PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND STUDY GROUPS: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

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I dedicate this work to

my daughter Margo.

You have brought joy

and inspiration to my life!

Abstract

Every year, school personnel embark on the road of professional growth. This road has traditionally taken the form of teacher professional growth plans (TPGPs). While the TPGP has enabled school personnel to set and strive toward personally directed professional development, the perception is that many of these goals have not been realized into their intended levels of authentic school improvement or enhanced learning in classrooms. This study evaluates the ability of study groups, as a professional development activity to impact school improvement. Forty school personnel were surveyed to determine the ability of study groups to facilitate goal setting, team learning, and professional dialogue as vehicles for lasting school improvement. Recommendations for linking these vehicles to action include providing time, a collegial environment, and encouragement to taking risks.

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Chapter One: Setting the Stage

The notion of professional development has evolved into far more than sporadic attendance at teacher conferences or conventions. Professional development, as a result of several political mandates in Alberta since the mid 1990s, has been united with teacher evaluation, teacher improvement and the evolution of a formalized quality teaching standard for educators in Alberta. This political reality has set the stage for increased time and attention on professional development programs and continuous teacher improvement at the school level. Although school personnel have always used professional growth as a vehicle for achieving quality teaching and enhanced learning in the classroom, legislation of teacher reforms has added an accountability factor to the professional development activities of teachers, schools, and divisions. These changes have forced a mandate for all stakeholders to seek ways of achieving such growth efficiently, economically, and authentically. The result of this accountability mandate has been a shift towards recognition of the necessity of school personnel to have more power over their own professional development needs and direction. Consequently, in addition to the Teacher Professional Growth Plan, activities such as study groups, peer-coaching, action research, and team-planning have emerged as legitimate methods of pursuing professional growth in schools.

Historical Contexts

The evolution of Teacher Professional Development in Alberta began as a result of changes made to Alberta Education's 1985 *Teacher Evaluation Policy*. This policy outlined the obligations and protocol for the evaluation of teaching personnel by school divisions. Under the 1995 document, teachers with interim and probationary contracts

were evaluated yearly using formal criteria established by the division in conjunction with requirements from Alberta Education. Teachers with continuing contracts were formally evaluated every three to five years, most often by a representative from the division's central office staff.

In 1993, with the election of Ralph Klein's government, fiscal restraint and a commitment towards accountability in all sectors of the public domain directed Alberta Education's goal of legislating improvements to teaching in the province. In September, 1995, then Minister of Education Halvar Johnson, released a position paper discussing quality teaching. This was followed in June, 1996 with a policy position paper which addressed teacher competencies, preparation, certification, and evaluation. These items would later form the basis of the *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* (Teaching Quality Standard) released in February of 1998 (Alberta Learning,1996).

In 1998, representatives from Alberta Education, the Alberta Teacher's Association (A.T.A.), Alberta School Boards Association (A.S.B.A.), College of Alberta School Superintendents (C.A.S.S.), and the five education degree-granting Alberta post-secondary institutions developed and released the Quality Teaching Standard. According to Gary Mar, the Minister of Education at the time, this new policy would assist teachers by identifying areas of improvement, and in the process help students at the local level. Within this document were three main foci:

1. Establishment and articulation of a standard of teaching quality.

2. Articulation of knowledge, skills, and attributes expected of teachers in the province of Alberta.

3. Requirement for all teachers in Alberta to produce a Teacher

Professional Growth Plan (TPGP) each year in which they would assess their learning needs; relate these needs to the Quality Teaching Standard; and remain accountable for carrying out the goals in the school, division, and provincial Education Plans.

The policy stated that, "each teacher employed under a contract of employment to a board will develop, implement, and complete an annual individualized professional development plan…annually, each teacher will submit his or her completed individualized professional development plan to the principal who will review the plan with the teacher" (Alberta Learning, 1996). As a result, the Teacher Professional Growth Plan became mandatory for all teaching staff in 1999. Politically, at both the school and provincial levels, the notion of teacher professional growth began to evolve from an isolated, teacher-interest activity to a career-long learning process upon which evaluative information could be gathered. Importance and attention to the teacher-interest and enjoyment factor has been maintained in most schools since the Quality Teaching Standard was released. However, the evolution of professional growth as a result of the 1998 legislation has introduced the challenge of accountability formally absent from the process prior to the Quality Teaching Standard. At the school level, this shift has resulted in conflicts in funding and scheduling of teacher-interest activities and the obligations of improving teacher quality.

