

Teacher Supervision through Professional Growth Plans: Balancing Contradictions and Opening Possibilities

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Abstract

This article analyses the implementation of a new supervision policy mandating teacher professional growth plans (TPGPs) across Alberta, Canada, drawing upon findings of a qualitative study informed by a micropolitical perspective. Teachers and principals interviewed after three years of implementing this policy appeared to work within three basic contradictions related to the intersections of power and knowledge: (1) The policy promotes teacher self-direction while potentially undercutting professional empowerment through increased surveillance; (2) Professional growth plans appear to honor and liberate individual teachers' ways of knowing while potentially narrowing teacher learning to a technicist model; and (3) The "learning" focus of growth plans implies a focus on teacher risk-taking, creativity and personally meaningful learning, but the policy requires conformity to school and district goals and provincial teaching standards. However, principals and teachers found productive ways to balance these three tensions or work around them. This article describes strategies exercised particularly by administrators to implement the policy within these tensions, and concludes by discussing this model of teacher professional growth plans in terms of negotiation of control.

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Introduction

Professional growth plans are not a particularly new approach to teacher supervision and staff development, but centralized policies mandating their usage are rare. Alberta's new provincial supervision policy (Alberta Learning, 1998) requires all teachers to maintain a "teacher professional growth plan" (TPGP) which is reviewed annually by a supervisor, and must conform to government-specified Teaching Quality Standards. This article addresses what appear to be contradictory pressures embedded in professional growth plans through analysis of Alberta's policy and the perceptions and practices of teachers and administrators who are implementing it, using a micropolitical lens. Following a discussion of these pressures and the background of the policy itself, the article presents findings of a qualitative study in which educators were interviewed about their experiences implementing professional growth plans.

The centralized regulation of what some may argue to be private spaces of learning has the effect of converging dual interests in the supervisor's role. On one hand teacher supervision is influenced by public pressures for greater accountability, most graphically represented by the Alberta government's specification of eleven teaching standards and serious consideration of implementing regular state-controlled teacher re-certification, described later. On the other hand, discourses of reflection and continuous growth have become ubiquitous in Alberta and elsewhere. Supervisory literature and practice has incorporated Schön's (1983) notion of "reflective practice" premised on understandings of teacher learning as self-directed, particular and contextualized. Teacher growth is increasingly viewed as emerging from reflection in and on interactions in unpredictable complex classroom situations (Hyun and Marshall, 1996; Siens and Ebmeier, 1996), enabled by trusting, empowering support (McBride and Skau, 1995).

Additionally, professional growth plans reflect a general emphasis on lifelong learning that has come to dominate human resource literature and government documents as well as perspectives on teacher development. Critics of the current sloganeering surrounding lifelong learning have shown that the yoking of personal learning to vocational ends subjects an individual's whole learning life to measures of organizational productivity and efficiency (Martin, 1999), turning living itself into an endless human resource development enterprise (du Gay, 1996). Furthermore, lifelong learning is an individualistic enterprise, and as Seddon (2000) argues, this focus contradicts the solidarity and collective nature of teaching that grounds learning in ideals of equity and participational democracy.

Contestation is bound to inhere in government mandates attempting to resolve these dual interests towards centralized accountability and control while urging individualized continuous reflective (lifelong) learning of teachers. The resulting contradictions and conflicts must be confronted somehow by teachers and school administrators as they work to implement and make personal sense of policies such as Alberta's requirement for supervised teacher professional growth plans.

Through the Lens of Micropolitics

From a micropolitical perspective, Iannacone (1991) describes such implementation as "processes of producing policy from conflict." Micropolitics provide an important window for

analysing new educational initiatives, for, as Marcus (1999) puts it, educational reforms disrupt “the assumptive worlds of the actors . . . Suddenly muddied are the shared understandings of the dominant values, proper behavior, feasible policy options and appropriate decisional zones” (p. 47). New reforms create value tensions as well as a temporary power vacuum in which various actors move to control agendas and resources (Marshall and Scribner, 1991). The micropolitical perspective in education, writes Mawhinney (1999), is chiefly concerned with questions of agency and interests – Who or what is responsible?

