Fostering Teachers' Lifelong Learning through Professional Growth Plans: A Cautious Recommendation for Policy

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Abstract

This article addresses the question *What approaches, experiences and resources foster lifelong learning of teachers?* drawing from a qualitative study of an approach to teacher development and supervision recently mandated in Alberta: teacher professional growth plans. The study interviewed teachers, principals, and superintendents in various jurisdictions about their experiences, perceptions and challenges implementing growth plans. The article first presents significant issues in current debates about lifelong learning in general and teachers' professional development in particular, then describes the research findings in terms of approaches, experiences and resources that appear to best enable teachers' learning. The article concludes that when implemented with commitment, affirmation and collaboration, teacher professional growth plans are a positive first step towards fostering learning communities in schools. Recommendations and cautions for the development and implementation of growth plan policies are provided, based on the Alberta experience.

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Introduction

Teachers' professional development has long been linked to educational reform. Models of professional development are profuse, as are empirical reports of their implementation. Significant issues have been shown to include time, resources, top-down implementation efforts, lack of follow up, lack of contextualization, lack of consideration of teachers' personal investment in practice, and teacher isolation. Given the vast amount of literature now available to show exactly what enhances and what inhibits professional development in different contexts, there seems little need for further study on the subject

However in the past decade, two trends have emerged which have waged significant influence upon our conceptualization and attitudes about teacher learning. One is increasing replacement of the term professional development with the broader signifier lifelong learning. The other is a shift from focus on individual teachers developing skills to conceptualizing learning evolving in communities of practice (Davis and Sumara, 1997). In particular, enthusiasm appears to have grown for the notion of building "learning community" (Mitchell and Sackney, 2001). Together with the changing demographics of the teaching profession, these trends are reconfiguring issues of teachers' professional development. They are also linking teachers' knowledge and practice to broader questions pervading other sectors of public service, community and industry, about the purposes of lifelong learning and the links between lifelong learning, work, relationships, and identity.

The central concern of this article is the role of policy and administration at both provincial, district and school levels seeking to foster teachers' learning towards improving schools. Policy should support supervisory practice which honours the diverse processes of professionals' learning as interpretive meaning-making, and links learning to core visions (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2001). Supervision that supports teacher learning must also somehow navigate between teacher needs for autonomy and flexibility (Green, 1992) and public demands for professional accountability and measurable competency.

Teacher professional growth plans (TPGPs) may satisfy these competing interests. Mandated in Alberta in 1998, in New Brunswick in 1997 as portfolios, and currently receiving serious consideration in Nova Scotia, professional growth plans appear to foster the flexibility, holism and affirmation necessary to accommodate diverse teachers and contexts. Because they are teacher-directed, TPGPs honour professional autonomy, yet as policy they urge district commitment to teacher learning. In practice, some districts have demonstrated the potential of TPGPs to catalyse teacher collaboration in ways that build productive learning communities within schools. As a preface to a later discussion of teacher professional growth plans in policy and practice, the following section describes issues of lifelong learning and learning community that deserve consideration by those interested in interventions to foster teachers' continuing development.

Issues in Professionals' Knowing, Lifelong Learning and Learning Communities

Research in professionals' ways of knowing has for the past few decades focused on how individuals construct knowledge through practice, sometimes with reflection on that practice, in particular communities configured by cultural norms, values, particular language and histories, and politics. Despite much critique, Schon's (1983) notion of "the reflective practitioner" reflecting critically both *on* action (after the fact), and reflecting *in* uncertain, volatile and unpredictable situations continues to be promoted widely in teacher preservice and continuing professional education. Clandinin (1995) has shown how for teachers, personal knowledge is holistically entwined with practical knowledge. Psychoanalysis has excited recent interest in the role of teachers' desire (Todd, 1997) and resistances (Britzman, 1998) in their learning and teaching, especially in exploring their unconscious knowledge about themselves. Sociocultural views understand teachers' learning as inseparable from systems of relationships and interactions in which they participate (Davis and Sumara, 1997). Their growth is interconnected with the discourses, meanings, desires and opportunities surrounding them (Garman, 1995).

While there is contestation among these views, some overall themes of teacher learning may be argued to include the integration of various knowledges (personal, practical, relational) with teachers' participation in various communities of the school; the embedding of learning in practice; the important role of intentionality and reflection in learning; and the significance of both internal personal conflicts and external culture and relationships on teachers' learning. Inspired by these emerging understandings of teacher learning, professional development initiatives in schools have employed a combination of approaches. Poole (1995) claims that clinical supervision has given way to reflective, growth-oriented models of increased collegiality. Others emphasize teacher-directed learning through self-reflection and dialogue in relationships founded upon trust and respect (Garman, 1990; McBride and Skau, 1995). Reflective practice has been encouraged through initiatives training supervisors and teachers in critical reflection (Siens and Ebmeier, 1996), through portfolios (Bosetti, 1996), mentorship programs and action research. In Alberta a study of teacher evaluation practices across the province showed the effectiveness of teachers' individual goal-setting and reflective self-assessment on an ongoing basis in a culture fostering continuous learning and believing in teachers' essential competence (Maynes et al, 1995). However, analyses of school-based initiatives to foster teachers' professional development tend to report similar problems: limited commitment from senior administrators or limited time (Herbert and Tankersley, 1993); teacher commitment varying according to individual philosophies, attitudes and experience of teaching (Hyun and Marshall, 1996) and the lack of monitoring, support and adjustment that is required to sustain change over the long term.

