thus presenting a leadership challenge for me in finding the
right balance between allowing the ISG to self-direct while also assisting with some leadership of the group. This autonomy versus principal input tension will be described in the following section and will lead into a discussion of the emerging teacher leadership born of the Instructional Strategies Group.

**Autonomy vs. principal input.**

As principal of the high school, I have intentionally assumed an outside stance with regard to the Instructional Strategies Group as a way to encourage professionalism, empowerment and agency (Wood, 2007) of teachers at BCHS. It was by no mistake that I took a “hands off” approach and supported the group, as Mark said at the beginning of the chapter, to “fly on its own.” Some participants interpreted this stance as demonstrating my confidence in the group and recognizing, as Jessica explained, “that the staff can work out their own problems.” This acknowledgment by Jess led into her fuller explanation that her expectations for the principal were to keep “doing what you’ve been doing,” and continue to allow the group to meet and be “free to discuss whatever, however we want in this little entity of ours...that’s your support. And to respect that we are professionals and that’s the way we handle the meeting. And treating us like [adults].” It was very important to Jess that the group maintain ownership of their “little entity” and continue to be treated as adult professionals. Jessica’s comments affirmed my intentional positioning as an “outsider” to the ISG, and acknowledged my stance of allowing the group to self-direct.

However, within interviews, some participants asked for my input regarding the future direction of the ISG. They inquired about appropriate “themes” for future meeting
invitations or asked for direction in maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of meetings with the publication and distribution of meeting minutes. I usually refrained from offering “my” answer and, instead, referred study participants back to ISG members for “their” answers. I continued to encourage the group to seek the answers to their questions from the other members of the group.

The questions to which participants referred remained fairly superficial and did not reflect any of the tensions that might be expected within a teacher learning group. As mentioned previously, only Kathy spoke about group conflict. Her brief disclosure highlighted the difficulty I had, and continue to have, as the instructional leader of the school. How do I strike the right balance between autonomy and control with regard to the “leadership” within the group, and the ability of the group to work out its own problems and chart its own course? How do I continue to encourage teacher learning and leadership among ISG members? My answer was, and is, that I can’t do it alone; nor should I.

**Emerging teacher leadership.**

Although study participants were unwavering in their assertion that the ISG did not have any formal leadership, it became evident during the study that the members of the ISG were emerging as teacher leaders in their own right. Tim recognized leadership qualities in his colleagues and suggested that the principal encourage that leadership by identifying members of the ISG who, through their participation, stood out to Tim as possessing leadership potential. Tim offered:

Young people we have in there; they’re five, six, seven years out. They’re still searching. I would fan those fires. If I was principal, I’d make sure, I’d pull them
aside and coach them. Give them that mental hug they need. Let them know they’re on the right course. Not as a group but as individuals....The right word at the right time; out of the blue. You know who they are. [chuckles]

Tim was correct. I did and do know who “they” are. It was interesting, however, that Tim’s perception was that the principal was not offering individualized encouragement to teachers. Tim did not indicate whether that had been a topic of an ISG meeting or merely his perception. Nonetheless, it was a point of reflection for me since my perception was markedly different from Tim’s. The reality, however, is that my presence is missing in the building during the school day. As I mentioned previously, I am often called out of the building to attend diocesan, city, and community meetings which benefit the school but require my time away from the school day. Because of these absences, when I am in the building, I often spend my day responding to events that happened while I was away. Tim’s remarks have made me even more conscious of the vital time-sharing I must balance between my internal and external duties for the school.

Regarding leadership of the ISG, I realized I had been using the facilitators as the de facto “leaders” of the group when, although appreciated, they were clearly not recognized by the group as spokespersons for the ISG. The facilitators modeled leadership in the sense that they ensured the distribution of meeting times, places, topics, and minutes, but they did not assume the responsibility for the direction of the group or meetings. In fact, when Frank spoke about the role of the facilitators, he was careful to describe the ways in which the facilitators encouraged shared leadership in the group by noting that facilitators demonstrated “we’re all important to the school; we’re all important to the group; we’re all important to our students. Let’s come together.”
While I hoped that the ISG would advance the individual and collective instructional leadership of participants, I was also very aware there were other teachers, specifically the Department Chairpersons, who might feel disempowered by the empowerment of the ISG. Only one Department Chairperson participated in the ISG. Interestingly, this individual has never spoken about the group at any Department Chair Advisory Board meetings. As the principal, striking the right balance of communication and consideration of ideas at the intersections of formal and informal power dynamics among the faculty emerged as an important factor in determining my appropriate support of the ISG. Although I did not initially consider the possibility, if not handled properly, I have realized that allowing the formation of "another" group of teachers within the school might create competition for my attention and support, and could potentially lead to disunity, disappointment, and distrust among the faculty. Unfortunately, these realizations have left me with more questions than answers.

The overall uncertainty and inability to attain consensus in the perceptions shared by participants specifically with regard to leadership of the ISG highlighted the necessity for me, as principal, to communicate effectively with the group. Thus, communication emerged as an important consideration in finding the right balance for ongoing principal support of the ISG.

**Communication**

Most study participants expressed they were happy with the principal being involved in the ISG with one caveat—recognizing the importance of the group’s ability
to self-direct. They were not able, however, to offer definitive responses as to the amount of involvement the principal should have in the ISG. “On the fence” responses like Mark’s at the beginning of this chapter reflected the dynamism of teaching and learning and the ultimate inability to apply a “one size fits all” formula to this instructional leadership challenge. This uncertainty pointed to an even greater need for establishing agreed upon lures of communication between the ISG and the principal.

Although they differed in the type and frequency of communication, all participants expressed a desire for communication with the principal both inside and outside of ISG meetings. They also identified the importance of naming individuals to serve as communication liaisons among the ISG, principal, and BCHS as will be discussed in the following sections.

**Inside and outside.**

Study participants expressed clear expectations of ways in which I could affirm, encourage and support their membership in the ISG through communication with members inside and outside of ISG meetings. Within meetings, several participants indicated that they welcomed my input. Kathy shared her opinion that the principal’s participation in the initial ISG meeting of the year would be extremely important. She invited my attendance saying, “At the first meeting, your input would be tremendous.... I think the guidance of setting the year up is tremendously important.... You would have more expertise in getting the group an identity right now. I think that’s what it needs.” Kathy was referring to the changes in the group name, meeting format, and focus over the course of the past three years. She enjoyed the informality of the group but at the same
time indicated that she perceived the constant changes as an obstacle to advancing the group. Zack had a different suggestion:

Tell [the teachers] you’ve got their back. Say, ‘I’m here for you if you need anything. What can I do to support your efforts in the classroom?’ ... Sometimes you tend to feel a little isolated and things happen in class and you’re like, ‘Okay. Does anyone else know I’m going through this?’ Affirmation from your peers and your boss is important.