These are important questions for examining teacher supervision policies and practices, where issues of accountability and power in the teacher-administrator relationship have long been acknowledged (Grimmet, 19**; Smyth, 1985). When new supervisory policies are introduced into schools they intercept complex dimensions characterizing the micropolitics of school life. Ball (1987) has described these characteristics as changing patterns of control, goal diversity, ideological divisions, diverse interests (including practical self-interests, ideological interests, and vested interests in material conditions), conflict, political activity and power. Among strategies of school micropolitics identified by Marshall and Scribner (1991) in these shifting landscapes of negotiated interests, several can be applied to the implementation of new supervisory policies: negotiating boundaries and turf, building influence and coalitions beneath bureaucratic routines, using ‘pocket veto’ power and control of changes to remake policies in site-level implementation, creating realities through symbols and myths, and privatizing any conflicts that emerge. However, as Blase (1991) has emphasized, micropolitics is not only about power and how people use it to influence others and protect themselves, but also about cooperation and how people build support to achieve their ends.

Those who subscribe to a Foucauldian view analyse how teachers as subjects are constructed through ‘technologies’ that make them objects of knowledge and targets of power. Foucault (1980) asks, What techniques make an individual ‘knowable’? Discursive mechanisms such as normalizing judgments based on pre-constructed standards, various practices of “surveillance”, selection and categorizing, self-assessment and ‘confession’ make a teacher visible and therefore easily regulated. Furthermore, through these practices teachers internalize the very disciplines that construct and regulate their identities. Foucault (1980) terms this self-regulation “pastoral power”, a concept applied by others such as Popkewitz and Brennan (1998) to analyse the undermining of teachers’ professionalism through various practices. In policing themselves to conform with pre-established standards, teachers’ authentic choice and freedom evaporate as they become controlled by particular ways of knowing and systems of knowledge. This self-regulation also locates the system’s problems in the bodies of individual teachers, subverting their resistance and diverting challenges away from broader social and economic forces circulating to construct problems.

In applying these post-structural concepts of power to education, Popkewitz (1998) argues that particular notions of ‘the good teacher’ (activity-oriented instruction, reflective practitioner) combined with particular assumptions about teacher knowledge (celebrating practical wisdom and ‘recipe knowledge’) and practices that make teachers ‘visible’ (through self-revelation), all work to produce particular teacher identities and behaviors by governing teachers’ inner beliefs. Popkewitz (1998) calls the coming-together of different pedagogical discourses to generate principles for participation and action scaffolding. He suggests that scaffolding embodies rules through which “thought is organized, perception directed, and action

controlled” (p. 56). Thus teachers are normalized – which may be precisely what some may believe good supervisory practices should do.

These issues of power and control, conflicts of purpose and administrative ambivalence are nothing new in the realm of teacher evaluation, which is by now widely understood as separate from supervision (Gleave, 1997; Hazi, 1994). Critics of clinical supervision have also analysed the inherent power relations and political negotiation of meaning (Grimmett, 19**; Smythe, 1985). However, supervisory literature about teacher reflection tends to focus more on ways to increase teachers’ meaningful engagement in reflective practice (i.e., Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2001, Zahorik, 1992) than on critical analysis of the technologies of power, their effects, and the micropolitics of knowledge being negotiated in practices such as supervised growth plans¹. This article endeavors to address these latter issues, while acknowledging the possibilities for growth plans to produce positive changes in schools, teaching and learning valued by both teachers and administrators. In particular, the focus here is upon the micropolitical effects related to centralized mandating of teacher professional growth plans. This is the unique dimension of the Alberta case, and may be read as an explicit state movement to *control* teachers’ learning: its direction, its purposes, its scope, and its accountability.

A New Supervision Policy for Alberta Teachers: Background

The Alberta policy 2.1.5 Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation (Alberta Learning, 1998) 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.

This policy emerged at the confluence of various dimensions. First, teaching quality and its regulation has been a particular concern for public and political interest in Alberta since the James Keegstra case (Keegstra v. County of Lacombe, 1983). This case precipitated a provincial requirement in 1985 that school districts instate systematic written teacher evaluation policies. Second, a general turn towards reflective, growth-oriented, collegial and dialogic supervision models (Poole, 1995) was beginning to surface in certain districts and schools. Studies conducted in Alberta found some teacher reception to portfolio-building (Bosetti, 1995), some examples of teachers’ individual goal-setting and reflective self-assessment on an ongoing basis (Maynes, Knight, McIntosh and Umpleby, 1995), and initiatives to build a learning community in the school (Haughey, Townsend, O’Reilly, and Ratsoy, 1993).

Third, the provincial education department continued to promote measurable teacher accountability. Three-year “business plans” for education advocated strategies for improvement focused on three areas: updating teacher preparation and teacher certification requirements; establishing competencies for beginning and experienced teachers; and developing a coordinated approach to delivering professional development opportunities for teachers (Alberta Education,

¹ There exist wide-ranging critical and deconstructivist analyses of reflection-oriented views of adult learning, particularly in the workplace (see for example Edwards, 1998; Fenwick, 2000; Michelson, 1996; and Sawada, 1991) but these are not prevalent in teacher supervision literature.