The term "lifelong learning" invites a much broader scope of definitions than "professional development" of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge and who sets the definition of 'good teaching' that guides learning. While professional development clearly denotes learning for the sake of improving professional practice, lifelong learning is not rooted in any particular moral or professional commitment. The question becomes, learning what, and for which purposes? For example, is learning legitimate if it leads people out of teaching? Critics of the current sloganeering surrounding "lifelong learning" are also concerned about the irrevocable yoking of personal learning to vocational ends, marking all learning as economistic and measured according to productivity and efficiency (i.e., Martin, 1999). Lifelong learning becomes an individualistic enterprise, its purpose to consume skills while turning teaching into an endless human resource development project. And as Seddon (2000) argues, this focus threatens the solidarity and collective nature of teaching that grounds learning in ideals of equity and participational democracy.

The notion of "learning community" that has become popular in schools (Sergiovanni, 1994; Shields, 2000) may help avoid potential individualism, vague purposes or technicist approaches to teachers' lifelong learning. According to Mitchell and Sackney (2000), learning community is developed through building three modes of capacity: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Building personal capacity involves individual teachers confronting and perhaps reconstructing their structures of personal narratives shaping their practice: embedded values, assumptions, beliefs and practical knowledge. Interpersonal capacity depends on fostering both an affective climate where teachers feel affirmed and motivated to participate, and a cognitive climate that encourages learning. Organizational capacity depends upon the productive rearrangement of structures that can enable and encourage collective learning: resources, power relationships, and work design.

Turning to the central purpose of this article - to propose policy and administrative practice fostering teachers' lifelong learning - the foregoing discussion suggests several questions for consideration. How might policy and administrative practice encourage learning communities that promote personal, interpersonal and organizational capacity-building? How can jurisdictions encourage teachers' learning in ways that affirm capacity, allow flexibility, provide incentive and encourage accountability for learning without exercising surveillance and control through hierarchical power relationships? What approaches have positive impact on students' learning, while honouring teachers as self-directed professionals with different needs and learning processes? What kinds of policy can place importance on continuous professional learning and development, without narrowing the focus to individuals' skill development without contextualization in collective action, social critique and moral purposes? Where are resources best allocated to support meaningful teacher learning, in a professional context where demands overwhelm the time available, and where the cultural norms of schools may determine higher priority attached to teacher performance and productivity than to reflection and learning?

The remainder of this paper argues for the value of policies and practice supporting the use of teacher professional growth plans (TPGPs). This position is based on a qualitative study of mandatory implementation of growth plans in Alberta. Although it is early yet to discern the real consequences of this policy in schools or its relation to outcomes such as student achievement, there are signs demonstrating its positive potential to foster teacher learning. Of course, as is true for any educational implementation, much depends on the thought, time and resources dedicated to its success. And not unlike other educational changes, certain concerns and possible distortions that may inhibit or neutralize its potential attend this initiative. The following sections present the policy and this study of its implementation, ending with recommendations for approaches and resources that we observed to foster teacher learning and development.

TPGPs in Alberta: What *Are* Professional Growth Plans?

The Alberta policy 2.1.5 *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation* (Alberta Learning, 1998)[1] requires all Alberta teachers to create and maintain a "professional growth plan" which is reviewed annually by a supervisor. The policy stipulates that this plan must contain at least three goals for professional development, designed and written by the teacher at the beginning of each school year. A year-end review examines actions and outcomes to meet the goals in terms of teacher learning. This review is written by the teacher and shared with a supervisor, usually the principal. The plans are kept by the teacher and may not be shared with anyone without the teacher's initiation and permission. Nothing in the growth plan may be used for purposes of teacher evaluation[2].

The new policy appears to support all the good things that teacher supervision literature has been advocating: teachers reclaiming their own professional growth and assessment by engaging in reflective processes of writing and dialogue. The Professional Development Director of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) explains that the existence of this policy helps prevent the possibility of teacher testing. Any concerns about accountability or teacher quality that may be levelled against school districts can be answered by pointing to the existence of annual written records maintained by every teacher, reporting areas of practice requiring improvement, and describing specific actions taken to address these areas (O'Hare, 2001). More important, the policy presents a positive model of teachers as responsible professionals, self-directed continuous learners – rather than a negative deficit model of teachers requiring regular evaluation to ensure satisfactory performance. And finally, according to this ATA director, the policy places clear emphasis upon teacher growth as a priority requiring district allocation of time, staff and resources. The promise of teacher professional growth plans is their elevation of the status of teachers' *learning*. In requiring schools and staffs to invest time and resources in teachers' learning – not teacher evaluation - while upholding individual teacher's rights to direct this learning, TPGPs have the potential to foster meaningful experiences of lifelong learning. The study described below was intended to explore the extent of this potential.