While Zack mentioned a more personalized approach, most participants suggested my communication within the group should function as a resource to the group and as a way for the group to keep me apprised of issues discussed in meetings, and possibly those for which they were seeking action, explanation, or feedback. These ISG members sought my advocacy and authority in order to introduce and advance ideas they wanted to bring from the group to the larger BCHS community.

Outside of ISG meetings, some participants indicated my communication with all of the teachers at BCHS on behalf of the ISG demonstrated my support of the group and my encouragement of teacher learning. Mark thought it was important for the faculty “to know that our principal or administration is supportive and encouraging of our doing this,” and he acknowledged evidence of that support. Frank shared:

The support you give is [in promoting] that this is a good group for everybody in the school to be involved with... You’ve sent the e-mails out. You push the group. You publicize the group. You chat the group up, ...[and] you do that on a regular basis.

In addition to promoting the group school wide, some participants indicated my personal communication with ISG members outside of meetings was an important factor in encouraging ongoing teacher learning and participation in the group as well as providing an opportunity for personalized feedback and support to teachers who have
self-identified as teacher learners. Zack recommended that I “check in with the teachers...swing by the classroom...ask, ‘How are you throwing today?’”

Undoubtedly, my own communication with study participants during this inquiry had a significant impact on my thinking about teacher learning at BCHS. Having the opportunity to talk with the members of the ISG about their participation in the group and their thoughts about its work proved to be a very rewarding personal professional development experience for me. Just as participants had shared with me the value of regularly scheduled professional conversations with colleagues through the ISG meetings, I found myself similarly grateful for the opportunity to hold scheduled and focused professional conversations through the interviews for this study. In addition to providing research data, the interviews offered a more personal means to encourage deeper understanding between group members and myself with regard to the total corpus of our work together at BCHS. Beth even commented, “I’m glad you’re asking me these questions” and explained that the inquiry allowed Beth to pause and reflect on her thoughts about her participation in the ISG and share them with me, her principal. While I didn’t think about it at the time, the interviews allowed me the opportunity to “attend” seven privately scheduled ISG meetings with these dedicated educators. Through this practitioner research study, I was afforded the opportunity to connect with colleagues whom I admire, trust, and genuinely enjoy in a way that the normal hustle and bustle of our school day does not allow. Furthermore, as they were answering my questions about their participation in the ISG, I was able to offer clarification about administrative decisions that participants indicated had impacted the work of the group or their
participation in the group and for which they still expressed some confusion or concern. Having the access and time to spend with ISG study participants reminded me of the importance of relationship building for instructional leaders. My role as principal does not differ much from the role of the teachers in our high school classrooms in this regard. In order to be effective instructional leaders, we must build genuine relationships.

**Go-betweens.**

Interesting to me, and perhaps somewhat puzzling as well, was the desire expressed by several participants to have me serve as the liaison between the ISG and larger BCHS faculty. Some participants suggested one of the ways I might support the ISG was to enact recommendations the group had for the entire school. They saw my role not only of a go-between but also of authority capable of advancing the ideas generated from group discussions. Mark noted that he was looking for the principal to be supportive of ideas for change that emerged from ISG discussions. He speculated that:

> This is where the connection with the principal and the administration [would be important]; that maybe some of these ideas[from the ISG] could be implemented and have the authority of the administration to be communicated on a more effective level and make it more a reality.

Mark highlighted the importance of communication between the principal and the ISG since he attributed the inability of the group to give some of their ideas traction due to a lack of administrative support. He specifically spoke of one idea presented at an ISG meeting recounted by a participant who had allegedly approached “the administration” only to have his idea “shot down.” As was noted in Chapter 4, however, there have been several ideas born of the ISG that have made their way into the life of the school. It has been important for me to listen carefully to all teacher input, and I hesitated to privilege
one group of teachers’ ideas over another. Interestingly, within the structure of the school, there are ways for teachers to forward their ideas through their respective department chairpersons. In fact, department chair advisory board meetings are held monthly and any teacher may present an item for the agenda. ISG members did not need to wait for improved communication between the principal and the group to communicate their ideas to the whole school. However, it seemed clear they perceived the power and significance of their ideas as warranting the “authority of the administration.” Again, Mark’s comments brought to light the implied power dynamics between the formal and informal teacher groups at BCHS and the importance for me of balancing communication and decision-making among these groups.

As I analyzed participant descriptions of Phase 2 of the ISG, it became evident that I must be more conscious of my communication with the group as a whole. Reflecting upon Phase 2, I realized that by relying on the facilitators as my liaisons to the ISG, I missed the opportunity to talk with the group about moving toward a more inquiry based teacher learning group. Some participants recommended that the ISG appoint communication “agents” who would report to me periodically about issues, concerns, or questions that emerged from group discussion that the group decided to specifically communicate to me for information or feedback. While I appreciated the chance for more open lines of communication with the ISG, the recommendation left the lines more one-sided than two-sided, and I continued to worry about an appropriate balance.
Conclusion

Of the seven study participants represented in this research, each presented different ideas as to what it meant for me, as the principal of DCIIS, to support the Instructional Strategies Group. Evident within participant responses were three main themes of importance. Participants highlighted trust, leadership, and communication as particular areas in need of balance and attention regarding principal support of the ISG.

External factors such as recent uncertain budgetary climates in education in general, and Catholic education in particular, along with the potential for evaluative outcomes may have affected participant perceptions of relational trust with regard to principal participation in the ISG. Participants were divided in their opinions as to whether or not the principal should have an open invitation to meetings or attend meetings by invitation only. While ISG members noted the benefit of having the principal serve as a resource for the group, they expressed a change in the dynamic of the group when the principal was present. Study participants indicated that this change inhibited conversation in the group and was a result of the positionality of the principal. This led me to wonder about my role with the group. Clearly, I considered myself as another teacher attending ISG meetings while most participants saw me as the principal.

Acknowledging the importance of allowing the ISG to self-direct, I struggled with wanting the group to advance the individual and collective learning of the group in ways that would advance teaching and learning at BCHS. I believed that the members of the ISG should maintain leadership of the group. Admittedly, there are other ways in which the instructional leader may guide a group like the ISG, but I believed that it was
appropriate to encourage the leadership of the members of the group instead of imposing my authority on the group. ISG participants demonstrated evidence of advancing their respective leadership on the faculty. Unexpectedly, this created a leadership dilemma for me. Given that ISG participants represented teacher leadership from an informal faculty group, as school leader, I have the added responsibility of balancing the communication and consideration of ideas from the ISG and members of our formal faculty leadership, the department chairpersons.