1994; Alberta Education, 1995). One preliminary recommendation was a program to be administered by the provincial department, then called Alberta Education, requiring re-certification of teachers at five-year intervals.

These recommendations were interpreted by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) as a bid for dramatically increased state control of teaching standards and evaluation, and the ATA lobbied hard to resist the proposal for government-administered regular teacher re-certification. Through a series of discussions in the period 1995 to 1997, representatives of government, the ATA, Alberta universities and school districts helped formulate an alternate approach to supervision that became the new policy 2.1.5 effective February 26, 1998. The policy builds on and refers to a 1997 Ministerial Order amending the School Act to specify a Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Learning, 1997). This standard specifies 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 evaluation².

Although such standards appear to re-establish provincial control, the Alberta Teachers' Association accepts them as sufficiently broad to allow a range of interpretation and enactment, and sufficiently clear to uphold central principles of professional practice set forth in the teachers' code of professional conduct (O'Hare, 2001). The ATA also supports the supervision policy mandating growth plans (one officer explained, "it was a political coup for us" in arresting the re-certification movement) for allowing teachers to reclaim their own professional growth and assessment by engaging in reflective processes of writing and dialogue (O'Hare, 2001). Any concerns about accountability or teacher quality that may be leveled 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 outcomes of specific actions taken to address these areas.

More important, the policy appears to present what the ATA desires most: a positive model of teachers as responsible professionals and self-directed continuous learners – rather than a negative deficit model of teachers requiring regular evaluation to ensure satisfactory performance. Finally, 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 grant a space of possibility for teacher supervision that is generative, liberating, and honors "the intelligibility and intentionality of the teacher's work" (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1998, p. 145).

However, to argue that any policy statement creates positive change or oppression merely through its passage is to ignore the multiple dynamics in schools that influence the daily enactment of a new initiative. Real teachers and principals do have agency, and their interactions determine how any policy plays itself out within particular complex contexts of practice. The potential tensions of control and purpose embedded in a policy mandating professional growth

² The KSAs specify that teachers must demonstrate their ability to do the following: apply appropriate pedagogy, understand the legislated moral and ethical frameworks, understand the subject disciplines, use many approaches to teaching and learning, engage in a range of planned activities, create and maintain learning environments, develop meaningful learning activities, apply a variety of technologies, gather and use information about students' learning, establish and maintain partnerships, and demonstrate career-long learning.

plans are perceived and responded to in particular ways by educators in schools. The remainder of this paper presents findings of a qualitative study³ examining early experiences, approaches to implementation and effects reported by Alberta teachers and administrators working with Teacher Professional Growth Plans.

Procedures of the Study

The study was in two parts. The first part focused on a particular jurisdiction that reported significant success with teacher professional growth plans, and that had longer experience with them than other Alberta district because it began the implementation process one year prior to the mandatory TPGP implementation in September 1999. The second part examined perceptions and experiences of district administrators in five other Alberta school jurisdictions, and compared these with the Wescana findings.

Wescana Public School District⁴ is adjacent to a large Alberta city; it comprises an active suburban hamlet (population approximately 25,000), a small city, and a large rural area; it serves 41 schools and 15,700 students. 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 for their strong leadership and commitment to TPGPs (among both staff and administrators): one elementary, one junior high and one senior high school. All were located in the suburban hamlet and were described by the superintendent as “successful” schools, comprising a relatively “stable homogeneous” staff. That is, both teaching staff and students apparently mirror the demographics of this suburban centre, described as lacking significant ethnic diversity and characterized as “white middle class”.

Data collection and analysis procedures were based on a naturalistic interpretive approach, understanding that individuals construct personal meanings from their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990), to address the broad question: How do principals and teachers experience and use professional growth plans? In semi-structured open-ended personal interviews, 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 in each school were then interviewed about their own experiences and the different approaches they were using to implement TPGPs. (Teacher selection strived to achieve some diversity among participants in terms of gender, teaching experience and assignment.) Between three and six teachers were interviewed in each of the three Wescana schools for a total of eleven, including four men and seven women, all white residents of the suburban centre in which they taught. In the interviews teachers were asked to narrate their specific experiences related to the following questions: 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

³A full report of this study is available from the University of Alberta describing teachers’ and administrators’ experiences working with Teacher Professional Growth Plans: the challenges of implementation, the most effective supports and resources, and the influence of TPGPs on teacher development perceived by teachers and administrators (Author and Smulders, 2000).