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[1] The policy builds on and refers to a 1997 Ministerial Order (Alberta Learning, 1997) appending the School Act to specify a "Teaching Quality Standard" specifying eleven "knowledge, skills and attributes" (KSAs) that must be met by certificated teachers throughout their careers, and be used to guide their professional development, supervision and evaluation.

[2] The policy (Alberta Learning, 1998) includes separate provision for teacher evaluation of novice teachers requiring certification and for teachers experiencing difficulty.

Study Methods

   This remainder of this paper presents findings of a qualitative study[3] examining early effects reported by teachers and administrators of Teacher Professional Growth Plans on teachers' learning, and effective approaches to their implementation in Alberta. The study had two parts. The first part[4] focused on a particular jurisdiction that reported significant success with TPGPs, and had longer experience with them than other Alberta districts because it began the implementation process one year prior to the mandatory TPGP implementation. Wescana School District[5] is adjacent to a large western city, contains a small suburban centre and large rural area, and serves 15,700 students and 825 teachers in 41 schools. Noted for the priority it places on teacher learning, the district employs a full-time professional development director in central office and encourages schools to allocate substantial resources to fund teacher development activities.

   This study focused on three schools suggested by the Wescana district superintendent, one elementary, one junior high and one senior high school. All were located in the suburb and were described as "successful", comprising a relatively "stable homogeneous" staff. Principals (and one assistant principal) in each school were asked to narrate the story of TPGP implementation and experimentation in their school, describing the changing responses of teachers and the district support. Principals also shared their perspectives about the outcomes and value of TPGPs for their staffs, any issues they detected, and descriptions of the school's overall characteristics and culture. Individual teachers selected from volunteers (between three and six in each of the three Wescana schools for a total of eleven -- four men and seven women) were then interviewed about their own experiences and the different approaches they were using to implement TPGPs. We asked teachers: 1. How do you use Teacher Professional Growth Plans? Has this changed over time? 2. What changes have you noticed, if any, in your approaches to professional learning since starting to use TPGPs? 3. What for you have been the benefits, if any, of TPGPs? 4. What for you are the challenges or concerns of using a TPGP? 5. What for you have been the most valuable supports and resources related to your use of a TPGP?

   In the second part of the study, one representative from each of five other Alberta school jurisdictions was interviewed about the approaches they were using to introduce TPGPs in their district, their perception of the benefits and concerns of growth plans, and their own findings about effective approaches and useful resources to support teachers' learning through TPGPs. This representative was a district-office administrator who had close experience implementing growth plans at the district level (two had recently been principals, and therefore spoke from one year experience implementing TPGPs at the school level as well as one year at the district level). Three of these five districts are small rural jurisdictions; one is a large northern district embracing a city as well as rural schools; and one is a large district adjacent to a major urban centre, embracing a small city, several suburbs and some rural schools. Also interviewed were two Alberta Teachers' Association professional development officers who assist schools to implement growth plans.

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[3]I wish to thank Heather Kanuka and Anne Smulders for their contributions to this study.

[4] See Fenwick and Smulders (2000) for a full report of the first part of this study.

[5] A pseudonym.

Each interview transcript was analysed using qualitative coding methods described by Ely (1991) to identify categories and themes for individuals, which were then validated with each participant. Then transcript themes were compared across three groups to identify individual differences and patterns of similarity: Wescana school administrators, Wescana teachers, and senior administrators in five other Alberta districts.

The findings below will be presented in several parts, with emphasis placed on the Wescana district findings. First are discussed the *experiences* of educators (teachers and administrators) using teacher professional growth plans in Wescana district, followed by experiences described by other district superintendents. Then *issues and concerns* reported by Wescana educators are presented, followed by issues raised in other districts. Recommended *approaches to implementation* of growth plans are outlined based on findings from both Wescana and other districts, followed by recommendations for *resources* and finally for *policy-making*.

Educators' Experiences using Teacher Professional Growth Plans in Wescana District

All Wescana school administrators and teachers claimed that TPGPs motivated teachers' learning. Common benefits cited were greater authenticity and teacher commitment to their own professional development; increased teacher focus and accountability for their own development; increased collegiality; and teachers' self-affirmation. Most teachers also described the whole process of using TPGPs self-affirming, and claimed to enjoy their principals' direct involvement in their learning activities and accomplishments. Teachers also reported an overall increase in their own learning activity, which many attributed to the value of goal-setting and the focusing encouraged by the TPGP process. Some teachers described an increase in collaborative activity as a result of the TPGPs, but nearly every staff participant in the study said that they approached professional development differently than they did before having to write a plan. These themes will be discussed in further detail in the following paragraphs.

Greater Authenticity and Commitment to Learning. All but one teacher claimed that the requirement to "show" someone their learning purposes and progress motivated them to engage a reflective process they valued. Several teachers claimed that their involvement in learning activities such as professional reading, attending workshops, and joining in-school groups to explore particular teaching-related topics had increased since constructing their first growth plan, and some described these activities as being more "proactive, intrinsic and exciting" since the introduction of TPGPs. And after a few uncertainties in the TPGP start-up process, school administrators in Wescana district described a growing "authenticity" of the plans, reflecting goals and learning in which teachers had strong personal investment. Administrators also noted increasing ownership of teachers for professional growth and increasing levels of what they described as teacher confidence and enthusiasm. Although administrators varied in the amount of specific direction they gave to teachers about writing growth plans, all emphasized the importance of refraining from judgment and providing encouragement for teachers' own directions.