In conjunction with the policy announcements by Alberta Education, the Alberta Teachers Association released its own position paper indicating its support for the government's *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* provided that the Alberta government and school divisions committed to the allocation of adequate

resources to the three processes outlined in the document's title. The position of the A.T.A. was that the majority of resources should be allocated to professional growth programs if they were to reach their potential to improve professional practice (Alberta Teachers Association, 2000).

The Alberta Teachers Association agreed with the notion that all teachers, including administrators, should be responsible for continuing professional growth both individually and collectively. The association also clearly concurred with the notion that professional growth should be seen as a career-long process, and that that process should align itself with the association's definition for effective professional development programs which included:

1. A balance among the needs of the teacher, the school, and the jurisdiction;

2. Ongoing and school-based professional development;

3. A basis of (a) a clear statement of objectives shared by all participants, (b) a flexible and long-term plan with opportunities for evaluation and monitoring, and (c) the needs of participants as identified within the school setting;

4. Incorporation of sound research principles into classroom practice;

5. Provisions for a climate of trust, peer-support, open communication and collaboration;

6. Involvement of participants in decision making at all levels of planning and implementation;

7. Incorporation of theory, demonstration or modeling, coaching and feedback;

8. Provisions of practical experience to teachers;

9. Recognition and use of participant's expertise;

10. Provisions of time for participation in professional development programs;

11. A focus on student learning; and

12. Inclusion of various forms of school-based learning such as action research, study groups, peer coaching, joint planning, reflection and visitations (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2001).

<div align="center">Statement of Inquiry</div>

Every year, school personnel at Lacombe Junior High School (L.J.H.S.) embark on the road of professional growth. This road has, since the mid 1990s, taken the form of the Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP). While the TPGP has enabled school personnel to set and strive toward personally directed professional development, the perception is that many of these goals have not been realized into their intended levels of authentic school improvement or enhanced learning in classrooms.

Like their colleagues across the province, L.J.H.S. staff members (teachers and support staff) have produced Teacher Professional Growth Plans in the fall of each school year. The goals in these plans fell within the realm of the goals developed the previous spring in the school's Annual Education Plan. The school goals fit within the umbrella of goals set by Wolf Creek School Division. The district goals were connected to the provincial goals set by Alberta Learning. Teachers submitted their TPGP to a designated administrator at the commencement of the school year. At the beginning and midway through the year, meetings were held between the administrator and individual staff members to discuss the TPGP and the progress being made in achieving the goals within it. Information gathered in these meetings could become part of a formative evaluation of school personnel. In between meetings, school personnel directed their own growth and

progress. Personal direction included individual strategies for meeting goals and targets, attendance of workshops, conferences, professional reading, etcetera.

Originally, two or three days per school year were designated by the school division for Professional Development Days. Frequently, these days were booked at the school level for school-wide or district-wide inservices, seminars, or workshops that all staff members were required to attend. In the vast majority of cases, no formal time was scheduled into the school calendar in which teachers could pursue the goals of their TPGPs. In subsequent years, half days were granted by the school division to schools in eight of ten months during the school year. During these half days, schools were required to hold staff meetings and use the remaining time to pursue professional development.

As the TPGP process continued at Lacombe Junior High School, the administrative team became aware of two specific trends as they met with school personnel regarding their growth plans. First, many teachers admitted they were disappointed in the amount of time they felt they had to actively and adequately pursue the goals within their enhancement plan. Staff members were writing excellent and ambitious goals for professional growth, with high hopes for achieving each of them over the course of the year. However, for many staff members, once the demands of the school year began, attention to their goals document was set aside until it was pulled out again before meeting with an administrator to discuss the growth plan and its progress. This situation was not due to a lack of teacher interest in or commitment to professional growth, but a symptom of a group of busy professionals whose time was saturated by the realities of classroom responsibilities. Many staff members admittedly continued to write many of the same goals in their growth plans year after year because they did not feel the

goals had been given the attention they deserved due to time constraints. The staff perception appeared to be that the pursuit of enhancement plan goals was an "add on" or extra to an already busy schedule.

The second observed trend was that many teachers, unknowingly, were pursuing the same goals in their growth plans as others with similar teaching loads. The TPGP process appeared to be an isolated, individual pursuit and as a result, staff members were missing out on a valuable opportunity for professional dialogue and sharing. The administrative team made suggestions for staff members pursuing like goals to get together, and some attempted to make time for these meetings. However, without any scheduled time in the calendar for these meetings to occur, adding them on to busy schedules was unrealistic and therefore not pursued by most staff members.