Study participants described my communication with the Instructional Strategies Group as another important aspect of my support of the group. They expressed the importance of my communication with the group both inside and outside of meetings. Participants sought my support of the group’s work in a particular way in order to advance the ideas the ISG had for the larger BCHS community.
Chapter 6
Circling Back to Move Ahead

As I embarked on this journey, I was quickly humbled by the people and the work that would consume the leader and teacher in me and leave me as the most grateful of learners. The participants of the Instructional Strategies Group who volunteered to assist with this study generously shared their thoughts on teaching, learning, and leadership at BCHS. They did this through their descriptions of the work of the ISG, its impact on their practice, and their perceptions about principal support of the group. Their thoughts provoked, confused, buoyed, troubled, and inspired me. Throughout this study, I had the opportunity to reflect not only upon my relationships with teachers who volunteered to assist in this inquiry but also on my relationships with the entire faculty at BCHS. It has also allowed me to intentionally consider my role as instructional leader of the high school and the implications of this positionality on teaching and learning at BCHS for all learners, both adult and adolescent.

As a practitioner researcher, the work of Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) who posit that “practitioners must make their peace with how much of a challenger of the status quo they wish to be” (p. 35) has influenced this study. The authors remind that courage and a “critical spirit” (p. 35) are needed to problem pose and problem solve for the benefit of our students. I have thought about this reality quite a bit as I reflected on the strong, academic tradition of our school and the perceptions shared by study participants, made decisions about analysis, and reported the work of the ISG participants.
who took part in this study. There have undoubtedly been times that I have challenged the status quo both outwardly and within my own thinking while, admittedly, there have also been times that I have intentionally decided to take a step back.

I realized that conducting this study as a practitioner researcher completing a doctoral degree in educational leadership from an ivy league university has also complicated my role and my thinking. My positionality within the high school rests at the intersection of school leader and researcher with the added responsibilities of a doctoral student engaged in IRB approved research. This important point of intersection has resulted in what I have come to conceptualize as a three dimensional relationship among my principal, researcher, and student selves. For not only has my research prompted me to “[push] back some on what is ‘known’ or expert knowledge” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p 61), it has also stretched this knowledge in ways that related specifically to the Instructional Strategies Group, teaching, learning and instructional leadership at BCHS, and my work there as leader, practitioner researcher, and graduate student.

My unique positionality in this research has enabled me to access and analyze data that could not and would not have been possible by another researcher. There is no doubt that my work as a graduate student has enhanced my understanding of the theoretical frameworks that prompted my inquiry into the Instructional Strategies Group which, as suggested by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), “emanate(d) from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two” (p. 42). Although I might have used other methodologies to complete this research, I was
committed to assuming an inquiry stance so as to utilize my unique perspective in order to strengthen this study for myself and for other instructional leaders.

The Instructional Strategies Group is important. It is important to me, to the teachers who are members, and especially to the students we serve. How it is important and why it is important are questions that have been at the heart of this inquiry and to which I returned throughout the study. Now, as the journey is coming to a close, it is important for me to “circle back” to reflect upon the ways in which this study afforded me opportunities to think about the issues and practices that matter to me as an instructional leader and to challenge my own assumptions about teaching, learning, and leading at BCHS. The conceptual frameworks I chose for this study, i.e., instructional leadership, adult learning theory, the relationships between knowledge and practice, and professional/teacher learning communities, re-emerged as I concluded this study as natural, organic lenses through which I was able to further construct my sense-making of the Instructional Strategies Group. I have come to understand that the decisions to use these frameworks, made at the onset of my inquiry, ultimately became more personal than professional and served to deepen my thinking in unexpected ways. In the following sections, I share my rationale for selecting these frameworks for my study, utilize them to frame my final discussion of the ISG and highlight those things which are important to me as principal of BCHS.
**Instructional Leadership**

As I acknowledged in Chapter 1, instructional leadership has been the window and the mirror (McIntosh & Style, 1994), the overarching lens, through which I viewed the ISG. Certainly, my positionality as principal of the high school encouraged the development of this framework as integral to the study. However, I would also suggest that my strong belief in the value of the collective knowledge and instructional leadership of practitioners at all levels of education also has contributed to my own thinking and learning with regard to the ISG. Examining the impact of ISG participation for members in relationship to themselves, students, colleagues and BCHS provided descriptions of the ways in which the group contributed to the individual lives of the teachers and the collective life of BCHS. In so doing, the ISG mirrored some of the qualities that I consider essential for instructional leaders. It encouraged shared leadership and professional risk-taking, enhanced teacher repertoires of instructional strategies, and provided intellectual and relational support for participants with regard to their work. Teachers were troubled together and celebrated together as they directed their learning for the vitality of teaching and learning at BCHS.

Although I acknowledge that I hesitantly entered into this study from the stance of the school's instructional leader, I now recognize that anything less would have diminished that which I was trying to discover and celebrate by conducting this research. Thinking about my role as the instructional leader of the ISG, I engaged in significant reflection about the ways in which my action and inaction may have impacted ISG participants and the larger BCHS faculty. Conducting this study as an instructional
leader as practitioner researcher allowed “questions [to] emerge from day-to-day practice and from discrepancies between what [was] intended and what occur[red]” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). The reality of these discrepancies required that I make more deliberate decisions with regard to my communications with all stakeholders in the BCHS family but most notably the participants of the ISG. Using instructional leadership as the mirror reflecting back to my own leading also led me to consider the ways that I recognized the individual and collective instructional leadership of ISG participants through this same conceptual window (McIntosh & Style, 1994).

The emergence of teacher leaders from the ISG has become apparent time and again over the course of the past three years. I have witnessed teachers from this group, most notably those participants who volunteered for this study, stepping forward and/ or stepping out of their comfort zones in response to various anticipated or unanticipated needs at BCHS (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). The ISG has provided a safe space for teachers to discuss challenges and changes within the context of a dynamic and uncertain school climate (Hamilton, 2008). It has also provided a place for teachers to share how to better understand and serve students who bring diverse and, at times, unfamiliar identities to their learning. ISG members have recently approached me about creating a collection of teachers’ and students’ stories in hopes of making visible some of these differences. This idea offers another example of the ways in which participation in the ISG has encouraged professional reflection and learning in transformational ways for these teachers. It is my hope that this important collection of stories may develop into ongoing inquiry for the group extending beyond the current school year.
Within and beyond their classrooms, the relational and intellectual benefits described by ISG participants demonstrated a synergy that could only exist through learning in community with others. Kathy described her observations of the interactions between other ISG participants and their students as positively contributing to her improved relationships with her colleagues and with her own students. Frank talked about planting seeds of thought and learning shared by colleagues in the ISG not only for his students, but also in his own practice. All participants shared about moments when they had experienced their own vulnerabilities as teachers and learners. Keeping in mind that the ISG was a self-organizing group of teachers who voluntarily dedicated their time to advance their understanding of their professional practice, the work the group completed in Phases 1-3 has laid a foundation solidly based on relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; 2003) to support the group and its work as the ISG moves forward. It is with and through this trust that members have highlighted the relationships so important to the success of BCHS. It is also this trust and these relationships that participants reported were challenged during Phase 2 when the PLC coach directed the ISG.