⁴ A pseudonym.

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?

Interviews were approximately one hour in length, audiotaped and transcribed. Although some teachers and principals also showed us actual growth plans, these were not collected and analysed as data. Each transcript was analysed manually using qualitative coding methods described by Ely (1991) to identify categories and themes for individuals, which were sent to participants for validation. Then transcript themes were compared across two groups to identify individual differences and patterns of similarity: Wescana school administrators, and Wescana teachers. Themes and conceptual understandings emerging from the resulting analysis were compared to the policy analysis we had undertaken before starting the study, and used to generate theoretical ideas. These themes and concepts were also taken to the participants to verify their credibility.

For purposes of comparison following the completion of the Wescana interviews, one representative from each of five other Alberta districts was interviewed. This representative was a senior administrator who had close experience implementing growth plans at the district level (two had recently been principals, and therefore spoke from two years' 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. Each of these administrators was asked to describe the strategies of implementing TPGPs that they had observed or experienced in their districts; any benefits they had observed (and why they considered these 'benefits', and the indicators upon which they were basing their judgments); and any challenges or concerns they perceived related to TPGPs as a method of teacher supervision. These interviews were all tape-recorded and transcribed, then interpreted using coding procedures of qualitative analysis described above to identify common themes.

Implementation of Teacher Professional Growth Plans

In the Wescana Public School District, TPGP implementation began one year prior to the mandatory provincial implementation to allow school staffs time to experiment with the plans, according to principals and teachers. District-level commitment to growth plans was evident in modeling (superintendents also maintained and shared with school staffs their own growth plans), information and group dialogue sessions for district principals about TPGP implementation, and district-level provision of professional development initiatives to address themes reported from the teachers' growth plans (district office representatives gathered these themes from schools.) The 'talk' about growth plans appeared to be frequent and embedded in other district activity: teachers for example were impressed that superintendents visiting the schools asked about TPGPs and shared their own.

In all three Wescana schools participating in this study, at least one workshop was held at the beginning of the process to present TPGP philosophy, purpose and format; show sample plans; and often gather teachers in groups to formulate their own plans. In addition all principals dedicated staff meeting time to discuss TPGPs. All principals shared their own professional growth plans, and arranged individual meetings to review each teacher's growth plan at the beginning and end of the school year. Some arranged mid-year meetings with teachers to discuss

evolving goals, encouraged small group meetings, and provided individual ‘coaching’ to allay fears and help define goals. All emphasized praising teachers’ progress on their goals, informally or publicly. Representatives of the other five school districts indicated using similar implementation strategies.

Wescana teachers and administrators all claimed they experienced positive change in their practice and a range of specific benefits that they attributed to TPGPs, including 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 (Author and Smulders, 2000). However, educators also expressed some concerns about rigidity and linearity of the TPGP planning process; threats to teacher trust, confidence and risk-taking in their learning; the time and resources required by the TPGP process; and unclear links between learning purposes and teaching practice (Author and Smulders, 2000).

Superintendents in the other five districts remarked that TPGPs increased the district’s influence on teacher development by encouraging alignment of teacher goals with district and school goals, and helped the district allocate PD resources more effectively. In addition, these administrators claimed to have observed greater focus in teachers’ learning, greater commitment among staffs to learning as ongoing and continuous, and greater collaboration within and across schools. The concerns noted most frequently by this group were related to accountability. There was some concern 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 track a growth plan as carefully as administrators would maintain a staff file that must satisfy public scrutiny. In addition, all five district administrators noted the challenges of the supervisory role change implied by TPGPs: some were concerned about the weakening of the supervisor’s authority, while others felt that TPGPs opened opportunities for more supportive trusting relations between principals and teachers.

Working Through Tensions and Contradictions

When a micropolitical lens was used to examine issues of power, agency, interests, and political strategies of influence in these educators’ perceptions and experiences implementing the TPGP policy, three dimensions representing contradictory interests were identified. These three appeared to be threaded throughout teachers’ and administrators’ stories of the benefits, concerns, and strategies they utilized in implementing professional growth plans: (1) The policy promotes teacher self-direction while potentially undercutting professional empowerment through increased surveillance and regulation of learning; (2) Professional growth plans appear to honor and liberate individual teachers’ ways of knowing while potentially narrowing teacher learning to a technicist model of knowledge; and (3) The “learning” focus of growth plans implies a focus on teacher risk-taking, creativity and personally meaningful learning, but the policy requires conformity to school and district goals and provincial teaching standards.