Increased Focus and Personal Accountability in Learning. Many Wescana teachers reported that growth plans helped them focus, developing a clearer sense of purpose and meaning in their teaching and learning activities: "It helps you prioritize, focus on what's most important for these kids." One described the TPGP as a continual barometer, that what was happening on a daily basis in their classroom was "on the right track." Goal setting generally was described as increasing insight into one's own teaching, and helping define a personal vision for one's practice. One teacher explained that goal-setting revitalized her teaching and reduced stress. The writing down of goals seemed to be a powerful act for many, to "rethink and clarify", to create a written "anchor" for ongoing reference, or to reaffirm the purpose of daily activity.

Principals also stressed the personal accountability that goal-setting creates: "When it's written down, you begin to relate everything that happens to that goal". Teachers take more responsibility for their own professional development, one explained; they do much more "conscious planning" for their growth, and more thinking around questions such as, "How will I know when I get there? What will it look like?" Although some teachers claimed to have been writing and reviewing personal goals prior to the mandated requirement to do so, most had not and reported that they found themselves more committed to, involved in and aware of their own professional learning because of constructing a professional growth plan.

Some Increase in Teacher Collaboration. All four Wescana district school administrators described some collaboration happening among some teachers in preparing their goals ("but some teachers you have to nudge a bit"). In the elementary school the administrative team invited staff to meet in small groups during the school year to review their growth plans and progress. Most teachers chose this option and said they found it a rare and rewarding opportunity for concentrated dialogue about professional practice ("deep talk"). In two schools, teachers linked TPGPs to increased collegial learning activities through peer-offered seminars or informal sharing: "People realize that everybody is working to improve. So if somebody brings a book in, it's 'Gee, I was reading this and I thought you might enjoy it because I know you're working on the same kind of theme.'" Some teachers also noted their changing perceptions of their practice interconnecting with the school and district systems, through the Wescana district initiatives to identify themes in TPGPs and respond to them: "you're sort of not working in a vacuum here, there is a big picture and you're part of that. It's important not to come to work everyday and put one foot ahead of the other." Further collaboration was prevented particularly in the junior and senior high schools by time constraints, individual work styles, low degree of similar interests and teaching issues, and limited team approaches to teaching.

Teachers' Self-Affirmation Through Learning. Almost all teachers described TPGPs as an affirming process, allowing one to "be treated as a professional", creating one's own goals and choosing when to seek help and for what. One explained the process had expanded her understanding of her capabilities and potential. Some enjoyed seeing their colleagues grow in confidence and professionalism. A major source of affirmation and confidence-building for many was the written evidence of accomplishment: "Here's how I am skilled and getting more skilled". As one secondary teacher explained:

> *You get lost in your everyday stuff and not realize how much you do accomplish in a year. . . . success is often very small and it takes an extreme length of time before you see a real change. [The TPGP] gives you concrete examples of what you have accomplished.*

All school administrators referred positively to the teacher professional growth plans stressing competence and growth rather than deficits and judgment. End-of-year discussions with teachers about their growth plans tend to highlight their accomplishments, positive changes and affirming incidents throughout the year that otherwise might be forgotten.

Administrators' Experiences using Teacher Professional Growth Plans in Other Districts

Representatives of the other five school districts described implementation strategies, similar to those used in Wescana district, employed in schools where principals were interested in and strongly committed to TPGPs. Workshops and mid-year meetings with teachers were adopted upon the initiative of particular school principals. Most principals apparently emphasized to teachers the importance of linking their learning goals to school and district goals for improvement, by involving teachers in studying these system goals and helping them write a personal plan that connected their own practice to the district directions. In all five districts, themes and needs from teacher professional growth plans were drawn together and sometimes charted in detail. This information was used to plan school- and district-level professional development activities and to allocate PD resources.

The main benefits of TPGPs noted by district-level administrators in these five districts, were the increased ability for districts to influence the direction of teachers' learning by encouraging alignment of teacher goals with district and school goals, and the increased opportunity to target PD resources to meet specific teacher-defined needs.

Administrators also claimed to have observed greater focus in teachers' learning. Some believed that teachers were more likely to commit their energy and time to a goal that was written down and shared with a principal, especially if resources were allocated to it. Additionally, some perceived that the formation of goals helped teachers focus ahead and plan for imminent curriculum changes and new technologies – thus reducing anxiety about 'keeping up'. Finally some administrators noted more "wide angle" focus among teachers, who they felt were increasingly aware of their connection to the "big picture" of district issues and directions.

Three senior administrators believed TPGPs produced greater commitment among staffs to ongoing and continuous learning. One called the process "high involvement, high achievement" which he attributed to the visibility of learning benchmarks. Another explained that although at first the growth plans were treated as a "paper exercise", teachers began to see changes in their classroom appear. Teachers were becoming, he felt, more attuned to their PD in terms of *outcomes* achieved (as new teaching skills mastered or changes in their students' progress) than as *events* attended. The TPGP focus on observing indicators of learning over time was apparently affecting some teachers' classroom practice, to focus more on student outcomes.