In 2001, the Wolf Creek School Division announced seven full-day professional development days would be granted to schools throughout the 2001-2002 school year in which staff meetings and professional development were to be addressed. This announcement coincided with a discussion surrounding a resource entitled *Whole Faculty Study Groups: A Powerful Way to Change Schools and Enhance Learning* (Lick & Murphy, 1998) at an administrator's professional development session. These events, coupled with the trends observed in the TPGP process provided a catalyst for seeking ways to improve the professional growth process for the staff of Lacombe Junior High School.

<u>Study Groups Pilot Project.</u>

Several staff members had indicated an interest in improving the growth plan process during TPGP meetings with administrators. In addition to those who had articulated a

need for improvement were those whose enthusiasm for the growth plan process had waned over the years. The announcement of additional professional development time appeared to be a timely opportunity for the pursuit of professional growth in a study group format. The notion of study groups was defined in the Lacombe Junior High context as a small group of professionals working together toward common goals for enhanced classroom practice and student learning (Lick & Murphy, 1998). The following plan was drafted for the first year of the Study Groups Pilot Project:

1. Our school felt it was important to include all staff members in the study group process. This inclusion involved teaching and classroom-based support staff. This direction led to the decision that teaching staff would be required to join a study group; support staff would have the option of doing so. This allowed teacher assistants the opportunity to participate in this professional growth, but allowed secretarial staff an opportunity to complete other tasks while study groups were meeting on professional development days. This arrangement was consistent with what had traditionally happened during professional development workshops and inservices. Support staff not participating in a study group would submit a personal growth plan as traditionally required.

2. Study groups should comprise of two to five people although no limits would be set by the administrative team on the number of members.

3. Staff would be surveyed to determine their professional development interests and needs. The results would be posted in the staff lounge so that people could see who had similar needs and interests.

4. A deadline of two weeks was set for staff to form a study group and indicate what

topic they intended to explore.

5. Newly-formed study groups would meet on the final professional development day of the school year to begin preliminary planning for their group.

6. Study groups would meet for a designated period of time on each professional development day in the school year (approximately one a month).

7. Study groups would hand in an action plan, which would serve as the TPGP for each member of the study group for the school year. The action plan goals were to follow the mandates of TPGP goals and include specific strategies and accurate measurements for meeting those goals.

8. Study group members would continue to meet with an administrator throughout the school year to discuss their study group goals and progress.

9. At the end of the school year, the process would be evaluated to see if it was worth continuing.

The study groups pilot project began in September, 2001. In June of 2002, many staff members responded favourably to the process, and indicated through formal and informal meetings that they preferred the study group process to the individual growth plans. A smaller group, after the first year of the project communicated they did not feel the activities of their study group had been successful or effective. It was determined, at this stage, to allow teaching staff the opportunity to opt out of the study group pilot project for the 2002-2003 school year. Those not wishing to join a study group were required to follow the traditional TPGP format. At the time of the research, thirty-one of forty-two school personnel were participating voluntarily in study groups at Lacombe Junior High School.

The research process has led to reflection on how the study group process has enhanced professional development, and what modifications may need to be made to continue to promote meaningful change as a result of the study group action plans. This masters study investigated the ability of study groups, as a method of professional development at the school level, to impact school improvement. It explored the factors that contribute to authentic school professional development. These factors include team learning, professional dialogue, and collegiality as vehicles toward school improvement. Central to the investigation and observation of these factors is the exploration of the perceptions of school personnel in relation to professional development and study groups.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

A survey of the literature on professional development in the context of team learning and whole faculty study groups reveals several recurring key themes. Almost every author in this review speaks to the need for shifting professional development from isolation and individualism toward the formation of learning communities that work together to learn and grow. Facilitation of these types of communities requires the formation of a collaborative culture. Within this culture forms a model for listening, learning, and participating in authentic change. Goals and vision serve as a force for change. They foster risk-taking and a synergistic environment which serve as a catalyst for action.

Changing the Focus of Professional Development

Speck and Knipe (2001) argue for the need to change the traditional focus of professional development in order to facilitate authentic change and growth in an organization. Traditionally, much of the professional development that teachers participated in was district or school-wide and covered the same topic for everyone regardless of their teaching position or load. It was assumed that whatever the topic was would be of interest or importance to each teacher in attendance thus developing a "challenge between pedagogy and practice" (p. 37). Many teachers walked away from such PD sessions armed with information that unfortunately was not always translated into practice or action in their classrooms. Often the topics of these sessions were important to those who organized them, but not necessarily to all in attendance. Teachers may or may not have adopted these ideas. Even if the ideas were accepted, because the notion was not generated at the grass roots level, its ability to be lasting was often