As participants described ways in which their membership in the ISG positively contributed to their improved classroom practice, they also described ways in which their learning remained consistent with a strong, traditional, academic culture. It appeared to be difficult for study participants to shift their focus from teaching to learning in their classrooms and to embrace their students as “co-constructors of knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Since students at BCHS continue to enjoy success in post-secondary education, teachers may be reluctant to change classroom practices that have
been successful in preparing our students to advance their educational goals. Teachers have historically enjoyed a great deal of autonomy with regard to curriculum and instruction in our school. As a result, there seemed to be a clear hesitancy to disrupt the status quo of learning even though the teachers originally stated their reason for meeting in the ISG was intended to be a disruption of continuing to do what we’ve always done.

Working within a highly resilient secondary setting brought forward ways in which it was difficult for ISG participants to imagine interrupting the strong academic traditions at BCHS or to question the assumptions that guided these traditional practices. It was important for me to conduct this study of the Instructional Strategies Group in order to improve my understanding of the group and to be able to assist the group in moving forward by creating more secure spaces for taking professional risks and experimenting with new learning ideas. It was challenging to move the group toward this kind of learning, especially since I was not a member of the group and was deliberate in allowing the group to self-direct. In retrospect, I realized that ISG members could not be expected to understand or participate in these learning practices without having experienced them in their own learning or practice.

My relationship with the Instructional Strategies Group has been different from the start. Whereas my leadership for other school groups has entailed appointing teacher leaders to facilitate group discussions on selected topics and then, essentially, getting out of their way by providing the appropriate supports needed to advance an idea that takes hold, I have always been very conscious of honoring the integrity of the ISG and its status as a self-organized teacher group. While I have directed other teacher-led groups
at BCHS to establish a student mentoring program, or to link students and teachers to vocational, cultural, and compassionate learning opportunities within the city, or to conduct a faculty review of the school’s discipline code, the ISG continued to determine its own topics for discussion and direction. Because of the nature of the ISG, I have hesitated to mandate participation or direction for the group since I genuinely respect all of the teaching professionals in our school and their ability to work together to advance their professional learning. (Wood, 2007; Chandler-Olcott, 2002). As was evident throughout this study, this hesitancy on my part was not always understood by ISG participants and suggested the need to establish a better means of communication between the group and the principal.

Honoring the integrity of the ISG by allowing it to self-direct, I made the deliberate decision to transfer my instructional leadership to the group. Since I had intentionally allowed the group to meet without my presence and direction, when some members of the group requested my participation and I became interested in attendance in order to conduct this study, most participants were uncomfortable with my attendance. They shared that their discomfort was primarily due to the potential for evaluation of their ideas, thoughts, performance, comments, etc. during ISG meetings. Consequently, a leadership dilemma emerged which underscored my vulnerability as the instructional leader. The group was meeting without my direction. Participants shared with me that, at times, they were helping each other to cope with me and/or administrative decisions that I had made. They were talking about me “behind my back” and I had given them permission to do so. The need for ongoing relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002)
between the ISG and me was essential in order to maintain a constructive professional relationship with the group and its members in light of these realities. I understood that by shifting my instructional leadership to the group, I had disempowered myself; I also believed that the decision, paradoxically, modeled strong instructional leadership by placing myself in a vulnerable learning position. However, within our school’s learning culture where teacher centeredness sometimes borders on authoritarianism, this paradigm shift was unprecedented and perhaps misunderstood. Yet, it was and is my belief that it was important for me to model this vulnerability in order to begin to question the assumptions that underlie the traditional instructional leadership historically demonstrated in our school. Ultimately, it became my hope that through this practitioner research study I would position myself as a learner in this inquiry and demonstrate the type of inquiry-based learning that I have come to understand as important for all educational professionals; school leaders, teachers and students.

Maintaining a professional stance for their students and colleagues was an important guiding factor for ISG participants. Their ideas for professionalism included collegial sharing, staying on the “cutting edge” of professional practice, developing a repertoire of instructional and classroom management strategies, collegial study of current professional literature, and sharing school improvement ideas with the larger school community. Although most of the improvements they shared were structural, ISG participants were beginning to touch upon the cultural with their discussions of the diversity of our student population and its impact on teaching and learning. For some, articulating the impact of participation on their practice was a challenge. However, as
they shared their perceptions, striking in participant comments was the desire to legitimize their practice through their participation in the ISG, and the many ways that this participation reinforced their ideas about what counts as professionalism. Since the group decided on its own topics for discussion and direction, it was not surprising that participants reported, with the exception of Phase 2, that they had created safe spaces and engaged in professional activities and conversations that aligned with their ideas about professional responsibility, accountability, and practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Whitford & Wood, 2010).

Finally in thinking about instructional leadership and the ISG, it must be acknowledged that there were certain limitations beyond the control of the instructional leader. At BCHS, the age and design of our buildings along with the realities of our budget restricted resources of all types and may have potentially limited learning opportunities. Although we dedicated appropriate resources to fulfill our obligations to our student learners, I must admit that it was our adult learners who did not receive the necessary time and money to nurture their ongoing professional learning. Engaging the faculty in deliberate participatory planning, including budgeting, for their own learning is an appropriate and necessary future goal.

**Adult Learning**

my interest about ways in which adult learning ideas could and should be applied to professional development practices. I was intrigued and decided to investigate these concepts further. As a result, my study of the group of teacher learners in the ISG quickly became grounded in theories of adult learning. It was through my reflection about andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and how a learner’s “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) may be applied to the work of the ISG that I had the profound realization that I, the instructional leader at BCHS, had been planning and conducting professional development from a deficit perspective. It was at that time that I made the decision to deliberately refer to “professional development” as “professional or teacher learning” moving forward. I recognized that the traditional learning culture of our school had reinforced traditional learning behaviors and practices among teacher learners and made it very difficult for teachers to move to more participatory learning.

Although the focus of this study was the Instructional Strategies Group, some of the lessons learned through participant perceptions may be extended to the larger BCHS community. With regard to teacher learning, participants were steadfast in their belief that their most effective learning occurred when they had the opportunity to select and self-direct their own learning activities (Knowles, Holt, & Swanson, 2011). Since the ISG enjoyed a small but faithful attendance compared to the total population of teachers at BCHS, it was fair to conclude that not all teachers were comfortable with, or felt they would benefit from, the type of learning opportunity available in the ISG. Therefore, it was important for me, as the instructional leader of the high school, to recognize that a variety of professional learning opportunities should be offered on a regular basis so that
all teachers have the chance to pursue learning options of interest and application with consideration of different interests, challenges, and learning styles (Knowles, et al., 2011). In addition, moving forward, it will be important to include teachers, both within and outside of the ISG, to assist in planning teacher learning opportunities at BCHS. To date, the administrative staff has been responsible for this task. Although I have made a concerted effort in the past five years to offer multiple learning opportunities among which teachers had the option to choose during professional learning sessions, I expect that involving teachers in the planning would lead to more successful outcomes and perhaps even spark additional learning and inquiry groups. As the instructional leader, I have also wondered if the existence of the ISG may have precluded expanded discussions with the faculty about participatory teacher learning. I continue to ponder how the empowerment of this teacher learning group may have impacted my thinking and decision-making regarding other professional learning opportunities for all teachers at BCHS.

