

THE ROLE OF TEACHER LEADERS IN IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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Dedication

Like most of my colleagues, I would like to dedicate the culminating project for my master's degree to my family. This has been a busy season for all of us, and I have had to spend much of my time focused on my academic and career goals. I would like to express my thanks to my wife, Wesla, for being so flexible and accommodating. I would also like to thank my two young daughters, Isabel and Emma-Lynn, for being so understanding and for always reminding me when it was time to take a break.

Abstract

This paper illustrates the role that teacher leaders can play in the process of improving opportunities for professional learning, particularly at the school level. The first section addresses recent scholarly research in the field of education including the concept of teacher leadership, adult learning theory, and distributed leadership practices. All of these concepts are framed within the larger goal of improving learning opportunities for all students. The next section of the paper explores my educational context in both Alberta and Northside High School, where I was social studies teacher and an informal teacher leader. The paper proceeds to explore my goals and the results of two leadership internships that I conducted over the course of one school year. These experiences, in conjunction with my inquiry into the related areas of educational research, have provided me with a number of conclusions about the ways that teacher leaders can truly enhance professional learning in schools.

Acknowledgements

So much of the learning that I have experienced over the past two years has resulted from both the formal classes and the informal conversations that I have had with the members of my cohort. The reflections that we shared that are based upon so many wide and varied experiences will stay with me as I move forward into my career, and I am sure the same will be true for us all. I would also like to thank all of the faculty members who have enriched and guided our learning experience. I would especially like to thank Carmen who has played such a significant role from the beginning to the end of the process.

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The Role of Teacher Leaders in Improving Professional Learning

One of the foundational goals of educational leadership is the formation of an environment where educators experience new and improved opportunities to grow. This objective, however, is not an end unto itself. Ultimately, teacher growth has a higher purpose: improved learning for all students. This endeavor is directly related to the third professional practice competency for formal leaders in Alberta, referred to as “Leading a Learning Community” wherein the leader “promotes and models life-long learning for students, teachers and other staff” (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 5). Formal leaders face a number of challenges as they strive to foster authentic learning experiences for educational professionals who hold a wide range of experience, interests, and areas of expertise. Consequently, the target of continuous growth for both educators and students is often elusive. Teachers, as professionals, also have a duty to engage in the practice commonly known as professional development (PD). Townsend and Adams (2009) argue emphatically that thriving schools consist of teachers who “engage in productive [and] continuous professional development” (p. 96). Furthermore, Timperley (2011) asserts that one of the contingencies for improved student learning requires every teacher to participate in meaningful opportunities to grow professionally. However, the issue of fostering meaningful PD for teachers is not as simple as providing more time and money.

The challenge associated with providing educators with meaningful opportunities for growth is illustrated by the apparently overwhelming frustration that teachers express toward conventional forms of PD (Hill, 2009). Here are just a few of the common frustrations that educational researchers have found:

- There is often a disconnection between the formal PD activities presented to teachers and the day to day work of educators in the classroom; furthermore the so called *sage*

on the stage or *guru* models fail to recognize teachers as professionals with years of experience in specialized fields (Knight, 2009).

- Even when teachers find PD applicable, they quickly abandon the ideas presented to them if the experience is an isolated event. The immediate and urgent demands of the classroom quickly overshadow novel ideas (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003).
- Additional coaching and capacity building is necessary to help the new pedagogical practice take root (Knight, 2010).
- In some jurisdictions, there is a lack of time and funding available for teachers to engage in meaningful PD (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- Models of PD that utilize a stand and deliver approach are cost effective for large audiences, but they do not model optimal pedagogical practices.

There is no panacea for addressing all of the challenges associated with building and delivering an effective program for professional growth. However, one of the solutions involves the coordination of efforts from stakeholders at all levels of the education system – from classroom teachers to the upper levels of government bureaucracy. Accordingly, Fullan (2007) contends that a cohesive vision is a “precondition” for system wide transformation (p. 34). The purpose of this paper is to explore one variable in this complex equation: the role of the teacher leader.

The Teacher Leader and Professional Growth

Specifically, I will address the question: In what ways can teacher leaders contribute to a more vibrant professional learning environment? I will evaluate the challenges and opportunities offered by formal structures such as Teacher Professional Growth Plans (TPGPs), which is a foundational tool for ensuring, directing, measuring, and evaluating professional growth in

Alberta. More specifically, I will describe the educational context of Northside High School (NHS), where I conducted two educational leadership internships over the course of this past year with the goal of improving the opportunities for the professional growth of my teaching colleagues. I conducted these internships at NHS under the guidance of the principal and in partnership with the Professional Development Committee. I will also reflect upon my experiences and my learning throughout this process as I took up the role of a teacher leader. I will unpack the challenges that I faced through these experiences and I will reflect upon my learning in the light of the research that relates to the broader topic of professional growth of educators.

Literature Review

Teacher Leadership

All teachers practice leadership at the most fundamental level. Every day teachers lead their students through a range of learning activities. However, Barth (2007) asserts that teacher leadership is something more; he argues that teacher leadership is the cumulative activities of an educator that positively affects a school beyond the walls of a single classroom. Some teacher leaders have formal leadership designations, such as department head, curriculum leader, or instructional coach. In other cases teacher leaders do their work informally as they collaborate, mentor, model, and learn from their colleagues (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006). Teacher leaders can take a wide variety of actions that improve the vitality of a school, including active participation in the design of “staff development and in-service programs” (Barth, 2001, p. 444). Therefore teacher leadership and PD are two concepts that are natural companions.

Adult Learning Theory

Meaningful professional growth for educators must take into account recent scholarship in the areas of andragogy, professional learning (as distinguished from professional development), reflective practice, and professional autonomy.

Andragogy versus pedagogy. Conventionally, professional growth activities aimed at teachers are based upon the assumption that adults and children learn in essentially the same ways (Terehoff, 2002). Knowles (1968) argues that adult learners are fundamentally different from children and adolescents; through this contention he popularized the concept of *andragogy*. Knowles (1980) defines andragogy as the “science and art of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Accordingly if teachers, as adult professionals, are going to engage in authentic learning, it is necessary to provide opportunities that are distinct from those that are typically used to instruct younger learners. Initially, Knowles’ ideas were received with a measure of scepticism. However, over the past three decades, as learning theorists debated the veracity of andragogy, two of his core ideas have endured and have made a significant impact on adult learning theory. Firstly, adult learning should draw upon the experience of the learners. Secondly, adult learning should be largely self-directed (Merriam, 2001). Knowles’ influence is readily apparent in the work of Herod (2012), he asserts that self-directed learning nurtures intrinsic motivation and increased authentic growth. Much more recently Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) argue that professional learners benefit the most when they clearly understand how learning opportunities are directly applicable to their professional practice. The relationships between adult learning theory and a modified approach to professional growth is clear: Educators who are able to play a role in guiding their own ongoing learning and development will be much more engaged in the process and they will experience more growth as a result of their efforts.

Professional development versus professional learning. The term *professional development* has been so widely used for so long that its meaning has become ubiquitous with conventional assumptions about adult learners; PD of this nature is characterized by isolated and episodic events that typically use a stand and deliver mode of instruction (Webster-Wright, 2009). It is for this reason that advocates of andragogy strive to redefine the concept of professional growth. Traditional PD does not significantly improve teacher competency because it typically involves finite activities that are separated from authentic classroom experiences, which ultimately results in “decontextualized” learning (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 703). Therefore, Webster-Wright argues that the philosophical shift necessary for the change in approach to adult learners justifies the use of a new term. Professional learning (PL) is characterized by long-term initiatives, situated within a learning community, and with goals that are self-directed (Webster-Wright, 2009). All references to PL from this point forward in this study are made with the shared assumptions established by Webster-Wright.