These contradictions are not particularly surprising given the policy’s birth amidst competing desires for measurable teacher accountability (on the part of the provincial government), increased teacher empowerment and recognition of self-directed professionalism (on the part of the teachers’ association), and a new societal focus on lifelong learning. However, educators found productive ways to balance these three tensions or work around them. The focus of the following discussion is upon these contradictions and the balancing strategies employed by teachers and administrators to produce positive outcomes in their practice.

Using Surveillance to Promote Self-Direction

While mandated professional growth plans promote teacher self-direction they simultaneously threaten to undercut professional empowerment through increased surveillance and control. Administrators in this study indicated that prior to the growth plan policy, certificated teachers were generally evaluated every three years via classroom observation by an administrator, but formative supervision varied widely. Informal classroom visits, peer mentoring and teacher growth goals were common practices in some schools, but the majority availed little supervision for certificated teachers beyond summative evaluation. The prevailing assumption seemed to be that as professionals, teachers ensured their own continuing development.

However the new policy mandates close monitoring of every teacher. Teachers reveal areas in their own teaching that they believe need improvement, and show principals at the end of each year exactly how they have achieved their own learning goals. Thus as Foucault (1980) might argue, through professional growth plans teachers are disciplined and regulated: the technology of rendering them 'visible' and thus measurable works to normalize and control teachers, while the procedure of 'confession' renders them vulnerable. This visibility functions in schools as a powerful control mechanism, allowing supervisors to reinforce conformity to certain expectations for behavior, to encourage promising innovations and to address deviations (Corbett, 1991, p. 77).

Both teachers and principals appeared well-aware of the exposure and surrender implicated in the TPGP process. Several Wescana teachers agreed that their first year of using TPGPs was a risky "testing of the waters", fearing criticism of the goals they had picked or the way they had written them. All but three were worried about fulfilling their goals by June. In fact 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? But what is a deadline really for if I don't strive to meet it? These concerns may appear puzzling given teachers' experience with the complexities of instructional goal-planning, and underline the levels of vulnerability and anxiety teachers first felt in showing their learning goals to a supervisor.

Most administrators in Wescana and other districts noted this anxiety and its sources: "Everything you put down has to be measured so teachers stress out, [worrying] what if I don't achieve it this year?" A few observed the vulnerability involved in a teacher sharing personal goals (akin to revealing one's weaknesses) with any colleague, especially the principal who has the power to evaluate and promote. One believed that the forced visibility potentially curtails risk-taking in teachers' learning, and another worried that TPGPs may actually reinforce a deficit model of teaching. The favored administrative response to these concerns focused on positioning oneself as a trusted partner working alongside the teacher. Specifically, administrators described strategies of trust-building including coaching, "handholding", cheerleading, and spending much individual and collective time talking through the process.

Most importantly, administrators tried to avoid voicing judgment about the actual goals that teachers generated: "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

them off.” In fact, administrators often counseled teachers to cut back big ambitious goals for manageability and greater measurable success. Most also stressed celebration, explaining that end-of-year discussions with teachers about their growth plans were for highlighting accomplishments and reminding teachers of affirming incidents throughout the year. In other words, administrators seemed to do what they could to soften the surveillant aspect of their own roles within the provincial mandate, aligning themselves as supportive partners with their teachers in a project of fulfilling provincial requirements -- while putting a positive spin on the new opportunity for teacher self-direction. Further in this balancing process, administrators needed to uphold teachers’ sense of “being treated like a professional” by avoiding overtones of paternalistic control.

In this they appeared to have succeeded, for most Wescana teachers described TPGPs as an affirming, confidence-building process for themselves and, some noted, for their colleagues. The written evidence of accomplishment was important, showing “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.

Over time most teachers in fact found the requirement to “show” a supervisor one’s learning purposes and progress was both liberating and motivating. Several 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. There were some teacher stories of dramatic transformation of practice attributed to the required goal-setting process. As one of these explained, TPGPs revitalize a sense of professionalism and self-direction partly because of the external gaze or “push”: “Professional development used to mean, for me, just going to the teacher conferences. And now I’m totally involved in my own professional growth and I’m finding that invigorating and exciting and I’m glad that someone pushed me in that direction.”