Reflection on ways that adult learning theory may be applied to teacher learning prompted me to re-consider my ideas about the ISG, other teacher learning opportunities at BCHS, and the ways in which my and the teachers’ collective assumptions about the relationships between knowledge and practice were made evident in our teaching and learning practices.
The Relationships Between Knowledge and Practice

Certainly, my ever deepening understanding of the relationships between knowledge and practice advanced by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) was a key factor in studying the ISG and, subsequently, has impacted my inquiry and understanding of the group. However, in addition to contributing to my own learning, these ideas have encouraged me to consider how ISG participants, i.e., classroom teachers who are deeply interested in improving their teaching through their own learning, might align with these concepts. Of particular interest to me were ways in which participants, individually and collectively, might be identified among the relationships between knowledge and practice.

Instructional Strategies Group participants indicated that their perceptions of knowledge included practical know-how, tips, and building strategies. This strategic concept grounded the group in practice and in name. Participants consistently shared that they wanted to align with experts in the field and demonstrated the knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice stances presented by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). Among other distinctions, these two concepts represent transmission of knowledge that is different from the knowledge-of-practice concept in which teachers act as generators and critics of knowledge. Although there is no hierarchical assumption underlying these three conceptions, I struggled with wanting the group to move toward more inquiry based work in order to round out their professional repertoire but also, admittedly, because I felt that developing an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001) would lead teachers toward deeper and more intentional decision-making for their
own and their students’ learning. Reflecting on the practices of the ISG, it became
evident that the work of the group did not fall neatly under the definition of “inquiry” that
I had come to understand and appreciate through my research and doctoral studies. The
idea of inquiry as it relates to communities of practitioners is described by Cochran-
Smith and Lytle (2009) thusly:

[Practitioner inquiry communities] work together to uncover, articulate, and
question their own assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling. In the
process, practitioners pose problems of practice that require studying their own
students, classrooms, schools, programs, colleges, universities, and communities.
They collect intentionally and examine systematically a wide range of data
sources including but not limited to student work. They also work collaboratively
to construct and re-construct subject matter and curriculum, to examine critically
content standards and the assessments and rubrics that accompany them, to act as
critically conscious readers and consumers of materials and programs and to
develop ecologically valid approaches to identifying and interpreting a range of
significant educational outcomes...[utilizing] a wide variety of resources,
including but not limited to a great deal of published theory and research by
academics. (p. 141)

Although there were elements of inquiry found in the work of the ISG since participants
perceived that they were generating knowledge for each other through their co-
construction of instructional strategies, the ISG did not show evidence of in-depth
questioning of the assumptions underlying teaching and learning. In practice, the ISG
remained teacher-centered in their approach to learning and focused on acquiring better
strategies for their students. ISG participants shared that their attitude and enthusiasm
about their practice was improved through their participation in the group and that it
enabled them to support one another and improve their teaching for students. There was
evidence of conversations held in meetings through instructional and compassionate
lenses regarding increased student diversity concerns as well as questions surrounding the
appropriateness of the name of the group. While these conversations suggested movement toward more of an inquiry stance, I still was struggling to describe, and more accurately, legitimize the work of the group. Did the ISG really make a difference?

After considerable reflection, I realized that I was searching for validation of the ISG from external factors. I wondered if I was, in actuality, substituting my perception of the legitimacy of “inquiry” for the perceived legitimacy of “quantification” and in so doing, diminishing the work and impact of the ISG. Understanding that it is essentially the participants of the ISG who are the experts defining their own work as professionals (Battey & Franke, 2008), I came to believe that the group was indeed on its way to establishing a knowledge-of-practice stance, and may be described as engaging in pre-inquiry work which requires a considerable investment of time (Weinbaum et al., 2004); time that members of the ISG continued to set aside. I no longer wondered if it was necessary for participants to have conducted “inquiry” as defined above in order to consider the impact of the ISG as legitimate now or in the future. Legitimacy was achieved when participants reported a positive impact on practice through their membership in the ISG and as supported by their own anecdotal evidence. What was important was that participants continued, and will continue into the future, to engage in collaborative work as a way to achieve individual and collective benefit from this professional practice.

I must also acknowledge that my impatience with and expectations for the movement of this group may have been born from the incredible pace of my own studies as an adult learner within my doctoral program and the fact that the ISG has only met 1-2
hours a month, a time constraint that significantly impacted advancement. Throughout the past three years, it has been important for me to step back and remember that the people with whom I lived and worked did not experience the exponential learning growth that has propelled my thinking during this study. Likewise, serving as the leader in a highly resilient, traditionally academic, secondary school that is the setting for this collaborative teacher learning group, I must keep in mind that context is important (Fullan, 2002) and, along with teachers’ identities, will “differentiate how teachers participate in and make sense of professional development practice” (Battey & Franke, 2008, p. 127). Similarly, without dedicating regular time within the school day for teachers to meet, it will continue to be difficult for the group to gain momentum (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). This reality was certainly evidenced by participants’ expressed desire to schedule time for teacher learning during the school day.

The ISG repeatedly returned to knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) approaches to their meetings. Subsequent to the data collection period for the study, it is interesting to note that the group on its own initiative invited an “outsider” to share her expertise with the group with regard to reading comprehension strategies for secondary school students. The reading coach was invited by the ISG and for the ISG and, as has been the group’s custom, these meetings were open to all teachers at BCHS. ISG members reported that the ability to self-direct (Knowles, 1980) this reading comprehension study was contributing to a successful outcome for the group during these ongoing sessions.
Professional/Teacher Learning Communities

The concept of professional/teacher learning communities was a timely topic and one with which I engaged in a great deal of consideration, discussion, and literature throughout this inquiry. I was interested in knowing how to categorize the ISG within the teacher learning community conversation. What I discovered was that the ISG did not fit neatly into any specific characterization of a professional/teacher learning community, but rather, it was uniquely identified and demonstrated aspects of instructional leadership, adult learning theory, and the relationships between knowledge and practice. It was a teacher initiated learning group in a secondary, diocesan, Catholic setting. The ISG was highly contextual; placed within a particular setting within a particular time in the history of BCHS and was characterized by the identities and experiences that participants brought to the group. In addition to the contextual implications of the roles and positionalities of the members of the ISG, my roles, positionalities and identity as an alumna of the school who has served as teacher and principal and enjoyed a deep and rich history with the school that is very much a part of my present has also impacted my instructional leadership of the group and the high school. The ISG was voluntary, school-based, cross-curricular, and cross-generational in membership and was self-directed and self-managed. Participants shared that the ISG was highly relational and enjoyed the commitment of a small corps of teachers who co-constructed a relationship-based group thus creating a good foundation for inquiry.