The reflective educator. Authentic PL also requires teachers to engage in ongoing reflection upon all their everyday activities. Reflective practice is formally required by teachers in Alberta and it is widely recognized by educational scholarship as an effective strategy for authentic PL. Teachers in Alberta are guided by a policy – for both interim and permanently certified teachers – that outlines the knowledge, skills, and attributes (KSAs) that all teachers are required to meet consistently throughout their careers (Alberta Education, 1997). The *Teaching Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta* (TQS) is intended for teacher supervision, evaluation, remediation strategies, and ongoing PL. The KSA that relates most directly to the importance of reflection is the section related to teachers as career-long learners. Specifically, “teachers need to recognize their own professional needs and work with

others to meet those needs” (Alberta Education, 1997, p. 4). While the term “reflection” is not mentioned anywhere in the TQS, the process of reflection is assumed throughout the KSAs.

Regular reflection on professional proficiency is also well supported by leaders in the field of educational research, both past and present. John Dewey was one of the founders of the progressive movement in education during the early twentieth century; he viewed the classroom as a laboratory where regular experiments in education should be conducted and carefully evaluated (Gutek, 2009). This approach is based on the thesis that pedagogical choices based upon careful reflection improve instructional practice (Dewey, 1933; Marzano, Boogren, Heflebower, Kanold-McIntyre, & Pickering, 2012). According to Schön (1987) capable professionals (including teachers) are distinguished from less-capable professionals by their commitment to ongoing reflection on their various duties.

Professional autonomy. Adult learners experience the most meaningful growth when they have a measure of autonomy. Self-directed learning shifts the locus of control away from an external entity and onto the educational professional; accordingly, classroom teachers experience increased levels of intrinsic motivation and that will enhance and sustain their professional growth (Kwakman, 2003). Similarly, Pink (2011) asserts that autonomy – rather than the traditional carrot and stick approach of external rewards and sanctions – is one of the critical organizational designs that drives increased productivity and effectiveness in twenty-first century professionals. For educators, however, the concept of autonomy requires careful consideration. Some educators long nostalgically for the level of freedom afforded to teachers in generations past, which allowed many to do whatever they liked with little regard for what happened beyond the walls of their own classrooms – but this is not what professional autonomy looks like for teachers today. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) advocate a form of “*collective autonomy*” (p. 144),

in which educators have a responsibility to balance their professional freedom with a collaborative posture toward other educators, students, parents and the broader community (Alberta Education, 1997). Authentic PL requires teachers to have the autonomy to set their own goals for growth, to exercise their professional judgment in their pedagogy, and to give careful consideration to the needs of the students in their classes within the wider context of the school. Yet on the other side of the balance, teachers also need to consider the overall goals of the jurisdiction, the school, and even the department. Teachers, as adult professionals, will learn and develop most effectively when they are given an appropriate and balanced level of autonomy.

Distributed Leadership and Improved Professional Learning

A distributed approach to leadership is critical in terms of determining *how* initiatives for PL can be effectively implemented. Collegial models of educational leadership have developed and gained significant popularity over the past three decades. Hallinger (2010) outlines the following steps in this evolution: instructional leadership in the 1980s, transformational leadership in the 1990s, and finally leadership for learning in the 2000s. The latest stage of educational theory conceptualizes leadership as a distributed process and a collective endeavor. Distributed leadership uncouples leadership from positional authority (Bush, 2011; Elmore, 2000). Accordingly, various members of an organization take on a leadership roles when their experience and expertise is evident and when it is in the best interest of the group, regardless of formal titles and positions. In an educational context, distributed leadership aligns perfectly with the assumptions of PL described above. Harris (2010) argues that distributed leadership “represents one of the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership in the past decade” (p. 55). One of the greatest strengths of distributed leadership is that it inherently increases leadership sustainability, because more people are carrying the various

burdens of leadership (Fullan, 2001). In practice, this does not mean that principals simply download all administrative tasks to teachers rather the principals recognize, cultivate, and utilize various areas of expertise within their learning communities (Southworth, 2009). In a distributed model of leadership, the informal leaders still receive their ultimate direction from a formal leader, but the principal orchestrates and nurtures space for teacher leaders to take the reins at times when it is appropriate (Bush, 2011).

One of the obstacles that often prevents leaders from taking a more distributed approach to leadership is our “traditional view of school leadership” (Timperley, 2011, p. 92). Adherents to traditional, hierarchical models of school leadership assume a prescribed distance and distinction between formal leaders and classroom teachers. At times these views are held by the leaders themselves; they can also be perpetuated by formal structures within a school district, longstanding artifacts of a school's culture, or even through expectations of teachers. Timperley (2011) draws a positive correlation between formal leaders who use distributed leadership (in sphere of instructional leadership) and improved student learning. Accordingly, she challenges both formal leaders and teachers to re-evaluate their assumptions about the essential role of leadership in professional learning and the difference teachers can make if they engage in the inquiry process to better meet student learning needs.

Despite the powerful arguments in favor of distributed leadership, it is important to recognize that implementing collegial models are not the only effective way to establish a PL program for educators. In his analysis of various educational leadership approaches, Bush (2011) concludes that no single model “provides a complete picture... but their relevance varies according to the context” (p. 192). There are many important decisions in a school or educational

jurisdiction that require different approaches to leadership. Distributed leadership is one of those models and it is collegial models that allow teacher leaders to have the greatest effect.

Instructional Leadership, Professional Learning, and Student Success

Since the ultimate goal of PL is improved educational opportunities for students, it is also worth considering the leadership models that have the greatest positive effect on student success. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) outline a number of tentative links between higher levels of student achievement and distributed leadership, but they also cite a need for more research in this area. Robinson (2007) explores the instructional leadership practices that have the greatest positive effect on student growth. Her meta-analysis identifies five leadership activities that have measurable positive effects. Of all the leadership activities, Robinson (2007, p. 8) asserts that “promoting and participating in teacher learning and development” has the greatest overall effect on student learning, with approximately twice the positive impact of any other leadership activity. This approach requires leaders to do more than just facilitate professional learning opportunities; leaders must actively participate in professional learning with teachers as leader, learner, or both (Robinson, 2007, p. 15). Other approaches indirectly influence student learning, whereas the formal leaders who use the most effective approach engage in the “core business of teaching” (Robinson, 2007, p. 9).

In summary, andragogy is *what* needs to happen in terms of increasing the effectiveness of PL for educators. Adult learning for teachers needs to be ongoing, self-directed, reflective, and collaborative. Distributed leadership is the ideal model for *how* PL should be organized within education systems. Among all the stakeholders that make authentic PL possible, teacher leaders are among the key people *who* will bring this process to life.

Teacher Professional Growth Plans in Alberta

It has already been well established that teachers, as professionals, must be continuously engaged in PL; however, there are potential challenges to this process when it is overtly directed from the top down, when the process becomes highly politicized, and principals are required to engage in administrative and supervisory duties that overshadow collaboration. Teacher professional growth plans (TPGPs) in Alberta are an example of a professional responsibility that is necessary for PL, but the nature of the formal structure itself has the potential to undermine its intended purpose. Teacher leaders can play a pivotal role in ensuring that TPGPs move beyond mere compliance to tool that promotes pedagogical vibrancy.

The Challenges of Mandatory TPGPs

Formal educational leaders and teacher leaders need to understand the challenges inherent within the system of mandatory TPGPs before their potential as a PL tool can be fully realized.

The origin and structure of mandatory TPGPs. Alberta's policy regarding TPGPs is virtually unique when compared to educational jurisdictions around the world (Fenwick, 2004). The current TPGP policy was instituted in 1998. Alberta Education (2008) stipulates that every teacher is required to submit an annual growth plan that:

- (i) reflects goals and objectives based on an assessment of learning needs by the individual teacher,
- (ii) shows a demonstrable relationship to the teaching quality standard, and
- (iii) takes into consideration the education plans of the school, the school authority and the Government, or the program statement of an ECS operator; (sec. 3)

Furthermore, all teachers are required to submit their TPGPs to the principal or a group of teachers who have been designated by the principal for that purpose (Alberta Education, 2008).