Administrators in Wescana and other districts described a growing authenticity of growth plans reflecting goals and learning in which teachers had strong personal investment. Two related strategies appear to have influenced this: first, administrators had conscientiously refrained from criticizing the directions teachers were taking, while providing clear direction and gentle guidance; and second, administrators shifted their surveillant role from judging to praising. Of course, to those who might analyse the formation of particular teacher subjectivities through political strategies, applause is even more powerful than critique for shaping an individual’s goals and values. However, Wescana teachers claimed to feel more empowered and energized about their practice. They described what administrators suspected: that TPGPs are strong motivators for teacher learning because they are required and because their learning is measured in terms of actual positive changes they observe. In other words, the tension embodied in the TPGP process between teacher self-direction and its potential undermining through surveillance is partly balanced through careful positioning of the administrator’s gaze as caring, encouraging, continuous, but relatively unobtrusive in its removal from the actual classroom.

Regulating the Process of Learning While Honoring Its Diversity

A second contradiction that appears embedded in TPGPs is related to their potential truncation of how teacher learning is understood. Professional growth plans supposedly honor and liberate different teachers' processes of learning: they are constructed and maintained by individual teachers, and based on activities chosen by each teacher. However the model itself of measurable goals-actions-assessment regulates a technical, mechanistic view of development, potentially reducing teacher knowledge to observable, pre-specifiable, trainable items, and teachers to subjects in perpetual deficit. In professional development theory such planning models have been widely criticized as too instrumental and linear to correspond effectively to the actuality of learning in practice (Cervero, 2001). Pre-established goals can only be formulated from an individual's particular position of knowledge using familiar categories. New categories and understandings that emerge on one's journey into the not-yet-known tend to be overlooked when they do not have a language. These insights and internal changes that are difficult to discern or articulate eventually become both invisible and devalued in what counts as teacher knowledge.

The assumption that teacher development is intentional and bounded in one-year periods also ignores the possibility that much learning is unpredictable and long-term. The processes of slowly emerging insights, sudden break-throughs, oscillations, and the role of personal readiness and chance incidents are not easily accommodated in a strategic plan. Nor is the goal-orientation easily reconciled with the substantially-researched notion of teacher knowledge as narrative (Clandinin, 1995), or other contemporary bodies of teacher learning theory. These include psychoanalytic approaches that examine the role of teachers' desire (Todd, 1997) and internal resistances (Britzman, 1998) in their learning and teaching, and sociocultural views of teachers' learning as inseparable from systems of relationships and interactions in which they participate (Davis and Sumara, 1997). TPGPs reinforce a fundamentally individualistic view of teachers as rational autonomous learners, which conflicts with the popular notion of collective teacher learning emerging in a community of practice (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Shields, 2000). Whether one supports these views of learning or not, to preclude them entirely through a technology shaping a particular rational view of knowledge is short-sighted.

In fact three principals described discomfort with the linear planning process: "some goals just aren't set-able in September". There was also concern that TPGPs focused teachers on formal actions (such as workshops and conferences) to learn teaching techniques, overshadowing more intangible, complex indicators and informal learning in practice. Many principals recognized the long-term nature of learning. They appeared sensitive to teachers' different career and life stages, priorities, pressures and work activity, and described attempts to accommodate teachers' shifting commitments, approaches, and progress on growth goals.

The predominant administrative strategy and the apparent key to ameliorating the repressive potential of TPGPs appeared to be flexibility and patience. All administrators stressed the need for a supportive and flexible response: "I took just about anything, as long as they had it written down." Most administrators also exercised considerable flexibility with the TPGP procedures, experimenting with portfolios, journals and other formats. Many had encouraged teachers to think long term, carrying goals from year to year. Some had de-emphasized the written exercise in favor of general school emphasis on learning, using the TPGP requirement as

an excuse to formally allot time for one-to-one dialogue about teaching, group sharing of learning approaches and challenges, collective celebration, and written reflection.

Teachers appeared to value these flexible administrative responses most highly. They described the most welcome supervisory assistance as help in forming goals authentic to their own classroom work, “space” to experiment, encouragement to “relax” and find a TPGP approach that was personally meaningful, and “permission” to view their own goals as tentative and unfinished. Some teachers voiced dislike of the one-year structure of TPGPs, and some wondered whether written goals for the TPGP actually inhibited their spontaneity in following learning opportunities as they arose.

But more predominantly, teachers claimed that growth plans actually helped them focus, clarifying purpose and meaning in their teaching and learning activities: “It helps you prioritize, focus on what’s most important for these kids.” The TPGP was described as a continual “barometer”, keeping one “on the right track”, helping to avoid becoming overwhelmed by competing demands, and defining “a personal vision” for practice. The writing down of goals seemed to be a powerful act, to create a written “anchor” for ongoing reference and reaffirm the purpose of daily activity: “The more and more busy and more frazzled you get, you can go back and say, wait a minute now, let me check if all this stuff I’m doing related to the goals that I’ve set for myself.” Principals’ comments also reflected this appreciation for an anchor in the chaotic everyday flow of learning: “When it’s written down, you begin to relate everything that happens to that goal”. Some believed that teachers committed more energy and time to a goal that was written and shared, and that goals helped teachers focus ahead on upcoming curriculum changes and new technologies – thus reducing anxiety about ‘keeping up’.