Certainly, prior to the introduction of the PLC coach, members of the ISG had spent almost a year carving out space and time for their meetings (Weinbaum et al.,
2004) and worked together to build trusting relationships among participants (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; 2003; Weinbaum et al., 2004). Essentially, introducing the coach into the mix during Phase 2 was bound to have a rippling effect on the relationships within the group, but I did not anticipate the wave it produced. The response of ISG members to the coach also spoke to the strong culture at BCHS. In addition to the admirable longevity of our teachers, I believe that the strength of our Catholic academic tradition set up the coach as an outsider who did not understand our school or our teachers.

Phase 2 in the history of the ISG may be described as a classic example of bringing an outsider in to a teacher learning group. This reality not only effected the ongoing work of the ISG, but it brought to light the power relationships that exist or have the potential to exist as a result of the ISG as well as my study of the group. I became very aware of insider/outsider communication and power dynamics.

As the instructional leader of a school-based teacher learning group, I began to wonder about insider and outsider communication and consultative opportunities between ISG participants and the larger BCHS faculty. I have come to recognize the importance of opening up dialogue with other members of the school in hopes of ensuring that the teacher learning occurring in the ISG is not done in isolation. Allowing for the school to learn from whatever groups may be formed at BCHS, I must see to it that conversations are facilitated across the school and are designed to encourage learning from learning.

In addition, the insider/outsider power dynamics that surfaced as a result of the existence of the ISG and BCHS department chairpersons set up interesting relationships among teachers and with the teachers and me as the two groups worked to advance their
ideas for BCHS. In addition, the perceptions of non-participating teachers must be considered as another aspect of the insider/outsider power relationship created by the establishment of a voluntary teacher learning group. I propose that the dynamics between the ISG and other faculty and staff groups do not have to be a formidable challenge if sufficient opportunities exist for all teachers to engage in individualized learning and sharing of information and ideas with each other and the principal. Again, time and space become key points of access for these discussions in a resilient secondary setting.

Beth shared that she believed ISG members were attending meetings for their own “selfish” reasons; however, Beth and others also commented that they hoped that some of the ideas discussed in the group might extend out to the entire school. While favoring ideas from this particular corps of teachers, if not handled diplomatically, may prove problematic for me as the school leader, it was encouraging to hear evidence of the desire of ISG participants to tackle collaboratively issues beyond the personally professional and move toward action for the benefit of BCHS (Wells & Feun, 2007; Fisler & Firestone, 2006; Weinbaum et al., 2004; Youngs & King, 2002). This extension to problem posing and problem solving outside of their own classrooms indicated the group was beginning to see their work as part of and to embrace “the whole.”

**Implications for Future Research**

Of interest to me throughout this research were my attempts to understand why the teachers in this study remained faithful to the Instructional Strategies Group. Unlike other professional development activities which are generally one day workshops, ISG
participants demonstrated ongoing interest and commitment to the work of the ISG and to other members of the group. I think that it will be important to continue to collect longitudinal data from the ISG in order to continue to highlight those characteristics of a teacher learning group that encourage its development and sustenance over time. When considering the concepts of andragogy as presented by Knowles (1980), I think it would be fascinating to study what, if any, correlations exist between individual characteristics such as age, race, gender, level of education, number of years teaching, number of years working at the school, subjects taught, etc., and participation in the ISG and/or other teacher learning groups. Another extension of Knowles’ concepts may be to engage in a collaborative study with the members of the ISG and other interested teachers in developing teacher learning activities that reflect sound andragogy.

In addition to my interest in why ISG members chose to participate in the ISG, I am also interested in why the other 80-85% of our teachers chose not to participate in the ISG. Again, it may be interesting to study what, if any, correlations exist with regard to individual characteristics and non-participation in a teacher learning group.

Other wonderings with regard to instructional leadership studies as a result of my work with the ISG include my deepened understanding that teacher learners are also students. Believing that teacher learners deserve differentiated instruction has prompted me to wonder how a learning assessment of our teachers might help to inform the development of appropriate teacher learning activities at BCHS. Again, I would view this as a more collaborative practitioner research process. I would seek to involve the whole faculty by asking teachers to complete learning assessments and then charge the
different groups of teacher learners to design a learning program for their particular learning style.

A comparative research study of other voluntary teacher learning groups would be an interesting extension to this work. I am curious as to the challenges reported by other teacher leaders, and would be especially interested in reviewing and reporting on school leader as practitioner researcher studies on this topic with particular attention to the potential differences among public and non-public institution. This work would have significant implications for instructional leaders in different educational contexts. In this era of scripted curricula and educational mandates, I think it would also be fascinating to review other studies representing voluntary teacher learning. I would also be interested in the perceptions of other teacher learning group participants with regard to the role of the school leader in these groups. Of importance to me would be an inquiry into the ways in which the identities of school leaders who are also graduates of the schools they lead might impact instructional leadership. My own experience would suggest that this particular identity has played a significant role, one which I believe I may have underestimated, in my instructional leadership.

Lastly, and for me, most importantly, it is my desire to extend the work of this study by engaging with the ISG in an intentional, collaborative inquiry creating a collection of teachers’ and students’ stories. These stories would serve as an important learning tool for teachers and students to improve our understanding of each other, and hopefully make visible some of the social and cultural differences that exist among and between our teachers and students.


**Researcher Reflections**

Embarking on this practitioner research journey, I had no idea how profoundly I would be impacted both personally and professionally. I think for those of us who are in the field of education and who genuinely and passionately care about our students and our colleagues, conducting research into ourselves and our schools moves the emotion and intellect throughout a full spectrum. The word itself, “re-search,” suggests the searching again for and with those things that may be familiar, but for which it is necessary to explore with new eyes: differently, genuinely, and passionately. Searching to me also implies more than just “looking for” something. A search conveys a sense of urgency and importance that may be demonstrated by the distinction, for example, between looking for a pencil versus searching for a lost personal treasure. This study has, indeed, been a search for my own personal treasure. It struck at the heart of what I believe is good about our schools—our teachers and our students. It reminded me that being present for the individuals who are so ardently engaged in the business of learning is probably the most important job I have. Admittedly, it is something that I have been missing.

Although I speak specifically to my experience as a high school principal in a private, diocesan, Catholic, co-educational setting, I know it mirrors the experience of many of my colleagues in other educational contexts. I believe we are all yearning for more time to be “present” in our work; time and presence to look around and pay attention to the people and the place that mean so much to us; time and presence to build
the trusting relationships that are essential to our work; time and presence to build up our teaching, learning, and leading together.