Fenwick (2003) is critical of this process because, in her view, Alberta Education is veiling its true purpose for TPGPs when they are promoted as a “holistic, generative and empowering opportunity for developing teacher knowledge and identity” (p. 339). She argues that the primary motivation for TPGPs is the assertion of government power over teachers, which furthers the government’s larger agenda of transforming the educational system into something that more closely aligns with the free market values of neo-liberalism (Fenwick, 2003, 2004). Fenwick asserts that the true endgame for mandatory TPGPs includes increased surveillance of teachers, stifling professional conformity, and the increased market value of Alberta’s high school graduates. The reality of Alberta Education’s heavy emphasis on accountability and demonstrable growth is also clearly evident in the plethora of high stakes standardized tests that have characterized the system for the past three decades. Alberta’s government and many taxpayers want assurances that they are getting a return on the significant investment in education (Wotherspoon, 2014). TPGPs are one tool that is, at least in part, designed to help meet this demand.

The most significant issue that Fenwick (2003) has with TPGPs is the influence of their current structure on the power relationship between teachers and the state, and by extension the relationship between principals and classroom teachers. It might seem innocuous that TPGPs are required to have a demonstrable relationship with the TQS (Alberta Education, 1997); however, Fenwick (2003) argues that this professional requirement is only slightly removed from the demand the Alberta government made to require periodic re-certification of all teachers in Alberta. The current TPGP process was initially created as a compromise between the

government and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA); this decision also included input from school boards and the educational faculty members at universities. When TPGPs were first instituted, the government relinquished its demands for formal re-certification, if all teachers could demonstrate continuing growth by adhering to their formal TPGPs. Timperley (2011) also expresses concerns about formal PL structures that are overtly associated with supervision and evaluation. Timperley argues that teacher professional growth is most effective when teachers "did not feel they were being checked up on by the principal, but rather talk about how much they respected him for his deep knowledge of literacy and his commitment to all students' learning" (p. 98). Formal leaders who collaborate with classroom teachers develop a relationship of trust that encourages and challenges teachers to engage in a process of genuine reflection and growth, rather than mere compliance. Therefore, if PL becomes – or is perceived to be – a veiled form of evaluation it loses its potential for promoting growth.

A recent report published by the Task Force for Teaching Excellence (TFTE) and the corresponding response from the ATA illustrates the adversarial spirit between the government and the professional association of teachers in Alberta (Feltham et al., 2014). The contentious nature of this political landscape has become a significant barrier for authentic PL. While the TFTE deviates (at least semantically) from earlier calls from the government to mandate periodic re-certification for all teachers, the ATA views many of the recommendations in the same light as previous political battles. Recommendation 21 calls for the "maintenance of certification for teachers" on a five year cycle (Feltham et al., 2014, p. 59). Ramsankar (2014), the ATA president, argues that the "politically driven recommendations have the potential to seriously undermine the culture of education in Alberta" (para. 2). Specifically, this recommendation would fundamentally alter the relationship between administrators and teachers, because

principals would be required to spend an increased, and arguably disproportionate, amount of their time on teacher evaluation when there are already so many other important demands on their time and energy. In addition to formal evaluations every five years, Recommendation 21 would require principals to complete written progress updates for all teachers on an annual basis (Feltham et al., 2014).

Administrators face tremendous demands on their time including the challenge of balancing managerial necessities involved with running a school and the more collaborative elements of leading a learning community. A multitude of urgent and immediate tasks compete for a formal leader's finite time and energy. In her research on the instructional leaders who have the greatest positive effect on student growth, Timperley (2011) observes that these administrators often "admitted to neglecting some administrative tasks" (p. 96). Ramsankar (2014), argues that the TFTE recommendations would turn "principals from collaborative school leaders into factory bosses." A shift in the administrator's role toward an overt emphasis on accountability will potentially undermine the collaborative culture that lies at the heart of the effective PL. In reference to this issue, Fullan (2014) agrees with the ATA's formal position, and stated that the goals of the TFTE should be reconstituted with an emphasis on collaboration between principals and teachers. Professional learning will lose much of its intended and essential effect if it becomes caught in a power struggle between professional associations and governing bodies. Furthermore, too much emphasis on managerial tasks will divert "principals from doing things that have much higher impact [on student outcomes]" (Fullan, 2014, para. 2). Whether or not Alberta's government continues its push for administrators to increase their focus on the supervision and evaluation of teachers, the reality is that administrators already struggle with balancing their important managerial tasks with the responsibilities of educational

leadership. Ultimately, this underscores the challenges that the political environment and the pressures placed upon administrators time and energy have upon developing an effective and authentic system that promotes PL in Alberta.

The Opportunities of Mandatory TPGPs

Teacher competency and collaboration. Despite the challenges associated with mandatory TPGPs, this formal practices also presents opportunities for growth and renewal as well. Fenwick (2003, 2004) identifies some valid concerns; however, her position also has its limitations. It is important to recognize that the education ministry's formal stance toward TPGPs, which is included in the *Teacher Growth, Supervision, and Evaluation Policy* (TGSEP), goes to great lengths to ensure that there is not an adversarial relationship between administrators and teachers. Unlike Fenwick's postmodern perspective might suggest, the TGSEP is nuanced enough to uphold the necessary requirements of teacher competency, while at the same time ensuring a spirit of collaboration between formal leaders and instructors. Fenwick (2004) rightly observes that any policy which associates professional goals with teacher evaluation inherently undermines genuine PL. Why would teachers willingly reveal their weaknesses to their supervisors if their transparency immediately opened them up to formal scrutiny? However, this is not how the TGSEP is designed. In section seven, the TGSEP clearly states that "the content of an annual teacher professional growth plan must not be part of the evaluation process" (Alberta Education, 2008). Therefore, if there is a question of teacher competency, TPGPs are protected documents; teachers should not be concerned that their honest reflections and goals could turn into a case for a formal evaluation. This balance ensures the integrity of TPGPs as an exercise in authentic PL, while at the same time holding teachers professionally accountable in their responsibility to engage for ongoing growth and development. The spirit of support and

collaboration that is intended by the TGSEP is also evident by the first duty that principals have toward teachers as they engage in ongoing teacher supervision, which is to provide “support and guidance to teachers” (Alberta Education, 2008, para. 9a). Joyce Sherman, an executive staff officer of the ATA who has worked directly with cases related to the TGSEP for nearly a decade, affirmed the collaborative spirit intended by this policy; Sherman stated that the supervisory responsibilities of a principal must always be done in good faith and with the goals of teacher growth and student learning (personal communication, March 5, 2015). Furthermore, the aggregate information teachers provide principals in their TPGPs is invaluable when it comes time to design formal plans for school wide PL. Overall, TPGPs provide a tremendous opportunity for professional growth and collaboration so long as the policy is understood by all parties, and the various points of the TGSEP followed appropriately.

Building professional capital. Some critics argue that formal structures, such as mandatory TPGPs, inevitably lead to bureaucratic standardization and creative stagnation. Yet, formal procedures also have the potential to establish what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) describe as *professional capital*. When teachers merely comply with the policy to complete their TPGPs, they become complicit in one of the dominant narratives in the business world: that teachers are professionals in name only. Associations such as the ATA tirelessly assert that teachers possess specialized knowledge and expertise, that they have the ability to self-regulate, and that they can make complex pedagogical decisions based upon a many variables. If teachers want to realize their status as professionals, and to rise above the status of educational technicians, they need to make genuine and ongoing PL a top priority. One of the steps Alberta teachers could take to increase their professional capital would be to collectively ensure that TPGPs are used for their intended purpose: ongoing professional growth for all teachers.

Teachers in Alberta have been completing mandatory TPGPs for over twenty years, so it should not come as a surprise if there is some need to breathe new life into a process that has grown tired and overly familiar. One of my principal roles as a teacher leader throughout the duration of my internships was to revitalize the formal requirements of the TPGPs completed by the teachers at NHS and to use some of the data gathered from these documents to inform the formal PL activities that we planned for the school as a whole.