jeopardized. The reality existed that in many cases, teachers returned to their classrooms to begin applying new knowledge in isolation, creating a situation where new ideas were "lost in the shuffle of shifting reform priorities and the countless time demands that affect the daily lives of teachers school leaders, and district leaders" (p. 3). Barnett Berry (in Alabama Best Practices Centre, 2001) supports the notion that 'one shot' professional development that takes place in most school districts falls short of any long-term impact on teaching and learning. "At best, teachers take a little of what they've learned and try it out in the classroom" (p.1). Berry cites the lack of follow-up and support following these workshops as one reason for their lack of success, stating that without these two crucial elements, "the idea that sounded pretty exciting in the training room gets stuck in the back of the file cabinet with all the other handouts from workshops past" (p.1). Berry suggests the inability of traditional professional development activities to make any meaningful connection with the real work of teachers, as a compelling reason for why school based professional development activities require a shift in focus.

Sparks and Hirsch (in Guskey, 2000) suggest the need for a shift in the old view of professional development as something that was "done" to passive listeners periodically throughout the school year, toward a perspective that sees professional development as "a series of extended, job-embedded learning experiences" (p. 69). Guskey stresses that an intentional, ongoing and systemic process creates successful professional development (p. 252). Intentional professional development is rooted in clearly stated goals. Ongoing professional development consists of continuous learning over the course of a career. Systemic professional development considers the encompassing beliefs and values of the organization and the individuals within it. Guskey

argues that traditional forms of professional development have been time-based rather than learning-based, stating that the focus of professional development needs to be on meeting the intended goals and intentions of the organization, not on finding ways to fill hours. "Rather than being based on clearly-stated professional goals, many professional development programs mandate a certain number of hours. Teachers ask, 'how can I get my hours?' not, 'what do I need to learn'" (p. 124). Speck and Knipe continue with an argument for the establishment of learning communities that lead to authentic change. Essential to this model is the requirement of collaboration among members of the organization. This argument is supported by Little, Darling-Hammond, and McLauglin (in Speck and Knipe, 2001), who state:

> If professional development is focused at the school level so that teachers can
> meet classroom improvement targets, the roles and responsibilities for teachers
> must evolve from isolation in their classrooms to involvement in the larger
> school-wide view of improvement and professional development... Researchers
> have found that teacher's individual efforts, in random isolation have not provided
> the power to move student achievement and school improvement in significant
> ways. Nor have district-level initiatives that vary from year to year made a
> consistent impact on schools, teachers, and student achievement. (p.85)

Both Senge (1990) and Kanter (1983) agree that many of the traditional practices of organizations serve as roadblocks to meaningful change. Senge argues that many of the situations we find our organizations in today are a direct result of the actions of the past. He states, "today's problems come from yesterday's solutions" (p. 57). This dilemma serves as an obstacle to what Senge describes as 'systems thinking,' whereby all

members of the organization have an impact on decisions and directions for growth. He argues that many non-systems solutions "merely shift problems from one part of the system to another... those who solved the first problem are different from those who inherit the new problem" (p. 58). When people feel they have no say or control over reactions or solutions to situations or problems, there is the perception that they are merely cogs in a wheel. Those solutions may be rejected or ineffectively put into action as members of the organization become disenfranchised with yet another add-on to their daily practice. Like any organization, the business of education has been inundated with new solutions to old problems, to the point where many teachers feel negatively about this 'flavour of the month' problem solving, which often comes from above or outside the organization, and which may or may not have direct implications for their own classrooms.

Kanter would argue that there exists a need for lateral rather than the hierarchical communication refuted by Senge. According to Kanter, such top-down directives create formal, restricted vehicles for change, making innovation a type of specialty that can only be carried out by specified groups of individuals, rather than by all members of the organization as a routine event. When these top-down directives come from outside the organization, they support the notion that talent must be imported rather than promoted from within. As a result, a culture of mediocrity is developed as people wait for the next 'solution' to be handed down and rejected (p. 87). Kanter states that individuals at the bottom of an organization need to be given the same opportunities to contribute to innovation that are given to the middle and top. "For change to be a way of life rather than an occasional traumatizing shock, the "Indians" as well as the "Chiefs" have to be

engaged in change making and change mastery" (p. 181).

Effective staff development occurs when all who participate in it own the experience. Such ownership allows participants to design activities to meet their needs. It draws upon the understanding and experiences of those who work closest to the most integral part of the school community--its students. When school personnel only see professional development as a separate activity, they have fewer opportunities for analysis, reflection, and evaluation of what they do in their classrooms. Professional development that is infused into the daily practices of classrooms allows for more learning to take place.