I believe what the teachers of the ISG have accomplished by carving out the time to be present for one another in the Instructional Strategies Group may be described as their own particular version of educational leadership. They have built up trust so they may build up one another and their students. They have shared their time and presence with one another within and outside of ISG meetings. They have dedicated their time and presence to the search and re-search of solutions to problems that get in the way of their teaching and their students’ learning. They have volunteered their time and presence to this study so we might all understand teaching, learning, and leading a little better. Throughout this study, they have taken the time to be present for me both personally and professionally, and for that I am profoundly humbled and deeply grateful. I have no doubt that as we move forward together, we will continue to genuinely and passionately re-search and discover many treasures.
Appendix A

Invitation to Participate

111 School Street
Barresville, PA  11111
May 3, 2011

Dear ISG Participant,

As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania completing my dissertation. I am intensely interested in learning more about the Instructional Strategies Group (ISG). As the ISG continues to emerge under the group’s own direction, I am interested in learning ISG members’ perceptions of their participation in this ongoing, local teacher inquiry group, and how these perceptions contribute to my understanding of teaching and learning at our school. My study also endeavors to provide a rich analysis of one context through which teachers and administrators may expand their understanding of teacher learning in different educational settings. As an ISG participant, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

I am requesting that participants complete a brief online survey at the onset of the study, engage in 1-2 individual interviews, contribute to online meeting notes as/when applicable, and provide feedback via short, post-meeting e-mail questionnaires. These activities will take place between May and September 2011.
As a dedicated educator, I know how difficult it is for you to add another task to your already complex list of duties. I greatly appreciate the time you are willing to provide to the success of my study. If you are interested in the results of my study, I will be glad to share them with you.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my study, please contact me at 555-xxx-xxxx or mccyy@xxx.edu. Your consideration of this request is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Yvonne G. McCarthy
Appendix B

Researcher and Participant Agreement

Dear Instructional Strategies Group (ISG) Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study. This project is part of the dissertation process included in my doctoral study. Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, nor will you receive any additional benefits to which you are otherwise not entitled. If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign this consent form. Please ask me to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this communication. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you.

As the ISG continues to emerge under the group’s own direction, this study seeks to explore ISG members’ perceptions of their participation in this ongoing, local teacher inquiry group, and how these perceptions contribute to my understanding as an instructional leader of teaching and learning at our school. The study also endeavors to provide a rich analysis of one context through which teachers and administrators may expand their understanding of teacher learning in different educational settings. You are being asked to participate in this study because, as a participant, you can offer insights into the ISG. The data collection portion of the study will last for approximately 5 months (5/11-9/11). I am asking you to agree to complete a brief online survey, to be
interviewed at least once (approximately one hour) and to offer your feedback on ISG meetings through short e-mail questionnaires. In addition, you will have the opportunity to add to ISG meeting notes collected online on a Google.docs document shared with ISG participants.

Individual interviews will be scheduled at school at a mutually agreed upon time based on your availability during the months of May–September, 2011. You will be asked to discuss, in detail, your perceptions of the ISG as well as the effect the ISG process has had on you, your classroom, and your teaching practice. Digital recordings of interviews will be transcribed. After transcription, recordings will be destroyed. Interview transcripts will be de-identified and labeled with a code for each participant. Electronic copies of interview transcripts will be stored on a password-protected laptop with back-up copies stored on a password-protected external hard drive. Hard copies of transcripts will be stored in notebooks in a locked file cabinet in my home office. The external hard drive will also be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

There is very little risk involved in the study. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms, and all data will be kept in password protected files on password protected computers. Any hard copy transcripts of data will be stored in notebooks in a locked file cabinet in my home office. While there is no benefit to you for participating in the study, your participation may influence the success of future teacher inquiry/professional development opportunities. Participation is voluntary; there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future. If you choose to participate, you have the
right to drop out of the research study at anytime during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Pennsylvania is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research volunteers like you. The IRB has access to study information. Any documents you sign, where you can be identified by name will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home. All study documentation will be kept secure with no identifiers included.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions, or if there is something you do not understand, please ask.

You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Signature: ___________________________ Print Name: ___________________________

Date: ___________________________ School: ___________________________
Appendix C

Professional Learning Community “To Do” List from PLC Coach
January 2010

- Get faculty leader(s) on board before first meeting **
- Set norms for PLC (completed by teachers at first meeting of PLC)
- Use data to decide on desired outcome(s) for PLC
- Provide initial leadership of group (PLC coach assisted existing group organizers)
- Eventually you want distributed leadership*
- Originally, professional development from outside
- Eventually, sharing of student work, sharing of lessons, etc. becomes professional development directed by BCHS teachers*
- Focus on students and student learning
- Make clear that no relation to teacher evaluation*
- Have a scheduled time for PLC meetings*
- Decide on “rewards”** (These included Act 48 hours and monetary compensation for time spent in workshops. Payments were made through Title I monies from Barresville School District.)
- Assess success periodically and revise as needed

---

5 Items completed as a result of Instructional Strategies Group meetings are marked with one asterisk. Several other tasks were completed before the first PLC meeting and are noted with two asterisks.
• Stress to teachers that the administration cares about PLC, provides necessary
  resources, but that the group is teacher run*

• Members hold each other accountable for implementing changes agreed upon
  by PLC members and administration*

• May include classroom visitations and teacher meetings with mentors
Appendix D

Barresville Catholic High School PLC Group Norms
February 2010

- Commitment to PLC in terms of attendance
- Begin each meeting with a prayer
- Begin meetings on time and end on time.
- Agenda published/made available to members 1 week prior to meetings
- Attend with positive attitude
- Show respect for peers
- Venue for relaying information
- Creative input
- Arrive prepared for meetings
- Reasonable commitment from school administration
- Maintain confidentiality for students and faculty
### Appendix E

**Table AE**

*Aligning Data Collection Instruments to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know this?</th>
<th>What kind of data will answer the questions?</th>
<th>Mapping Survey Questions</th>
<th>Mapping Interview Questions</th>
<th>Mapping Questionnaire Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do participants (individually and collectively) characterize the work that is done in the Instructional Strategies Group (ISG) over time?</td>
<td>To discover the perceptions of ISG participants on the &quot;work&quot; that is carried out in the ISG as individuals and as a group.</td>
<td>Surveys; Participant interviews; Short questionnaires; ISG meeting notes; Personal communication</td>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do participants describe the impact of their participation in the ISG on their classroom practices?</td>
<td>To assess the impact of ISG participation on classroom practices as described by ISG participants.</td>
<td>Surveys; Participant interviews; Short questionnaires; ISG meeting notes; Personal communication</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>3, 7-10</td>
<td>2 &amp; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>According to participants, what constitutes principal support of the ISG?</td>
<td>To discover ISG participant perceptions of what constitutes principal support of the ISG.</td>
<td>Surveys; Participant interviews; Short questionnaires; ISG meeting notes; Personal communication</td>
<td>2, 9 &amp; 10</td>
<td>4 &amp; 5, 9 &amp; 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I need to know?</td>
<td>Why do I need to know this?</td>
<td>What kind of data will answer the questions?</td>
<td>Mapping Survey Questions</td>
<td>Mapping Interview Questions</td>
<td>Mapping Questionnaire Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>As principal, what do I learn from ISG participants about what they consider important in teaching &amp; learning in my school?</td>
<td>To discover ISG participant perceptions of what is important in teaching &amp; learning in our school.</td>
<td>Surveys; Participant interviews; Short questionnaires; ISG meeting notes; Personal communication; Research journal</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Survey

The Instructional Strategies Group (ISG) was initiated and organized by a group of BCHS teachers in the spring of 2009. The following questions are designed for you to share your perceptions about your participation in this group.