Educational Context at Northside High School

Any plan to make meaningful improvement to PL activities in a school should begin with careful consideration of the educational context (Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009). NHS is a medium-sized urban high school with approximately 900 students. Both staff and students at NHS have long valued academic and athletic excellence. Diploma Exam scores are typically above provincial average. Math scores, in particular, are commonly up to ten per cent above provincial average. Sports teams are well supported by students, parents, and community members. NHS also values the importance of close teacher-student relationships. Collegiality among the staff members is based upon a strong sense of cohesiveness, active participation, and loyalty. Staff members, especially the formal leaders, often describe NHS as a “school of excellence”.

Another statement that is also often repeated among staff members, which also widely reflects one of the core values of the faculty, is “students come first.” This view illuminates widespread tacit assumptions about the inherent value of every learner. By extension, it speaks to their ability to learn and the responsibility of each educator to every student. However, in recent years some tension has emerged as a result of an increasing number of students with intensive learning needs, which has increased pressure on teachers. NHS has become the intake school in

the district for English language learners and it has the largest and fastest-growing Knowledge and Employability program in the district. Of all the local high schools, NHS is the most diverse in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status. These vast diversity among the students inherently results in classrooms that contain many complex learning needs.

This diversity also reflects the range of dispositions that parents have toward their children's formal education. Accordingly, their degree of direct involvement in the school varies significantly. Generally, the parents of the students at NHS respect the professional judgment of teachers, and parents are often involved and supportive of school programs. Teachers feel confident in their ability to offer a quality program to the student body, but there is some concern that teachers could use more PL that is specifically dedicated toward the issues related to the newly emerging needs in the school.

The final cultural artifact that I would like to note about NHS is its geographic location. To be from the north side generally has negative connotations; historically, this part of the city has been perceived as 'the wrong side of the tracks'. This view is supported largely by the lower socio-economic in this area. North-side culture is perceived to be rough around the edges, unconventional, street-wise, and resilient. This resiliency is sustained by a culture where faculty and students provide each other with support and where they are willing to give second chances. Many of the successes at NHS are due to the willingness of the staff to understand the unique needs of the student body.

Formal Professional Learning Opportunities

Overall, the teachers at NHS have a wide range of formal opportunities to engage in PL. Throughout the 2014-2015 school year, teachers have more than a total of thirteen such days. Consequently, NHS does not have any issues with a lack of time dedicated to form PL, however

that does not mean that these opportunities are used to their fullest potential. The school district and the administration at NHS (in coordination with the Professional Development Committee) set the agenda for the majority of the designated PL time. Fullan (2007) notes that one of the key ingredients for change and improvements in education at the system level is the coordination and coherence of PL at all levels, which is reflected in the structure described above. Yet, this approach also relies upon the professional judgment of principals and teachers to translate broad goals for PL at the provincial and district level, and apply them into meaningful action at the school and classroom level. Overall, this design balances micro and macro needs and builds structures based on broad-based input.

The Professional Development Committee is responsible for planning most of the school based PL days. This committee includes all the administrators, as well as eight volunteer members of the teaching staff (from a wide range of departments) who offer input into ideas for school based PL days; all members of the teaching staff are welcome to provide further input regarding upcoming PL days. This approach to planning PL at the school level largely reflects the principles of distributed leadership, as described above. The Professional Development Committee played an important role in my second internship and our plans to improve opportunities for improving PL at NHS.

Leadership Internships at Northside High School

Both of my internships were focused on enhancing PL opportunities within structures that were already in place at NHS. I was not in a position to create new programs or initiatives, rather my efforts focused on enhancing the time and resources already dedicated to formal PL in the district.

My Role as a Teacher Leader

Throughout both of my internships I held a relatively minor leadership designation: social studies department chair. It is important to understand that at NHS this role did not give me any measure of formal authority over my colleagues. In my time at NHS, the social studies department chair has had three key functions: representation, communication, and organization. It was my responsibility to represent the wishes and concerns of my department at faculty council meetings (a committee consisting of school administrators and all the department chairs) and to report back to my department about decisions that were made by administration, often in collaboration with the faculty council. Much of the organizational function of my role as department chair consisted of planning and facilitating department meetings. In recent years, the agenda for these meetings was dominated by immediate and urgent administrative matters that were brought down from faculty council. This left us with little time to collaborate and discuss ways to better meet the emerging needs of our students. It would have been entirely possible for me to focus entirely upon the managerial aspects of my role as department chair. However, in my role as a teacher leader, it was my goal to facilitate a collectively designed plan that would increase the time and opportunity to engage in purposeful communication and collaboration. My secondary goal was to increase the effectiveness of our PL without adding something new to our schedule or making something new for us to do. The time and energy that we were already spending on our TPGPs was one of the natural starting places for this goal.

Leadership Internship One

Initial vision and goals. The scope of my first internship emerged rather organically when I started discussing ideas with my principal during the summer of 2013. We quickly discovered that my interest in enhancing our formal opportunities of PL coalesced naturally with

the emerging vision for educational improvement in our wider organizational context. At both the provincial and district levels, there was a concern that many teachers did not fully understand the requirement in section three of the TGSEP which states that TPGPs must show “a demonstrable relationship to the teaching quality standard” (Alberta Education, 2008, b, ii). Leadership at the district and school level also observed that many teachers were writing their TPGPs without taking time to reflect on their growth and the challenges they were experiencing with all the KSAs. Furthermore, most teachers were not even aware that this is intended to be an integral part of the TPGP process. By addressing these deficiencies, it was assumed that teacher growth and student learning would improve.

During the summer of 2013 I was introduced to a pilot project, conducted by the ATA, designed to guide teachers through a process of detailed self-reflection on all the sections of the TQS. This process was completed using an online tool, which also guided teachers through a TPGP writing process that explicitly linked each teacher created goal with a specific section of the TQS. The ATA was evaluating the efficacy of these online tools, with the possibility of making them available to teachers across the province at some point in the future. When the principal presented this opportunity to the staff (with my assistance), he emphasized the benefits this opportunity afforded to us as teachers. Firstly, as educators at NHS, we would remain one step ahead of the curve in our district and the province. Secondly, the constructive feedback we provided to the ATA would improve the tool and the effectiveness for TPGPs across the province at some point in the future. Our teachers committed to the two year project, which involved using the online tools and providing formal feedback to the researchers who represented the ATA. In my own role as a teacher leader, I also had a vision for how this opportunity might provide our school with insight into enhancing PL for all our teachers. Toward

this end, I designed and engaged in an action research project which gathered data about how teachers perceive and use their TPGPs.

The action research that I conducted in my first leadership internship is relevant to this paper on two levels. On the surface, the research is meaningful because the data would be used to inform future school based PL activities at NHS. On a deeper level, the opportunity I had to reflect on my experiences conducting action research serves as an illustration for the kind of action a teacher leader can take in order to improve PL at the school level. I learned about how a teacher leader can improve student learning in ways that is directly linked to the context of the local school, how to generate and interpret credible evidence for future decisions, and ways to apply relevant scholarly research in the wider field of educational research.

Action research questions. I addressed the following questions through the course of my action research project during my first leadership internship:

1. In what ways does the process of self-reflection on the TQS help teachers create more meaningful TPGP goals?
2. To what extent does the explicit inclusion of one section of the TQS or one KSA with each TPGP goal enhance the effectiveness a teacher's overall professional learning?

Research methodology. I used a qualitative approach for my action research project. Before my questions were finalized, I began a process of observing and annotating the responses teachers had toward the modified TPGP process. Then, I looked for patterns in the experiences my colleagues were having with the process. I also formed a theory for an action plan based upon my observations, which included periods of observation, reflection, research, analysis, and action (Mertler, 2012). As a member of the teaching staff I had already established a trusted relationship with the participants in the study, which helped me with the challenge of

establishing a trust relationship with my colleagues, but this also meant that I was not an objective observer in this process. The most significant body of qualitative data that I gathered during this process was from a series of six semi-structured interviews.