Margaret Wheatley (2000) links participation with productivity, arguing that organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon in all organisms. Isolation, according to Wheatley, goes against the core nature of being human. "People organize together to accomplish more, not less. Behind every organizing impulse is a realization that by joining others, we can accomplish something important that we could not accomplish alone" (p. 340).

Due to the way schools have traditionally organized, collaboration has seldom been a consequence of working in a school (Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles, 2000). Stepping out of the confines of their classrooms forces teachers to "forge a new identity" (p. 363) which nurtures and supports collaboration until it replaces working privately. Education is not an individual pursuit (Collay, Dunlap, et al., 1998). Professional development in the form of learning circles like study groups allows for crucial opportunities for organization and so follows the innate need of humans to initiate, maintain and sustain communities (p.15). Forming and sustaining these types of communities among

colleagues in schools creates communities of life-long learners enabling professionals to

stay current and competent with new knowledge and understanding.

<u>The Role of Collaborative Cultures and Learning Communities</u>

All the theorists surveyed in this review would agree that a collaborative culture is

an essential piece to the puzzle of focus shifting that translates into meaningful change in

an organization. Speck and Knipe (2001) argue that the leader of an organization is

integral in setting the stage for the growth of this type of culture. "In a learning

community, the leader encourages all educators to develop a mind-set of collaboration,

shared inquiry, and teamwork and then formalizes the structures necessary to support

them" (p. 58). Gibbons and Norman (1987) outline four basic steps that are essential to

building a collaborative culture (p. 109):

1. Establish a supportive, cooperative ethos in the school and district.

2. Provide access to resources.

3. Establish leadership teams in schools with the power to make decisions about
   programs.

4. Create a flexible, responsive administrative support system.

   Senge states that when members of an organization see each other as

colleagues, dialogue occurs, as does a mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity (p. 245).

The result of this dialogue is what Senge describes as 'team learning.' Team learning is

defined as the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the

results its members truly desire (p. 236). Little (1987) carries this theory one step further,

arguing for a 'strength in numbers' approach to professional growth. "The reason to

pursue the study and practice of collegiality is that, presumably, something is gained

when teachers work together and something is lost when they do not" (p. 492). When teachers work together, they combine their visibility, responsibility, and influence on the school as a whole (p. 497), creating a sense of pride in the broad accomplishments a group can achieve when working together. Lick and Murphy (1998) speak to the synergy that is created by the "combined cooperative action in the group or team that generates additional energy beyond that consumed by the group" and its ability to produce an outcome beyond what could be obtained by individual members on their own (p. 89).

While agreeing with the importance of collegial learning and dialogue, Schmoker (1996) argues that collegiality cannot be the single goal of an organization. Without a supported focus, collegiality is not enough to yield solutions or meaningful change (p. 14). Simple teamwork "only confirms present practice rather than evaluating its worth" (p. 14) leading to unproductive meetings without a sense of importance or advanced purpose. Because teams who only focus on collegiality are unproductive, their loose goals or purposes often fall by the wayside, and the teams themselves are often dropped.

Rosenholtz (in Lieberman & Miller, 1991) states that improvement occurs in schools where staffs are professionally collegial rather than simply personally or socially compatible. While the latter two may enhance enjoyment in the working environment, the former allows for a foundation upon which initiative and experimentation have a place to root (p.245). Fullan (in LaBonte et al., 1995) substantiates this further by adding that these "professionally collegial relationships create a foundation of positive pressure and support essential for professional development activities which support school improvement" (p. 45).

When educators work in focused, collaborative teams, they engage in listening and learning. These types of communities "create a climate of high expectations for teachers and students and a culture of working together to achieve high expectations for both" (Speck & Knipe, 2001, p. 62). Senge (1990) describes this type of learning as 'metanoia'- learning that goes beyond just taking in information. "Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we recreate ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do" (p. 13). Essentially, this is the same goal we have for students in our own classrooms.

Traditionally, schools have dealt with important issues through meetings where school personnel were talked *at* rather than engaged *in* conversation (Barth, 2001). Unfortunately, this practice has minimized the amount of professional conversation with the capacity to promote reflection and the exchange of ideas (p.69).