1. How often have you attended ISG meetings available to you?
   
   All or almost all  Most ($\geq 50\%$)  Some ($< 50\%$)  Few ($\leq 25\%$)

2. How would you describe the ISG to a new BCHS faculty member?

3. What has affected your participation in the ISG? Recognizing that some teachers may consider one item as a barrier to participation while others may consider the same item a reason for participation, please indicate all that apply to describe factors effecting your personal decision with regard to ISG participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Impact on teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>Impact on student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other participants</td>
<td>Impact on teacher learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Principal support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Act 48 hours  
Collegial support  
Mission of BCHS  
Topics studied and discussed  
Other_________________________  
Other_________________________  
Other_________________________

4. Please take a moment to explain in more detail how the above items you indicated have effected your participation in the ISG.

5. Please indicate your perception of the overall impact of the work of the ISG on teaching and learning at BCHS.

High + impact  Some + impact  Minimal + impact  Negative impact  No impact

6. Please indicate your perception of the impact of the work of the ISG to improve your and/or your colleagues’ individual teacher classroom practices.

High+ impact  Some+ impact  Minimal+impact  Negative impact  No impact

7. In your opinion, how might ISG participants encourage increased interest and participation in the ISG?
8. What inhibits the work of the group?

9. What encourages the work of the group?

10. Please indicate your perception of the principal's support of the work of the ISG.
    High+ impact  Some+ impact  Minimal+impact  Negative impact  No impact

11. In your opinion, how might the principal increase support of the ISG?
Appendix G

Instructional Strategies Group Participant Interview Protocol

(**Some questions are adapted from a CPRE study, Implementation of the Empowerment Schools Intensive (ESI): An Exploratory Study dated: July 2007)

1. Describe a typical ISG meeting.
   
   • What is your opinion of the frequency of meetings?
   
   • What are group norms and how were they established?
   
   • How many teachers generally attend ISG meetings?
   
   • What is the format of the meetings and how has it been determined?
   
   • How are discussion topics determined?
   
   • Can you talk a little bit about topics that participants feel are important to bring to the group?
   
   • What happens when a teacher presents a new idea to the group? Can you give me an example?

2. Who facilitates ISG meetings and how is that determined? Compare and contrast the meetings facilitated by the PLC coach last Spring (if you were in attendance) with meetings facilitated by ISG participants.

3. How would you describe any changes you have made to your day-to-day classroom practices as a result of participation in the ISG?
• Can you say more about that?

• What was student response? Can you be specific?

• Can you describe quantifiable changes in student achievement (grades) as a result of your changes in practice?

• Were you able to share your experience(s) with colleagues in the ISG? Out of the ISG? If so, when and how? If not, why not?

4. Let’s talk about “principal support” of the ISG. How would you define “principal support”?

5. Do you have any suggestions as to how I, as the principal, can improve my support of the ISG? How might I encourage increased participation in the ISG?

6. **How do the teachers in the school feel about the ISG and its work?

7. **Is the ISG worthwhile in your opinion? What might be done to make it more effective?

8. **Do you feel that the ISG’s work has impacted overall student achievement at BCHS? Do you think it will eventually have impact? How long might this take? Please explain.
9. Overall, what has been your experience with the ISG?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation today about the ISG?
Appendix H

Open-ended E-mail Questionnaires

Thank you for offering your comments regarding the most recent ISG meeting.

1. What is your overall impression of the meeting?

2. What ideas or questions, if any, did you take away from the meeting? Was there anything that you would like to explore further?

3. At the most recent ISG meeting, did the group talk about any topic that seemed particularly useful to you? Please explain.

4. How would you describe the direction of the group based on the most recent ISG meeting?
Appendix I

Codes for Analysis

2009-2010

Comment:
    Descriptions of work of ISG during the 2009-2010 school year

2010-2011

Comment:
    Descriptions of work of the ISG during the 2010-2011 school year

Characteristics of ISG

Comment:
    Descriptions of characteristics/qualities of the ISG—flexible; responsive;
    spontaneous; relevant; applicable; utilizing teachers’ “funds of knowledge,”
    affirmation, collegiality, humor

Facilitators’ roles

Comment:
    Descriptions of ISG facilitators’ roles

Formal norms

Comment:
    Descriptions of formal group norms

Informal norms

Comment:
    Descriptions of informal group norms
ISG Meeting content

Comment:
Descriptions of work that is done during an ISG meeting. Includes sharing of instructional strategies, classroom management strategies, navigating school policy, professional concerns, reading and responding to professional literature, etc.

Link2learning

Comment:
Participant descriptions of how participation in the ISG links to learning in their respective classrooms; includes participant perception of student response

Moving forward

Comment:
Participant descriptions of next steps for the ISG

Obstacles

Comment:
Participant descriptions of obstacles that impede ISG

Other experiences

Comment:
Descriptions of other experiences described by ISG participants with regard to work of other groups similar in scope to the ISG

Part percept of non-part

Comment:
Participant perceptions of non-participant response to ISG

Principal affirm & encourage
Created: 2011-08-10 22:30:12 by Super
Modified: 2011-08-11 18:32:04
Quotations: 5
Comment:
  Descriptions of principal support of ISG through affirmation and encouragement

Principal allow ISG to self-direct

Comment:
  Descriptions of participant perception of importance of principal allowing ISG to self-direct

Principal as resource

Comment:
  Descriptions of ways in which the principal may serve as a resource to the ISG - suggestions, recommendations, financial and logistical support, etc.

Principal insight

Comment:
  Descriptions of ways in which the principal may offer insight and big picture perspective in response to ISG questions/concerns/requests/ideas

Principal mtg attend +

Comment:
  Descriptions of positive feedback with regard to principal attendance at ISG meetings.

Principal mtg attend neg

Comment:
  Descriptions of negative feedback with regard to principal attendance at ISG meetings

Professionalism

Comment:
  Descriptions of how participants link professionalism to ISG participation; includes
Program of attraction

Comment:
Descriptions of participants' overarching stance toward interactions specific to the ISG with non-participants.

Spring 2009

Comment:
Descriptions of the work of the ISG during the first few months of its existence—March–June 2009

TRUST

Comment:
Descriptions of TRUST within ISG. Includes participant descriptions of ISG being a SAFE place; also includes times when participants have not felt SAFE in group

WIIFM

Comment:
Descriptions of What's in it for me? Participant descriptions of their reasons for participating in the ISG
References