Description of activities. I had two key areas of focus in my first internship. First, I acted as a liaison between the administrators of an ATA pilot study and the teachers in my school as they used the online tools; second, I engaged in the steps necessary to conduct my action research project.

By October 4, 2013, I completed the necessary ethical processes to get the teachers' approval to participate in my study. At this point in time, the ATA's online TPGP project was also well under way. Our principal established an internal deadline for all teachers to have their TPGPs complete by October 15, 2013. As teachers wrote their TPGPs, I continued to informally observe the participants. I used what Davies and Davies (2009) describe as strategic conversations to gauge just how well teachers perceived this change in procedure to our TPGP process and how it related to their PL.

During this part of my internship many teachers required significant technical assistance to use the online tools. I worked with nearly 25% of the teaching staff at some point, either in small groups or one-on-one, as they completed their TPGPs. As one might expect, the necessity of my involvement was a source of frustration to many, yet these conversations became natural opportunities for teachers to share their thoughts with me and I had an opportunity to repeat the vision and purpose for this project.

I conducted six semi-structured interviews with members of the teaching staff between November 10 and December 3, 2013. The interviews took place in the homerooms of my interviewees at times that suited their schedules. In all, I interviewed 15% of the teaching staff at

my school. The interviewees represented a diverse cross-section of the teaching staff at NHS, including representatives from different departments, both genders, a variety of ages, and a range of teaching experience. There are a number of things I could have done to increase my pool of data and therefore the reliability of my results. First, I could have conducted more interviews. One of my obstacles with this was finding the time while teaching a full course load. A potential solution to this challenge would have been the use of focus groups. Second, I also could have verified my data with a Likert-scale survey. Despite the relatively small sample size of my data, I was able to confirm that my results closely resembled my observations throughout the process of the study. After I conducted each one of my interviews, I had my interviewees confirm the accuracy of my notes. Later, I merged all their responses into a single document, coded the results, and synthesized the data. Finally, I was able to start drawing conclusions and considering a plan of future action based upon the findings.

Research results. Universally, the six interviewees indicated that TPGPs play an important role for PL in Alberta. They also saw potential for the online tools designed by the ATA. In addition, all the interviewees indicated that the online tools still require some significant improvements related to overall efficiency and functionality. However, none of the teachers interviewed indicated that the online tools were more efficient than their conventional methods of writing TPGPs; nearly all of them said that the process took more time than in previous years. The teachers provided a number of suggestions to make the online tools more intuitive, user-friendly, and functional (see Appendix A for semi-structured interview questions). Overall, the teachers were optimistic that the technical issues related to the online TPGP tools could be addressed by the software designers (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Thematic Analysis of Responses from Semi-Structured Interviews

Observation	Number of Teachers (out of six)
Overall the process of writing annual TPGPs improves teacher PL	6
The online TPGP tool has <i>potential</i> to improve the TPGP process	5
The TPGP tool requires significant refinement	6
TPGPs were most demonstrably aligned with TQS after using the online tool	4
Overall, the structure self-reflection process on TQS improved TPGPs	
To some extent	4
Not significantly	2
Suggestion for improving the effectiveness of TPGPs	
More time for self-directed PL throughout the year	4
Increased teacher accountability/follow-up from principals	2

The interviewees also indicated that engaging in a process of self-reflection, specifically on their TQS competencies, was a worthwhile exercise. Collectively, however, they had mixed opinions about how helpful this process was when it came time to write meaningful TPGPs. Some teachers indicated that their TPGPs were no different than they would have been without going through the reflective process, whereas others felt as though their TPGPs were more specific and targeted on areas where they would like to grow professionally.

Most of the participants agreed that their TPGPs were much more demonstrably aligned with TQS than they had been in previous years, but this was not universally true. Two of the interviewees suggested that the relationship between TQS and their TPGPs would have been apparent in previous years, with or without the self-reflection process. Most teachers felt that it was difficult, at this relatively early stage in the school year, to measure the effectiveness of the TPGP in terms of fostering meaningful PL. If I had an opportunity to conduct similar interviews at the end of the school year, I would have had more definitive results in this area.

There were two other common results that the interviewees identified as factors that limit authentic PL: time and accountability. The teachers in this study all expressed their desire to grow professionally and they all highlighted that the scarcity of time limited their ability to engage in meaningful PL. Some teachers also indicated a desire for increased self-directed time to work on their own PL initiatives. The concept of accountability was also brought up by a number of the interviewees; overall, they agreed that teachers must be held to a higher level of accountability when it comes to the ongoing progress they make on their PL goals.

Conclusions from action research. In response to my first question, the TQS self-reflection tool designed by the ATA has the potential to improve the authenticity of PL in for teachers in Alberta, but only if it is a part of a larger strategy to improve the effectiveness of TPGPs.

The long-term usefulness of the self-reflection tool requires more consideration than simple software design. At the most basic level, the number of reflection questions should be reduced and it should utilize the common language of classroom teachers. Moreover, even the most effective self-reflection survey will quickly lose its impact if teachers are intended to use the same questions year after year. One potential solution to this problem is to have teachers reflect on only a few specific sections of TQS strands on a rotational basis; this would address both the issues of the length of the self-reflection and the potential perception of annual redundancy. Ultimately, this speaks to the importance of ensuring that teachers are engaged in meaningful and ongoing reflection on their growth in all the areas of the TQS.

The entire process of using the self-reflection tool underscored the need for more structured opportunities where teachers have the opportunity to engage in self-reflection related

to their continuous growth in specific areas of the TQS. This area of need is underscored by a number of observations that I made while conducting my action research:

- Many teachers in the study were unfamiliar with parts of the TQS or the document as a whole; several of these teachers stated outright that they had not looked at the document in a significant amount of time.
- Virtually none of the teachers knew that teachers are required to make a demonstrable link between the TQS and their goals in their annual TPGP (Alberta Education, 2008).
- Teachers expressed hesitation about making open and honest self-reflections about areas within the TQS. This hesitation was largely due to concerns about potential reprisals, such as a formal evaluation regarding teacher competency.

Principals have a vital role to play in ensuring that teachers are mindful of the TQS, that all teachers understand the formal requirements of the TPGP process, and that teachers understand their reflections on their growth in all the sections of the TQS are legally protected documents (Alberta Education, 2008). If the formal leadership of a school fails to address the concerns of teachers about reprisals arising from uninhibited sober self-reflection, then the TPGPs that result will either be dishonest or marginally relevant to the real professional growth that needs to take place. In addition to the work of the principal, teacher leaders can also play a role modeling an authentic TPGP process and discussing the importance of TPGPs with their colleagues.

A broader strategy to improve the effectiveness of PL through TPGPs should also include more time for self-directed professional development. This conclusion is supported by the interviewees in this study and by experts in the field of adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2011; Merriam, 2001). This is not to say that teachers should have exclusive rights to self-

direction when it comes time for PL; however, teachers do need some scheduled time that is dedicated to self-directed PL and these opportunities should occur at scheduled intervals (Timperley, 2011). It is also reasonable to expect teachers, as professionals, to work on their PL goals outside of mandatory work hours. If there is no scheduled time dedicated to self-directed PL, it quickly drops down the priority list for many teachers in favour of any number of urgent tasks. A recent ATA research study into the work life of Calgary area teachers found that they work an average of 55 hours every week, with 80% of their time spent on core instructional activities (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2012). How is it possible for teachers to engage in meaningful and ongoing PL when they have so many other immediate demands on their time? This concern about time was also a conspicuous theme within the responses provided by my interviewees. Authentic PL requires teachers to have more time designated for self-directed PL.