The notion of schools as learning communities demands our reflection on the purpose of schools in the first place. Barth (2001) points out that schools exist to promote learning to everyone who inhabits them (p.12). What has sadly been missing from the puzzle of educating students is the fundamental principle that in order to continue their effectiveness, teachers must also engage themselves in lifelong learning. Barth's argument stems from an analogy of donning an oxygen mask in the event of an airline emergency. He points to the fact that airlines require adults to secure their own masks before assisting children to do the same. Without ensuring one's own safety and stability, it is impossible to assist anyone else. Barth states that "the first step in reforming the learning experiences of young people is to reform the learning experiences of the adults responsible for young peoples' education" (p. 75). By establishing learning communities

among the adults in a school, collaborative cultures are born. These communities allow

for a shift from an isolated, personal vision toward a collective vision where groups of

people can accomplish great things together.

<center>A Need for Goals and Vision</center>

As previously indicated, many of the authors in this review believe in the motivating

force of goals and vision. When a team's actions are rooted in sound goals for change and

growth, their ability to accomplish great things is enhanced. Senge (1990) describes

shared visions as a source of power and motivation:

> A shared vision is not an idea… it is a force in people's hearts, a force of
>
> impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further, if it is
>
> compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person, then it is no
>
> longer an abstraction… it creates a sense of commonality that permeates the
>
> organization and gives coherence to diverse activities. (p. 206)

Schmoker makes the connection among goals, motivation, and improvement:

"Without explicit learning goals, we are simply not set up and organized for

improvement, for results" (p. 18). Goals and vision become the glue that binds teams

together as they journey toward career enhancement and professional growth. Without

the foundation of these two things, a team's ability for accomplishment is diminished (p.

19). Senge describes what can happen when team members combine their personal

visions to create a shared vision, creating a strong sense of powerful commitment and

synergy for something that is formed by the team rather than handed down from above:

"Organizations intent on building shared visions continually encourage members to

develop their personal visions. If people don't have their own vision, all they can do is

'sign up' for someone else's. The result is compliance, never commitment" (p. 211). This goal orientation and dialogue helps teams identify, address and assess needs for their classrooms that will have the most impact and make the most difference for students. This is supported by Weisbrod (1987), who describes practical theorist Lewin's theory of the link between motivation and our ability to have direct influence on the results of a solution or decision. "We are likely to modify our own behavior when we participate in problem analysis and solutions and we are likely to help carry out decisions we have helped make" (p. 89). The word *vision* extends from the Latin word *videre*, which means "to see." Vision allows for the activities of the group to be forward-seeing. Guskey (2000) refers to this as intentional professional development and states three steps to ensure that professional development is intentional or rooted in sound goals (p.18):

1. Begin with a clear statement of purposes and goals. This includes determining what the group hopes to accomplish with the professional development activity.

2. Ensure that the goals are worthwhile. This requires determining whether the desired results are worthy of the time, money and other resources that may be allocated toward their completion.

3. Determine how these goals can be assessed. What mechanisms are in place for evaluating the ability of the activity to meet the purposes and goals?

The Importance of Action

"Team learning requires regular practice. People need experimentation with their decisions" (Senge, 1990, p. 259). All the vision and goals in the world are not enough to

create positive change or professional growth if they are not followed by action. Whether

goals are individual or team in nature, they must be followed by the actions necessary to

achieve them, in order for them to have any lasting impression on professional practice.

Kanter (1983) describes three specific 'power tools', which must be present in an

organization in order to invest goals into action (p. 159):

1. Information tools. These tools include data, technical knowledge, political

   intelligence, and expertise.

2. Resource tools. Resource tools include financial funding, materials, space and

   time.

3. Support tools. These tools include the endorsement of others, backing and

   approval by stakeholder groups, and legitimizing the goal being pursued.

These tools augment the ability of a team's goals to become actions that lead to change

and enrichment of professional practice. Such enrichment leads to a sense of pride and

accomplishment. "What imbues this with meaning for employees is not just the sense of

being part of a group, but the significance of the tasks taken on: the feeling of pride and

accomplishment at building something relevant to the larger organization" (p. 203).

Sergiovanni (1994) concurs with the idea that communities connect people and

their purposes to one another through commitment rather than through contractual

obligation (p. 4). Such positive "peer pressure" successfully supports meaningful learning

and opportunity for change. Resulting from the community's commitments to one

another is a compelling sense of obligation to complete the inquiry necessary to achieve

the goals of the community. Success in this situation is defined by what occurs in the

school community as a whole rather than by what is occurring in one classroom (p. 147).