Four administrators perceived increased collaboration within and across schools, which they attributed to TPGPs. This resulted, they claimed, from certain principals getting teachers to work in groups to formulate their growth plans from the beginning, then making time for mid-year dialogues among teaching groups focused on TPGPs. Teachers were often compelled to talk and share ideas to achieve their learning goals, and thus the TPGP requirement helped build a culture of conversation about learning.

Issues and Concerns of Teacher Professional Growth Plans in Wescana District

The issues or concerns expressed by Wescana district principals centred on two dimensions of teacher professional growth plans. First was the potential rigidity and linearity of the planning process. Second was a concern for trust and teacher confidence in developing and sharing their goals. Teachers and principals also described some concerns about time, and what some felt to be unclear links between professional development goals and practice. These issues are discussed below.

Potential Restrictions to Learning. Some administrators and teachers described discomfort with a linear planning process applied to professional learning, explaining that important knowledge related to practice is often emergent and very difficult to articulate early in the year: "Some goals just aren't set-able in September", and teacher learning is more fluid and on-going than the one-year TPGP process of plan-action-measure allows. There was concern that TPGPs focused teachers on observable indicators and formal educational strategies for growth (such as workshops and conferences), overshadowing more intangible, complex indicators and activities of learning in practice and focusing on teaching "techniques". A few teachers wondered whether written goals inhibited "the spontaneity" of following unforeseen opportunities. Principals responded by encouraging teachers to consider goals as long-term (carried from year to year), and to experiment with alternate ways to capture growth. Concerns were often mediated through "coaching" and problem-solving at staff meetings.

Threats to Trust and Risk-Taking in Teachers' Learning. Most principals noted teachers' vulnerability in sharing personal goals (i.e., revealing one's weaknesses) with any colleague, especially the principal who has the power to evaluate and promote. Without strong trust between teacher and supervisor, explained one, there would be little risk-taking in learning "because everything you put down has to be measured, so teachers stress out -- what if I don't achieve it this year?" Several teachers agreed that the first year of using TPGPs was a testing of the waters: "It was really a risk. What if I write something down and it's not worded properly?" All teachers but three expressed concern about fulfilling their goals by June. For some, the experience of having written down and shared a goal, then finding oneself unable to achieve it at the end of the school year, was distressing: "You feel unsuccessful." Teachers wondered: Did I really fail if my goal wasn't completed? Is a goal ever completely finished? Administrators attempted to reduce anxiety through coaching and encouragement.

Time and Resources Required. Time ranged in concern for the teachers interviewed. A few regarded the TPGP as "one more thing to do", while others enjoyed making time for reflection. Most noted that the actual writing time required is minimal, but that the existence of the plan focused one's awareness upon everyday learning incidents: "[The TPGP] is a way of *being* as opposed to being time consumptive". For school administrators, TPGPs require scheduling blocks of time to meet individually with teachers, which most did not seem to find onerous. Some shared this responsibility with members of their administrative team. One had successfully encouraged teachers to meet in groups, which meant her own individual teacher meetings were brief and focused. In fact, administrators indicated that the additional time was a worthwhile investment allowing them to identify and address teaching concerns before they become problematic.

Unclear Links Between Learning Purposes and Teaching Practice. Wescana district principals related difficult questions about learning goals confronting their staffs such as: What's a manageable, realistic goal for one year? What counts as achieving a goal? Administrators wondered about the limits of "appropriate" goals for teacher learning, and about how to respond when teachers wrote "personal" goals (i.e. related to personal development); learning goals related to a new non-teaching career direction; "trivial" goals; goals "irrelevant" to teaching; goals that are part of "routine expectations" of teachers (such as implementing new curriculum); or what seemed to be "unrealistic" or unmanageable goals. The question for many became, At what point does a supervisor question a teacher's goal for lifelong learning?

However, all administrators emphasized the importance of accepting all teacher goals: "We're giving lots of freedom here . . .I've had to really lower my standards, but if I start rejecting [the goals] if they're scrawly or I don't agree with them, it turns [the teachers] off." A few teachers raised concerns about the whole meaning and purpose of teacher learning: while a learning plan must be meaningful to its writer, TPGP goals should not become a teacher exercise disconnected from children's needs. The bottom line, some felt, is that teacher learning must be directly linked to improving classroom practice, and ultimately to benefits for students.

Issues and Concerns of Teacher Professional Growth Plans in Other Districts

The concerns noted most frequently by senior administrators in the other five districts were related to accountability, although there was considerable variance in their views. Two were concerned that marginal teaching would not be addressed as effectively (as it was with a system of regular classroom observation), that TPGPs rendered teacher evaluation ambiguous, and that teachers might not maintain a growth plan themselves as "diligently" as administrators would maintain a staff file that must satisfy public scrutiny and personnel record-keeping. Some wondered how individual teachers could truly see areas they needed to improve without a supervisor to point these out, although others liked the TPGP move away from a 'deficit' model. Two worried that parents might be concerned if teachers' goals don't benefit their child – although another claimed that parents were far more concerned about their child being treated fairly than about teacher learning. All five district administrators noted the supervisory role change implied by TPGPs. Two were concerned about the weakening of the supervisor's authority, although others believed that TPGPs actually opened opportunities for more collegial talk between principals and teachers because they removed the threatening stance of the observing judgmental supervisor. In summary, these views of senior administrators reflect some continuing concern about their responsibility to ensure accountability (especially to parents) and teacher quality, and balancing these with trust in teachers' self-direction. Concerns about teacher evaluation appear related to the confusion of teacher growth plans with evaluative procedures (specified in a separate provincial policy).