The final conclusion based on the data from this study is that teachers need to have increased accountability for their PL. This would be especially important if teachers were to receive more self-directed PL time. Some of this accountability should come from school administration and teacher leaders within departments; however there are other potential mechanisms within the educational system that can provide more intrinsically motivated forms of accountability, such as professional learning communities (PLCs). A simple review of TPGP progress at the end of a school year is not sufficient accountability (or motivation) to ensure that teachers engage in systematic and meaningful PL throughout a school year. A process of self-reflection related to TPGPs should be ongoing throughout the year, rather than an isolated event during the hectic weeks at the end of a school year.

Leadership Internship Two

Initial vision and goals. The results of my first internship provided me with a significant amount of data related to improving PL at the department and school level. After taking the time to reflect on the possibilities for my second internship, the next step was to discuss my findings and my ideas with the principal and my teaching colleagues. In short order, the scope of my second internship came into shape. The common thread that ran through my efforts in all the variations of my role as a teacher leader was the goal of increasing opportunities for collaborative teacher-directed PL.

Collaborative professional learning at the school level. At the school level, my ongoing teacher leadership role was as a member of the Professional Development Committee, as described above. At these meetings I was given the opportunity to share some of the qualitative and quantitative data that I gathered throughout my action research process, along with my conclusions and plans for future action. One of the key pieces of qualitative data that we considered was the repeated requests from teachers to have more teacher-directed time for PL at scheduled times throughout the school year. Since our school year was already more than half finished at this point, we did not have a significant amount of flexibility in our scheduled time for PL, but the committee was able to find two half-days for this purpose. This move was very well-received by the teaching staff. With this time, teachers were required to work collaboratively (with at least one other teacher), set a specific goal, and share a brief report with the principal that outlined the progress they made toward their goals. The social studies department decided to work together as a larger group on these designated days.

The Professional Development Committee also considered some of the quantitative data that I was able to gather from the TQS self-reflection process. During my first internship, I

received written permission from all the teachers on staff to gather and use aggregate data from their TPGPs, specifically the links that all the teachers made between specific sections of the TQS and each of their professional goals. We reasoned that if a large number of staff members identified a demonstrable relationship in their TPGPs with specific sections of the TQS, these same teachers might also benefit from school based PL opportunities in that area as well. In this way, even school-based PL days would become increasingly teacher-directed, however indirectly. When the teachers at NHS linked their TPGP goals with TQS, the following areas were self-identified by the teachers most frequently: understanding subject disciplines, new instructional strategies, creating assessment criteria, using technology for teaching and learning, incorporating community resources, and contributing to the school and teaching profession. Again, there was not enough time remaining in the semester to address each one of these areas in a school-based PL day, but we were able to plan and execute a day where we brought in a number of professionals who work in our community who were available to help support teachers in working with students with complex needs.

Collaborative professional learning at the department level. At the department level, I sought ways to integrate more self-reflection and collaboration into our scheduled time together. One of the most significant steps that we took was a new approach for reviewing and reflecting on the progress of our TPGPs. In the past, all the teachers in our school reviewed their TPGPs with one of the four administrators in a scheduled ten-minute one-on-one meeting. Toward the end of the school year, the same process was repeated a second time. At the second meeting teachers discussed the extent to which they achieved their goals with their designated administrator. For many teachers, this process resulted in the creation of many ambitious goals, but relatively limited progress toward meeting those goals. These results were both frustrating

and predictable; they were due at least in part to a lack of ongoing support for the teachers and accountability throughout the course of the school year. Furthermore, the results from the conventional TPGP process is attributable to a general lack of experience in setting goals, strategies, and gathering appropriate evidence to measure growth.

As a department, we recognized several shortcomings with this conventional process for reviewing TPGPs. First, the time for meeting to discuss PL is rather limited because administrators were required to meet with so many different teachers. Consequently the conversations were limited to the time that was scheduled during the series of consecutive meetings. Second, this process was not overly collaborative, as the teachers were only sharing their TPGPs with one other educator in the school. Moreover, since all administrators reviewed so many TPGPs, they were not in a position to provide as much support as they might if they only reviewed a handful of TPGPs. In response to these issues, our department decided to review our TPGPs in the format of a group meeting – including our supervising administrator – rather than on an individual basis. This was a novel concept for most of the teachers in our department because, previously, we were not aware that it is permissible for TPGPs to be reviewed by “a group of teachers delegated by the principal” (Alberta Education, 2008, sec. 3).

Initially there was some resistance within our department to using a round table format to review our TPGPs. Growth plans are intensely personal documents. It can be incredibly difficult for teachers to reveal some of the areas where they see a need for growth within themselves. This issue would be complicated further if any of the members of the group have issues with *micro-politics* or mistrust. Achinstein (2002) defines micro-politics as the use of formal and informal power to achieve goals within a group. While no one in our department expressed any overt concerns about micro-politics, Achinstein (2002) asserts that with increased collaboration the

likelihood of conflict associated with micro-politics also increases. Some members of the department expressed their general hesitancy regarding the change, but everyone was willing to try the new collaborative approach for TPGP review. While I was not present at other department meetings, it is worthwhile to note that two other departments decided to use the same format for reviewing TPGPs in the 2013-2014 school year.

When it came time for the social studies department to meet and review our goals, it was remarkable to witness the new avenues of collaboration that opened up before us. One of the first things we noticed was the degree of congruence between many of our goals. In many cases, after one teacher finished explaining one goal, one or more other teachers would make comments about their own related goals; at that point the conversation naturally moved toward practical discussions about times and places where teachers could support one another and collaborate. In several instances, teachers identified areas where they were weak and others offered their support. The administrator who reviewed our TPGPs with our department also made a point of saying that she was able to spend more time providing input to the overall conversation than she would have with the old process. In hindsight, this simple change to our formal routine for TPGP review became a tremendous team-building exercise, an eye-opening experience in self-reflection, and a natural way to significantly increase collaboration in our department.

Furthermore, all of this was accomplished without adding anything new to our schedules.

As department chair, one of my goals was to increase the amount of time we had to formally collaborate with the members of the social studies department. One of the first steps that I took was to purposefully include an item related to PL on the agenda of our monthly department meetings. Each member of the department agreed to take one turn at the beginning of a meeting to make a short five- to ten-minute presentation on a new activity, instructional

strategy, assessment practice, or other innovation that had been successful in his or her classroom. We also took time during two of our meetings throughout the course of the year to formally review the progress we were making on our TPGPs. The teachers who were collaborating with each other or supporting one another in the progress of their goals took some time to comment together. Ideally, we would have had taken more time to formally review the progress of our goals. However, this was a time-consuming process and there were often a number of pressing administrative details that we also needed to discuss during our department meetings.

Overall, the social studies department at NHS still has a long way to grow before we meet all the descriptors of what Timperley (2011) describes as an “integrated” (p. 113) level of PL. During the last two months of the 2013-2014 school year we went through a lengthy process of building consensus toward finding more time in our schedules to meet together. Collectively, we wanted to set aside more time for regular and purposeful PL outside of the first few minutes of our monthly department meetings. We all felt as though we were just scratching the surface of our goals, and we needed more time to fully accomplish our individual and department goals. Following the example of D. Kobza (personal communication, February 21, 2013), we all agreed to use the approach of “take a little” scheduled time and “give a little” of our own time. After much discussion, we were able to find a weekly opportunity to meet together, rather than only having monthly meetings. I believe this step was possible because we all started to see increased value in the time we were spending together, especially regarding the opportunities for learning in all our classrooms. From a logistical perspective, this development was possible because of a change in the timetable at NHS for the 2014-2015 school year. The flex period was moved to the last block of the day; our department received permission to use the last 20 minutes of one flex

block per week to meet together, and we all agreed to continue our meeting for an additional 40 minutes past the end of the day. The end result was a plan to create a full hour of collaborative PL time every week.