When a change of focus to facilitate a collaborative culture occurs, team learning in the context of whole faculty study groups has an incredible potential to enhance schools, learning, and professional practice. Collegiality linked to a firm foundation in goals and vision leads to action where authentic professional growth has a place to grow. I have always felt that teachers do not spend enough time talking to one another on a professional level. Too many of us are unaware of what our neighbours do behind the closed doors of their classrooms. Many of us have no idea what our co-workers stand for. Too many of us are ignorant about what our colleagues are pursuing in terms of improving their professional practice. As a result, valuable opportunities for professional growth that result from spending time engaged in dialogue and action with other staff members are missed. I believe that whole faculty study groups offer a powerful vehicle for this type of professional dialogue and action. The results of this process may well extend beyond the expectations of any member of any team. The bottom line is our schools, and the teaching and learning that takes place in them, will only be improved through the collaborative process of professional development.

Chapter Three: Methodology

<u>Research Questions</u>

The framework for this study is firmly based in the research literature on recent professional growth and professional development activities. It is described fully in Chapter Two: Literature Review.

The research for this culminating project investigated the ability of whole faculty study groups, as a method of professional development at the school level to influence professional growth. It explored the factors that contribute to authentic school professional development. These factors included team learning, professional dialogue, and collegiality as vehicles toward school improvement.

At the root of this study was the following guiding question: How do teachers at Lacombe Junior High perceive the impact of study groups on professional growth? Embedded within this question were the following sub-questions that needed to be addressed in order to attend to the central question of the study:

1. How are study groups a change in focus for professional development?

2. What is the relationship between school culture and study groups?

3. What is the relationship between the goals or vision of professional growth and actions that carry out those goals?

<u>How are study groups a change in focus for professional development?</u>

Traditionally, school staffs participated in district or school-wide professional development. This broad-based PD frequently covered the same topic for everyone regardless of his or her position or teaching load. The assumption was that whatever the topic was, all staff members in attendance would find it important or interesting. Many

teachers walked away from these PD sessions armed with information, but did not always translate it into classroom practice or action. Even when these sessions resulted in a change in classroom practice, reality was that in many cases, much of this new knowledge was applied in isolation. In addition, many inspiring ideas were lost in the shuffle of every day classroom activities.

Like any organization, the business of education is rife with new solutions to old problems, to the point where many teachers feel negatively about professional development. Study groups can amend that negative experience and enable teachers to work as teams to address questions, concerns or the quest for information that is most applicable to their own classroom experience.

What is the relationship between school culture and study groups?

When teachers work together, they combine their vision, responsibility, and influence on the school as a whole. This work creates a sense of pride in the broad accomplishments a group can achieve together (Senge, 1990). Collegiality cannot be the single goal of an organization. Schmoker (1996), argues that without a focus and support, collegiality is not enough to yield solutions or meaningful change. From collegiality grows a community of educators working in focused, collaborative teams. Within these teams, school staffs participate in the types of listening and learning expected in their own classrooms. Such communities "create a climate of high expectations for teachers and students and a culture of working together to achieve high expectations for both" (Speck & Knipe, 2001, p. 62). Senge (1990) describes this type of learning as 'metanoia'- learning that goes beyond just taking in information. "Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we recreate ourselves. Through learning we

become able to do something we never were able to do" (p. 13). This type of learning is impossible without the conditions where it can grow. Administrators and teachers who create time and scheduling resources facilitate the support factors necessary for study groups to create meaningful and lasting school improvement and authentic professional growth.

What is the relationship between the goals or vision of professional growth and actions that carry out those goals?

When a team's actions are rooted in sound goals for change and growth, their ability to accomplish great things is enhanced. Senge (1990) describes shared visions as a source of power and motivation:

A shared vision is not an idea... it is a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further, if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person, then it is not longer an abstraction... it creates a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities (p. 206).

Schmoker (1996) makes the connection between goals, motivation, and improvement: "Without explicit learning goals, we are simply not set up and organized for improvement, for results" (p. 18). Goals and vision become the glue that holds teams together as they journey towards enhancement and growth. Without the foundation of these two things, a team's ability for accomplishment is diminished" (p. 19). This goal orientation and dialogue helps teams identify, address and assess needs for their classrooms that will have the most impact and make the most difference for students. All the vision and goals in the world are insufficient in creating positive change or

professional growth if they do not result in action. If they are to have any lasting impression on professional practice, goals of either individual or team nature must be followed by the actions necessary to achieve them. When collegiality is linked to a firm foundation of goals and vision leading to action, authentic professional growth has a place to grow.

General Approach

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and impact of participation in a study group among school personnel. This research study is interested in understanding the perceptions of study groups and professional development among school personnel. This includes an exploration of the impact of the shift in professional development focus, the relationship between school culture and study groups, in addition to the relationship among goals, vision, and action. Therefore, a qualitative method has been employed in order to bring meaning and understanding to the impact of study groups in this real-life central Alberta context. As a rich foundation of literature on professional growth and professional development programs already exists, an implied, focused method of inquiry in the form of a questionnaire has been used. The purpose of the questionnaire was to specifically assess the perceptions of the impact of study groups as a vehicle towards professional development.