These issues are part of a larger debate about how to conceptualize and facilitate professionals' learning in ways that are empowering and morally justifiable. Among the schools we studied, there was evidence of strategies to address these issues through effective implementation and support of growth plans. These will be discussed below in terms of *approaches adopted at district and school levels* in different jurisdictions to enhance the value of professional growth plans as tools for teachers' learning. *Resources that best support teachers' learning* through effective implementation of professional growth plans will be outlined, and finally, *policy provisions* will be described that can enhance effective professional growth plan implementation.

Approaches for Introducing and Supporting TPGPs to Foster Teacher Learning

Like any new initiative, the implementation of TPGPs in Wescana district was described as one of ongoing development with stops and starts, frustrations and sudden breakthroughs, back and forth rhythms, and continual clarification. That this process was experienced in the three schools studied here where significant time, resources, and training were devoted to the project, and where the pre-existing school cultures were, according to principals, generally positive, collegial and committed to strong visions speaks to the importance of careful implementation. Five approaches to implementing teacher professional growth plans appeared to have the greatest value for fostering teachers' learning in the Wescana district schools: (1) providing support and commitment, both financial, informational, cultural and relational at district and school levels; (2) encouraging flexibility; (3) building teacher trust and risk-taking; (4) focusing on context and community; and (5) balancing teacher self-direction with guidance.

Support Professional Growth Plans as a Serious Commitment. In the Wescana school district where teachers seemed very positive about TPGPs, strong central office support was evident through provision of plentiful information and regular group dialogue opportunities for school administrators. District office administrators visited school staffs to share their own growth plans and talk about the process, and mapped themes emerging in the teachers' plans across the district and created corresponding professional development opportunities. In schools, administrators had also held at least one workshop with their own staff to talk about purposes and formats for TPGPs, share their own growth plans, and get teachers working together formulating their plans. Communication about the growth plan initiative was emphasized within districts and schools: their potential, limitations and need for support. Administrators also communicated district goals and worked with their staffs to develop school goals: teachers were encouraged to consider these in mapping their own learning goals.

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Present Alternatives and Encourage Flexibility. Teachers varied widely in their commitment and approaches to professional learning. There were significant differences between novice and experienced teachers. Career and life stages influenced their goals and general commitment to professional development. Teachers' priorities, pressures and work activity also shifted in unpredictable ways, affecting their growth and progress towards planned goals. Most found that a growth plan is often enacted very differently than anticipated. For some teachers, the plan-action-measure format was too rigid – they preferred more fluid formats such as portfolios or reflective journals. For others there was considerable anxiety about what "counts" as a goal, what indicators demonstrated their actual learning, and what language one used to articulate learning. For most, learning goals were found to be evolutionary: no goal could be accurately envisioned and no goal was ever completely finished.

In schools where teachers reported great satisfaction with the professional growth planning process, considerable latitude and flexibility was extended to them to design and continually revise their goals in ways that made sense personally to them. In the first two years of using TPGPs, administrators often found themselves providing special assistance to individuals. Some teachers had overly high expectations for themselves, some needed help clarifying specific manageable goals, some felt "overwhelmed" by the requirement to set personal goals, some needed frequent "reminders" to get the thing finished, and some apparently found it difficult to apply meaningful goal-setting to their work. All administrators stressed the need for a supportive and flexible response in the first year: "I took just about anything, as long as they had it written down," explained one. The most useful supports described by teachers included help in formulating goals authentic to their unique practice, "space" to experiment, and "permission" to view goals as fluid and tentative. Most also appreciated the bi-annual dialogues with principals about their learning challenges and meanings of success.

Build Teacher Trust and Risk-Taking Over Time. While trust between teachers and supervisors has long been acknowledged as crucial if teacher reflection and learning is to be encouraged (McBride and Skau, 1995), approaches to actually promoting trust in an asymmetrical teacher-principal power relationship structured by accountability and embedding evaluation are less obvious. Wescana district school administrators in this study described the importance of really knowing each teacher and understanding teachers' unique priorities and approaches to learning. One key was administrators sharing their own professional growth plans, talking with teachers about frustrations, accomplishments, and dilemmas of process. Several provided recognition or celebration of teachers' progress towards learning goals. Almost all emphasized trusting teachers to pick their own areas for learning goals and to be accountable for their learning without questioning from the principal.