Collaborative professional learning at the district level. Everyone in our social studies department was also a member of our district-wide high school subject area PLC. Our district PLC completed two major collaborative projects during the 2013-2014 school year. The district provided us with two full days of time to work together and all of the teachers used some of their own time to make our meetings meaningful and productive. Our first district-wide project involved creating a set of inquiry based learning projects centered around the six strands of historical thinking as identified by Seixas and Morton (2013). We presented and shared our classroom tested inquiry resources during our first designated PL day on April 9, 2014. Our second district-wide collaborative effort was a “tri-high” review session for all students writing the upcoming Social 30 diploma examinations. In one evening, nine teachers provided an overview of the entire course for nearly 100 students. Dozens more students also accessed the materials we provided online through a Moodle website created specifically for this purpose. While these initiatives were not a direct result of my formal leadership, I did play a vital role in planning and executing these collaborative PL activities. I also ensured that the efforts of our social studies department at NHS were effectively integrated in the broader vision for the district level PLC. Furthermore, these experiences provided our department with tremendous motivation to build upon these successes and increase the level of collaboration between all three high schools. The success of these experiences has inspired us as a department to invest more time and energy into ongoing collaborative PL.

Key Learning Related to the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders

In many instances teachers are leaders beyond the walls of their own classrooms, but they do not have formal titles. Similarly, teacher leaders can benefit from reflecting upon their growth in the *Alberta Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders* even though they are not principals (Alberta Education, 2011). This is a preliminary document that is designed to guide and inform the leadership roles for principals in Alberta in a similar way that the TQS guides the role of teachers. Through the course of my internships I had the opportunity to put four of these leadership competencies into practice in a meaningful way.

Fostering effective relationships. The rapport and trust that I had already established with my fellow teachers at NHS was essential to my role as a teacher leader in both of my internships. In my first internship, I was a liaison with the ATA pilot project and I engaged in my own action research project. My collegial relationships allowed me to assist my fellow teachers with the online tools and to conduct my research with relatively little difficulty. As Fullan (2001) asserts, “successful strategies always involve relationships, relationships, relationships” (p. 70). This leadership competency was also one of the key elements of my second internship; the foundation of my work with my department and the district level PLC was based upon trust and mutual respect. We listened to one another’s concerns and we shared ideas for growth and change. When I suggested some of my ideas for increasing the time we had to collaborate, we made the decision to change together in a relatively quick and efficient manner. This was possible because of the relationships that I had with all of the members of our department and the relationships that we all shared with each other.

There are times, however, when leadership decisions or the actions of a teacher leader cause strain on the professional relationships within a group of teachers. Sometimes this has to

do with the decision itself and sometimes this is a consequence of the manner in which the decision is made. Leaders are often required to make difficult decisions that will inevitably be upsetting to some. This is when the art of leadership makes it possible to mitigate the negative consequences of the decision as much as possible. Resistance toward a change will be significantly less when the teachers know and believe that the decision was made in the best interest of the school, when the leader is consistent and hears the concerns of the affected parties, and when the decision aligns with the goals and vision of the school. On the occasions when a school or department has to endure the negative consequences of a difficult decision, the investment that leaders have made into collegial relationships will make it possible for the group to move forward more quickly and with greater resiliency.

During my first internship, I experienced some strain on my professional relationships with colleagues as a consequence of a challenging decision. In order for NHS to participate in the ATA pilot project, the researchers conducting the study required a commitment from our staff before we had time to meet together at the end of August 2013. Thus, we did not have the opportunity to make the decision to participate collaboratively. The principal decided to make a top down leadership decision using his formal position of authority. He made this decision based upon his understanding of the staff and the school culture at NHS. Historically, the staff at NHS has been open toward opportunities like the TPGP pilot study. Furthermore, considering how the goals of the project aligned with the emerging direction of our school district, the principal viewed this as a great opportunity for the staff at NHS. During our first staff meeting of the year the principal and I presented the project, we outlined the rationale for our participation (including the potential benefits for our collective PL), and we described the commitment that would be required from each one of the teachers throughout the process.

While teachers expressed their collective consent and their understanding of the project, I soon experienced some of the fallout associated with decisions that are made from a formal position of power. One of my first discoveries was the gap between the consent that was expressed in the meeting and genuine support from the teaching staff at NHS. This was the phenomenon Fullan (2001) referred to when he observed that top-down leadership decisions will often result in mere compliance rather than true engagement in new initiatives. When I started to have conversations with teachers individually and in smaller groups I also discovered that our purpose for the project did not translate as clearly as I expected. When I conducted my semi-structured interviews, one teacher's response to my question about the rationale for NHS participating in the project was surprising. This teacher said it was to "allow Jason to complete his master's" (personal communication, November 3, 2013). Clearly, some of the teachers at NHS viewed this initiative as something other than an opportunity for us to improve upon our formal structures for PL. Certainly, some of the responses to interview questions were not in line with my expectations. I had to consciously resist the urge to interrupt and (from my perspective) correct my interviewees. It was vital for me to practice disciplined listening, both for the integrity of my research and also to being the process of rebuilding trust with my colleagues. The interview itself did not change anything about the pilot project, but our open and honest discussions strengthened my relationship with my fellow teachers.

In addition to careful listening, I also noticed that I was able to strengthen my rapport by simply being present with them when they were working through some of the more frustrating technical details associated with using the online tools. This was especially true when we approach the due date for our TPGPs October 2013. A number of teachers were expressing vocal frustration about the new process. On the surface, it seemed as though they were rejecting the

project outright, but I started to understand a deeper source of their frustration when I took the time to assist the teachers through the process. One colleague had been particularly vocal about her frustration with the project; when we took the time to speak it became clear that her frustration was not so much with the project itself, but with the additional burden this was placing on her overall workload. I was also able to take some time to help her work through some of the technical aspects of the program that were causing her frustration. When she was finished the process of completing her TPGP with the new program, it was remarkable to observe her change in disposition toward the initiative as a whole. She expressed her appreciation for the time I took to help her and to listen to her concerns. While I was not familiar with the concept at the time, this experience of talking through the goals of the ATA pilot project resembles one of the skills that Robinson (2011) identifies as an effective strategy for overcoming resistance, which is “open-to-learning conversations” (p. 115).

In contrast with the stress caused to professional relationships by top-down decisions, I have also experienced the power of decisions made through consensus. Certainly, collegial models of leadership have their shortcomings; however, teachers will have much greater buy-in to an initiative when they are an integral part of the decision-making process (Bush, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This was certainly the case when the social studies department made the decision as a group to build weekly time for collaboration into our schedule for the coming school year. If this suggestion had been mandated to us from a position of formal authority, it likely would have been met by a range of responses from complacent compliance to outright resistance. As a department, we took measured steps toward genuine collaboration when “teachers master the skills associated with collaboration, they begin to function more as a team – sharing, encouraging, and supporting each other” (Townsend & Adams, 2009, p. 45).

Embodying visionary leadership. To some degree, my first internship also challenged me to engage in the competency of visionary leadership. This is a leadership role that I worked at in conjunction with the principal of NHS. Both he and I communicated the goals and benefits of participating in the ATA pilot project in a variety of formal and informal ways. This is a role where I felt more comfortable and capable as time passed. Initially, I made the assumption that I would be able to introduce our vision during a staff meeting we would be able to move forward as a group from there. However, I quickly learned the importance of communicating our vision and goals for improving often and in a wide variety of ways that helped the teachers at NHS see the coherence between the TPGP project and our shared goal of authentic PL (Fullan, 2001). I experienced the most success in this area when I had opportunities to meet with small groups and individual teachers in less formal settings. On many occasions this took the form of strategic conversations, whether I was meeting with teachers to assist them with the technology or on some occasions when I was helping teachers with building a demonstrable relationship between their TPGPs and the TQS. Ultimately, I worked to reinforce the overall goal of creating improved opportunities for authentic PL within our school and the social studies department.