But school-based and senior administrators appeared to welcome even more the accountability of imposing goal-outcome structures on ongoing learning processes. Teachers now take more responsibility for their own learning, 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?” 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 got hooked when they began to see real 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.

Thus far from being viewed negatively, the effects of TPGP structures on teacher knowledge were welcomed by most administrators and teachers in this study. What might be viewed as controlling by critics in fact appeared to be reassuring and even liberating for practicing educators. Both teachers and administrators approached TPGPs with implicit shared understanding that growth plans are enacted very differently than anticipated, that learning is fluid and evolutionary, and flexibility is essential. *Process* was stressed far more than goal achievement, which also helped balance the TPGP potential to shape perspectives of knowledge as mechanistic and rigidly planned. Many principals actively encouraged staff to work in groups to figure out TPGPs, which helped sustain an ongoing fluidity of reflective talk. Within these emphases, the regulatory process of writing and showing a supervisor one’s goals for developing

knowledge appeared not to restrict but to reassure: presenting a welcome anchor for many teachers in the dynamic and contested learning spaces of schools.

Who Defines What Counts as a Learning Goal?

A third tension inherent in a growth plan, related to the regulation of learning *process* discussed above, is the control of learning *goals*. Although TPGPs are supposedly created and owned by teachers as records of their own intentions and meanings of personally valuable learning in their own language, all administrators interviewed stressed that teachers' learning goals must be aligned with district and school goals. Ideological questions about what (teacher) knowledge counts most and whose interests should be served by teachers' learning are likely to generate diverse responses among educators, and necessitate boundary negotiation (and possible conflict) between teachers and supervisors. According to Marshall and Scribner (1991), conflicts about the authority of professional expertise and conflicting ideologies and values of subsystems among teachers and administrators are a significant dimension of school micropolitics. In Alberta, as elsewhere, teachers' growth goals are pressured by diverse personal, school, district, and community interests that are unlikely to be easily resolved.

Administrators must balance the directive to implement TPGPs in ways that involve teachers and secure their commitment to maintaining a learning plan and their ownership of the TPGP policy. At the same time administrators must somehow ensure that teachers' learning goals and activities, as encapsulated in the written plans, advance school and district initiatives. Administrators apparently must accomplish this through non-coercive means while soliciting teacher trust so that the growth plans reflect authentic, meaningful records of teacher learning.

One strategy frequently mentioned by principals that appeared to accomplish this balance was introducing TPGPs to their staffs within a general discussion of the provincial Teaching Quality Standards, school and district goals. At staff meetings teachers would examine system goals and be encouraged to consider "how your goals can contribute to what we're doing at the school level". Some administrators required teachers to include in their own growth goals at least one related to each of the system and school plans. Modeling was another common strategy among Wescana administrators, for both principals and superintendents maintained growth plans and shared these with teachers. Informal one-to-one conversations with teachers were also important, what one administrator described as "subliminal ways of talking up" the importance of certain school goals and relevance of system initiatives to teachers' own growth plans. Another had teachers demonstrate, in the end-of-year supervisory meeting, how their professional growth was related to provincial standards and school/district goals. In all districts represented in this study, themes and needs from individual teacher professional growth plans were drawn together and sometimes charted in detail at both school and district levels. These themes formed the bases for allocating resources to professional development activities, and presented powerful images of unity and alignment regarding growth goals at all levels.

"Peer pressure" was a strategy evolving from the collaboration that many administrators endeavored to foster using TPGPs as motivation. Certain principals had teachers work in groups to formulate their growth plans from the beginning, then made time for mid-year group dialogues focused on TPGPs. One superintendent noted that TPGPs motivated teachers to collaborate for the first time with same-subject colleagues across small schools to achieve their individual learning goals, simultaneously creating a sense of coherence and collectivity. Some teachers

noticed this too, commenting that their colleagues were becoming more involved in group activities and discussions in professional development: “[TPGPs] give those that need it a little push.” Some teachers also described positively their increasing understanding of the “big picture”, and a sense that “what you are doing connects to the whole system.”