Most administrators and teachers explained that time and patience is necessary before growth plans become a comfortable and meaningful process supporting professionals' learning. In Wescana district, educators were reporting trust and growth benefits from TPGPs only after three years of working with them. First, several teachers remarked that they became more confident over time in writing goals, and were "personalizing" their goals more to specific dimensions of their own practice and teaching styles. Second, all principals noted that over time, teachers tended to align growth goals less with personal development and more with school and district initiatives and curricular focuses. One principal described "subliminal" ways of "talking up" the importance and relevance of certain school goals and system initiatives to teachers' own growth plans. Third, over time most teachers seemed to have "come on board", approaching the TPGP seriously as a learning endeavour rather than a paper exercise. Collective "peer pressure", modeling and information sharing that developed among staffs over the three years of implementation tended to "nudge along" those who seemed less committed at first to TPGPs. But overall, administrators attributed these changes to their own restraint of critique or judgment of teachers' first goals and plans, building individual relationships, and providing liberal encouragement.

Encourage Focus on Understanding Context and Learning in Community. Any plan for a teacher's growth or evaluation and consideration of that plan in terms of judging a teacher's achievements must be integrally connected with the social and cultural context of the school. A teacher's practice is fundamentally embedded in the social relationships and cultural dynamics of a particular school and the community it serves (Garman, 1990). As Davis and Sumara (1997) show, a teacher's intentions for practice, perceptions about the changing self, perceptions about what counts as valuable knowledge, language for conceiving these, and everyday choices and responses cannot be understood in isolation from the organizational cultural and physical environment. Meanwhile, individualized conceptions of growth also tend to ignore the important influences on teachers' change exercised by parents, changing teaching assignments, community events throughout the year, and the school leadership in determining how and what a teacher learns and does in practice.

This serves to emphasize again the need to be flexible in working with each teacher, but also to encourage teachers as a staff group to examine the contexts in which they work. What external forces are affecting their motivation and freedom to learn what they consider most valuable for their professional practice? What cultural norms and values in their school may be directing their learning in ways they find unproductive?

The importance of building community is also apparent. Teachers traditionally work in isolation, which may contribute to a certain fear about sharing one's professional choices and learning. However as Maynes, et al. (1995) showed, in schools where professional development initiatives thrive, a collaborative culture of caring, mutual support, and excitement about learning is already well-established. The introduction of teacher professional growth plans may provide an opening to build collaboration, as shown in some schools which brought teachers together in beginning workshops and periodic small group dialogue to work through the TPGP process.

Growth plans also appear to present a potential springboard for building community across a district with respect to teacher learning. When district and school administrators maintained and shared their own growth plans, and inquired about staff plans as a matter of interest when visiting schools, there seemed to proliferate a sense of 'we're all in this together' among teachers. Teachers' learning activities can also be coordinated across schools in districts, sometimes more economically. And in Wescana district, efforts to map themes across the learning goals of teachers and schools not only led to linkages and joint activities, but also contributed – for some educators - to a sense of collective vision, of their learning goals connecting to a bigger picture.

Balance Teachers' Self-Direction with External Guidance. The intent of teacher professional growth plans is to foster teacher ownership of their own development and to value difference in teaching styles. Therefore, the most logical form of TPGPs would likely be a completely self-directed process, elective not mandatory, and not necessarily shared with anyone. The importance of building teacher confidence and trust has already been established. The TPGP policy has the potential to endorse surveillance that potentially inhibits this trust, invades privacy, and contradicts its purposes of empowering teacher learning and supporting a creative learning community (Fenwick, 2000). Yet, teacher professional growth plans were mandated in Alberta for the purposes of forestalling more draconian measures to scrutinize and regulate teachers, while highlighting learning and promising to ensure the accountability that the public seemed to be demanding. The resulting tension is one that supervising administrators must balance: honouring teachers' self-direction and professional responsibility for their learning, while providing gentle guidance.

In fact, teachers themselves claimed they found external guidance helpful for three reasons. First, some teachers found it difficult to focus their myriad interests and felt needs for improvement: administrators helped them narrow and clarify their learning goals into a manageable plan. Second, several teachers felt that while some 'good' teachers would attend to ongoing professional development as a matter of obligation, others would not unless required to do so. The external pressure did not come simply from the administrator and policy, but also from collective pressure of a school staff all writing and comparing learning goals. Third, teachers emphasized recognition for their learning, achieved through the simple act of sharing their plans with a sympathetic and interested colleague. This requirement resulted in significant increase of their intentional pursuit of learning opportunities and deliberate application of these to their practice.

However, a fine line appears between honouring teachers' own identification of what they need and making suggestions. Administrators in our study indicated some discomfort in balancing the need to support teachers' goals and direct them to "appropriate" goals for a professional learning plan. The issue here is large. Surveillance of a teacher's professional growth potentially invades very private areas, for the space between personal and professional in teaching practice is blurred. Teachers have cause to be concerned about how much control they truly will be allowed in designing goals that reflect important areas they determine for new learning or projects they wish to undertake.