Leading a learning community and instructional leadership. In the course of my second internship I also had the opportunity to work on the competencies of leading a learning community and providing instructional leadership (Alberta Education, 2011). As department chair and a member of the PLC in my school, I helped to facilitate collaborative opportunities for PL; thus, I took a lead role within two related learning communities. I assisted in the role of providing instructional leadership, as I provided opportunities for my teaching colleagues to reflect upon the TQS strands and to integrate them more meaningfully within their TPGPs. I also worked with our designated administrator in facilitating the review our collaborative TPGP

review at the end of the year. I played a complementary role with both of these competencies through the course of my internships.

Conclusions

Through the course of two formal internships it was my goal to help facilitate a more vibrant professional learning environment in Northside High School. My experiences comprise a qualitative example of how active and purposeful teacher leadership can help a school change and grow in this critical domain. The following conclusions are based upon my reflections as a teacher leader.

Recognize and Embrace the Role of Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership will have a limited effect upon PL in schools unless it is recognized and promoted at all levels within the education system. School principals play a critical role in recognizing the role of teacher leadership. While it is clear that not all decisions can be made collaboratively, teachers cannot be leaders beyond the walls of their classrooms unless those in formal leadership roles distribute measure of responsibility, credibility, and authority. More importantly, teachers need to recognize and embrace their capacity for leadership within themselves. Barth (2001) asserts that even in schools that were open to this concept, teacher leaders never comprised more than 25% of the teaching staff. In order to unlock the transformative potential of teacher leaders a cultural shift is required in terms of how principals approach their relationship with classroom teachers and how teachers understand their own roles within schools. Again, Barth (2001) argues that “*all* teachers harbor leadership capabilities waiting to be unlocked and engaged for the good of schools” (p. 444). When the concept of teacher leadership is actualized many areas of school life will be improved, including opportunities for meaningful PL.

Use Evidence to Inform Improvements in Professional Learning

Teacher leaders do not simply rely on intuition or common sense when they strive to improve PL within a school. Evidence, in various forms, is an essential part of providing more authentic opportunities for teachers to enhance their professional practice. Mertler (2012) laments that, in the world of education, too often there is an impassable gulf between the ivory towers of professional educational researchers and the classroom teachers who do the so-called real work of teaching. Teacher leaders take the time to explore the scholarly research that is related to their field of interest. The digital research tools that are available today make it possible for teacher leaders to explore the work of scholars around the world even if they do not have direct access to a research library. Similarly, teacher leaders who want to improve PL will gather evidence from action research. Academic research is only meaningful when it is applied in appropriate ways and with the knowledge of a specific context; action research is a vital tool in the task of bridging the gap between educational theory and pedagogical practice (Mertler, 2012). I was amazed by the degree of clarity that I gained about the challenges and opportunities inherent within the TPGP process when I worked through the various stages of the action research cycle. My experience with action research also provided the leadership at NHS with specific steps that it could take to improve formal PL opportunities. Teacher leaders can help to improve PL when they are informed by both scholarly and home grown sources of evidence.

I would also like to note that before action research can be utilized to gather reliable and relevant data, teacher leaders require the capacity, ongoing support, and additional time to conduct high quality action research. Capacity building in the area of action research can be done through a combination of formal classes and partnerships with experienced action researchers. One of the most essential supports that formal leaders can provide, in an effort to nurture action

research, is the encouragement of a culture that understands the value and the process of action research. Action research is a time consuming process, especially if teachers are leading these projects in addition to their roles with students in the classroom. The process of action research would be much more sustainable if a portion of the teacher leader's work assignment was dedicated to a special project. Furthermore, teacher leaders would produce much better results with the action research if they were mentored through this process, either by someone at the district level or a professional educational researcher. Evidence is necessary to improve PL at a school, and teacher leaders can play a vital role in gathering that information.

Recognize the Relationship between Leading and Learning

Teacher leaders inherently learn more when they are given the opportunity to lead. Proponents of andragogy assert that teachers, as adult professional learners, will experience increased growth if learning is situated in a learning community, if it is ongoing, and if it is self-directed (Webster-Wright, 2009). All of these essential elements of adult learning theory are also inherent within most teacher leadership roles. Teacher leadership is by its nature collaborative. It compels teachers to step beyond the walls of their classrooms and work with each other as they discover and refine ways to improve student learning. Teacher leadership is not an isolated event, it is an ongoing process. Teacher leadership is also largely self-directed. Most teacher leaders do not have formal titles, they take on beyond their classrooms because they want to address issues of personal interest or of great importance. In many ways the role of teacher leadership can be viewed as a metaphor for authentic PL. Some of the most powerful learning experiences are made possible when professionals decide to engage in a search for answers to a significant issue, when they have the capacity to engage in the search, and when they understand that their actions will likely have effects on many students in their schools.

Build Authenticity into Bureaucratic Structures

It is not uncommon for teachers to become frustrated by apparently pointless bureaucratic practices that leech away precious time and energy. One of the complex professional decisions that teachers make routinely is regarding what gets done now, what gets done later, and what does not get done at all. When a task is mandatory, there are times when teachers will complete it mindfully, however there will also be times when the task simply gets done. For teachers in Alberta, TPGPs are one professional task that should not, but often does, fall into the latter category. This is one of the areas where teacher leaders can have a truly significant positive effect on PL. At the very least, teacher leaders can model a persistent and enthusiastic passion for engaging in a process of professional self-reflection and setting meaningful goals for professional growth. Even better, teacher leaders will find ways to ensure the formal process of mandatory TPGPs contributes to authentic growth. Ideally, teacher leaders will find ways to make this process collaborative. It is vitally important to remember that teacher leaders must work within the framework established by those in positions of formal authority, especially the principal. When teacher leaders are able to look past the bureaucratic structures that frame their obligations, and see into the spirit or purpose behind their duties, they will increase the collective capacity for PL within their schools for growth.

Take Small Purposeful Steps toward Meaningful Professional Learning

Robinson (2011) observes that in most cases “professional development agendas are too ambitious for the allocated time, so learning is fragmented, inadequately supported, and arbitrarily terminated when the money runs out” (p. 114). When I reflect on my experiences as a teacher leader at NHS, Robinson’s principle certainly applies to many of my own experiences with formal PL. Teacher leaders who are aware of this issue can take any number of steps to

mitigate this challenge. It is essential for a teacher leader to set clear, measurable, realistic, and attainable goals for PL. Teachers often try to do too much too quickly when it comes to enhancing their instructional practices and pedagogy. However, this tendency increases the likelihood of burnout or initiative fatigue that, in turn, diminishes the likelihood of success. When teacher leaders take small, measured, and purposeful steps toward their goals, the progress might be slower, but it will be much more measured and sustainable.

Ultimately, I have learned that teacher leaders have the capacity to play a vital role in improving the vitality of PL, both for themselves and for their teacher colleagues. Effective teacher leadership and improved PL work hand-in-hand toward the ultimate goal of improving learning opportunities for all students (Barth, 2007).

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. In your understanding, what are the reasons why our school chose to participate in the online TPGP online tool pilot study?
2. How do you feel about how the initiative was introduced to the teaching staff?
3. What are some of the potential benefits of participation in the study? As teachers in Alberta? As a school? As individual teachers?
4. To what extent was the TQS self-reflection helpful in the process in making your TPGP?
 - a. Did you find your goals to be more directly related to TQS than in previous years?
5. To what extent did you need assistance with using the online TPGP tool?
 - a. How satisfied were you with the technical assistance that you have received?
6. In what ways were the technology and the process associated with the online tools helpful or hindering in writing your TPGPs? Please explain.
 - a. Do you think the challenges associated with the technology can be easily addressed?
 - b. What suggestions would you make to enhance the online tools?
7. Overall, do you see the process of writing a TPGP as a meaningful and authentic way of directing your professional learning? Please explain.
 - a. Do you feel as though the exercise of relating each of your goals to a specific part of TQS will enhance your professional learning this coming year? Please explain.
8. Overall, do you see our participation in this project as time well spent? Please explain.