Beyond influencing general frames in which teachers developed TPGPs, some Wescana principals were concerned about the legitimate extent of their control. In particular, administrators wondered about the limits of “appropriate” goals for teachers’ learning: do these include “personal” goals (i.e. related to wellness or personal development)? Some were concerned about “trivial” goals; or goals “irrelevant” to teaching; or goals they felt were part of “routine expectations” of teachers (such as implementing new curriculum). One had confronted teacher goals related to a new (non-teaching) career direction. Many had read teachers’ early goals as “unrealistic” or unmanageable. The question became, At what point does a supervisor interfere with a professional’s own goals for lifelong learning?

The response for most administrators seemed to be allowing wide latitude while stating clear guidelines and expectations; refraining from direct critical judgment while stressing coherence among individual and system growth directions. In fact many principals claimed that teachers’ goal-setting over the three years had become more aligned with school and district initiatives, but at the same time had become more personalized to specific dimensions of their own practice and teaching styles. Administrators were unanimous in asserting that outside “the traditional group of cynics”, most teachers seemed to have “come on board” and were taking the TPGP written plan and action seriously. All teachers but one corroborated this reading, although they focused most on the relation of their goals to their classroom practice. One believed TPGPs represented a paper exercise that diverted attention from children’s needs. The other teachers reported positive changes in their commitment to professional development, the meaningfulness of their learning goals, and increased personal confidence and trust in the TPGP process. And as explained earlier, teachers also perceived greater collegial collaboration and general importance placed on professional development, and some described significant improvement in their teaching which they attributed to the introduction of professional growth plans.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thus while the mandated regulation of teacher professional growth plans embeds certain potential tensions and contradictions, practicing administrators and teachers managed to work through these in ways that opened useful possibilities for school improvement. The three contradictions between intent and procedures of TPGPs discussed in this article – requiring surveillance to promote self-direction, regulating the process of learning while honoring its diversity, and controlling learning goals from behind -- required careful negotiation, particularly by principals charged with the direct supervision of teachers’ growth plans.

Teachers on the whole seemed relatively cooperative, and amenable to the controlling apparatus of the TPGP policy. This is interesting given that the policy requires teachers and administrators to achieve consensus about the purposes *and* processes of a teacher’s learning. This requirement combines the traditional supervisory debate about what constitutes “good teaching” with the private territory of a teacher’s heart and mind. Even where a pervasive discourse such as the reflective practitioner potentially structures the notion of ‘good teacher’ according to particular standards and norms, teachers still might be expected to negotiate their

own engagement with the discourse. They find spaces in which to individually or collectively resist its categories and claim their own discursive territory about ‘good teaching’ and ‘teacher growth’. Teachers might be expected to resist or subvert the implementation of a system such as TPGPs that purports to subject their learning lives to intensive scrutiny and regulation.

Yet, although many teachers claimed they felt anxious or ambivalent at the beginning of implementation, by the end of three years (when interviewed for this study) most appeared enthusiastic. Far from a minimal surface compliance, teachers seemed to be participating fully, heart and mind, in the TPGP process. Like the administrators, many teachers seemed to understand their learning as a long-term, unpredictable process, and had adapted the growth plan format to accommodate this process. The ‘pocket veto’ exercised by some teachers by participating lightly or writing goals they had already mastered was tolerated and often ignored by principals, and group pressure over time reportedly nudged them towards greater commitment. Trust in principals was apparently built when teachers realized they were not going to be criticized for their goals, but instead affirmed in specific and sometimes enlightening ways. Trust in the TPGP process apparently grew when teachers began to see professional development resources and planning flow towards growth areas they identified and when, in some schools, teachers began to see a general cultural shift in conversation and activity to emphasize teacher learning. Several teachers apparently also discovered the utility of their growth plan as an “anchor” over time, and developed a sense of connection and systemic understanding by participating in the district-wide TPGP process.

This growing trust and evidence of personally valued outcomes may explain why teachers seemed to surrender to the control built into the policy and reinforced by principals’ strategies of influencing their participation. Overall, at least eight strategies appeared to be used most frequently by principals in the Wescana district to offset potential conflicts and work through contradictions: (1) setting the stage carefully with clear expectations and informal suggestion; (2) following up with strong support, both financial, informational, cultural and relational, modeling their own serious commitment to and belief in the value of TPGPs; (3) de-emphasizing the procedures of the policy but emphasizing learning process, using the policy’s existence to justify increased talk and activity dedicated to learning; (4) remaining flexible and experimental, accommodating differences among teachers; (5) refraining from critical judgment, “accepting just about anything”;

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