Resources That Appear to Best Support Teachers' Learning through TPGPs

For growth plans to be more than a paper exercise, the school and district must be prepared to commit substantial dollars and time to staff engagement in the process. In Alberta schools where teachers were satisfied with the professional growth plans, the supervisors had apparently devoted some hours to TPGPs in staff meetings, teacher workshops, and mid-year meetings – all towards introducing, writing and revisiting the plans. More importantly, in terms of professional development, these schools also devoted financial resources allowing teachers to actually engage in activities they designated for their growth plans. These varied, but at the very minimum release time and some funds provided partial reimbursement of teacher resources. For some teachers the most important aspect of the resources provided appeared to be a symbolic recognition (through public acknowledgement, tokens, or being asked to lead school-based seminars) that their professional learning was important to the school. Where growth plans seemed to have less meaning, it appeared that teachers were expected to engage in development activities after school, drawing upon their own resources to pursue the learning they would need to achieve their growth goals.

The study also indicated that administrative time is required to review and discuss plans with each teacher. In areas where teachers were cynical or noncommittal about the professional growth plans, administrators had simply mandated the plans and reviewed them at the end of the year. Training for administrators also appeared to be an important component. In Wescana district, all administrators were not only coached on approaches to implement the growth plans, but also met at intervals to discuss the implementation.

Finally, an important resource would appear to be a staff member designated to coordinate professional development at the district level. This person gives a voice and substantive presence to ongoing professional development throughout the district, provides support, can bring schools together to coordinate activities and provide linkages between educators interested in similar areas, and argues to ensure continuation of resources dedicated to teachers' learning.

Policy Provisions That Appear to Enhance Effective TPGP Implementation

This paper has argued for the value of a centralized policy that mandates teacher professional growth plans. However, such a policy must be carefully constructed so that affirmation is not overshadowed by accountability. The policy should balance self-directed learning with external guidance, and must avoid casting teachers' learning as the solution for systemic problems. To help build trust, teachers' vulnerability must be protected. To the extent possible, the policy should attempt to secure the conditions that may best ensure its success in terms of fostering teachers' learning. Finally the policy must allow sufficient flexibility to meet widely varying teachers' needs. To these ends, following are some recommendations for the formulation of such a policy.

In Alberta, the teacher professional growth plan policy was developed through close collaboration between the teachers' association and the provincial government, then mandated across the province at once. This procedure appears to have the advantage of gaining endorsement and implementation support of teacher representatives, as well as their voice in working out details of the policy that will balance most effectively the considerations listed above.

Any policy mandating growth plans should be carefully distinguished from policies related to teacher evaluation. The growth plan itself must be protected from any potential uses for external evaluative purposes. In Alberta, the Teacher Professional Growth Plan policy stipulates that supervisors may not initiate teacher evaluation procedures using any information ascertained in the growth plan process. Furthermore, in an effort to help decrease potential teacher anxiety the policy should clearly stipulate that teachers own their growth plans, and that the plans may not by placed in the district office unless teachers initiate this action.

To promote teachers' lifelong learning, a policy mandating growth plans should also clearly state that the teacher is the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes a relevant goal for his or her own professional growth. Any further specification should not restrict the wide range of application required by different teachers and staffs. For example, rigid timelines (i.e. one year) are potentially repressive and difficult to implement. The policy should acknowledge the probability of growth goals changing or not being achieved for various reasons outside teachers' control, related to the school's social-cultural context. And to be most flexible, the policy should acknowledge that goal planning is only one possible option among many alternatives that a teacher may choose to enact and capture learning.

A policy document might consider providing explicit discussion of the important element of collaboration. Perhaps a policy can provide a clear statement encouraging school staffs, or groups within the staffs, to create and monitor collective goals for growth instead of individual plans. Supporting documents might encourage the formation of school dialogue groups, cross-school partnerships among teachers, and shared ownership of areas for growth identified within the school.

Finally, the policy should provide a clear description of the school administrator's role in monitoring the professional growth plan process. Suggested procedures developed from this description might specify the need to build trusting relationships with teachers, the potential difficulties of taking on a coaching role, the need for flexibility and dialogue with staff, and recommended approaches to introducing the professional growth plan initiative.

Conclusion

Teacher professional growth plans are not proposed here to be a panacea or best way to foster teacher learning. However, in responding to issues of professional development presented at the beginning of this paper, TPGPs offer a flexible policy approach that have potential to motivate and affirm individual teachers' learning as well as generate community-building at the school level. This paper has described the kinds of resources and supports enhancing the learning potential offered by growth plans, and shown some problems that can accompany thoughtless implementation or too tightly controlled procedures. Above all, the central dimension in schools where teacher learning flourished appeared to be a visible commitment to learning at all levels. This was manifested most importantly in administrator time and psychological support dedicated not only to staff learning (including themselves) but also invested in building collegial relationships and fostering a positive, creative, vibrant culture where members felt accepted and trusted. Administrator flexibility and willingness to tackle critical questions and philosophical dilemmas of learning also appeared significant in building teacher trust, and extending the potential of TPGPs to build the personal, interpersonal and organizational capacities recommended by Mitchell and Sackney (2000).

The moral dimension of teacher learning – its purpose and how it is understood respective to a school's success – continues to be debated among educators, individually and collectively. Teacher professional growth plans inherently demand this dialogue, as teachers must negotiate and critique together what goals for learning are most meaningful to themselves and their visions as educators, while remaining defensible to their communities. In this sense, TPGPs offer a potentially powerful tool for the lifelong learning to which critical theorists such as Martin (2000) urge commitment: people learning to be active citizens in a democratic society.

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