The use of study groups as a vehicle for personnel professional growth, although on the rise, is still a relatively recent phenomenon in Wolf Creek School Division. The notion of what makes a study group differs from school to school. Individual schools have chosen to approach the idea with differing levels of staff-led choice and direction in terms of topics covered, group members, and time allotted for the pursuit of the study

group's goals.

Although the study was designed with potential replication in future studies, it was created for the context of the Lacombe Junior High Study Group Model. Different sites may see the notion of study groups in different lights; therefore, it is believed that the data collected in this study may carry significant weight to those who wish to explore potential outlets and recommendations for improving or assessing the quality of school-based professional development programs.

Essential to understanding the methodology of this study are the following definitions of terms based on the Lacombe Junior High experience.

Study Group: A small number of individuals joining together to increase their capacities through new learning for the benefit of students, given that the purpose of a school is to create the conditions and circumstances necessary for young people to learn to their fullest potential and capabilities.

School Personnel: For the purpose of this study, school personnel includes all teachers (full and part time), teacher assistants, and library technicians who participated in a study group both in the year prior to the data being collected and in the current year.

Professional Growth: Any conscious action or activity engaged in by a teacher, teacher assistant or library technician for the purposes of enhancing or improving professional practice, student learning, or school climate. Direction may be the responsibility of staff members. There is an assumption that all professional growth activities have some relevance to the school's goals, and that professional growth is a career-long process (Alberta Learning, 1997). In this study, the term professional growth is used synonymously with professional development.

Limitations

Although many schools, school divisions, and other organizations across the world have implemented study groups as a vehicle towards professional growth, it is difficult to say whether their study group experience would result in the same conclusions interpreted by this study. Many theorists have many different definitions for the notion of study groups. In addition to a wide array of definitions for the concept itself are the multitude of variations for which the study group process may be implemented from site to site. Implementation could be impacted by several factors, including size, number of staff, goals, time available, culture or history, to name a few. Implementation might look different in a school setting than it would in a business environment. This study is confined to a secondary school in a small central Alberta town. Therefore, any conclusions and recommendations are local and thematic.

Context and Procedure

At the time of the study, the school population of Lacombe Junior High was approximately 600 students in grades seven through nine. The school employed approximately forty school personnel. The members of this staff had various levels of experience and lengths of employment at Lacombe Junior High School. Many had fewer than ten years teaching experience. The administrative team was relatively new, having worked together as a team for three years. In the past three years, there were many maternity leaves which resulted in a fairly high degree of staff turnover. This turnover rate was coupled with staff members facing the challenges of new curricula in language arts, science and health. The school was part of a district-wide initiative that provided seven full-day designated professional development days to enable school sites to carry

out staff meetings and professional growth activities.

Many schools in the Wolf Creek School Division and across the province were using study groups as a vehicle for professional growth and school improvement. However, it was deemed more manageable by the researcher to limit the study to the specific context of Lacombe Junior High School where the researcher was employed as an assistant principal (although on maternity leave at the time of data collection). Focusing this study on the staff of Lacombe Junior High was a deliberate choice as the school is conveniently located close to the researcher's home. Since the purpose of this study was to explore how school personnel perceived the impact of study groups on professional growth, the staff of Lacombe Junior High provided an excellent sample group. Specifically, the staff was in their second year of participation in the study group process. They were new to the process, thus able to draw upon experiences from before and after the implementation of study groups as a vehicle toward professional growth. For reasons of convenience, it appeared more manageable to work with a group of subjects with whom the researcher had a previously established professional relationship. Anderson and Arsenault (1998) state that several access and entry issues affect the qualitative research experience (p. 126). These include:

1. Knowing the hierarchical structures of the organization.

2. Learning about the setting and what people do there.

3. Understanding the formal and informal politics of the site.

4. Learning names of key people.

5. Identifying appropriate ways of communication with people in the site.

6. Knowing how to fit in in terms of appearance and behaviour.

Because the researcher has worked with this staff for eight years, she was fully aware of both the formal and informal rules and regulations of the research site, and therefore better able to overtly enter the research field without the obstacles of entry and access issues.

The questionnaire (see Appendix C) was distributed to twenty-three staff members who had chosen to participate in study groups for the second year of the pilot project. Since all staff members participated in study groups in the first year of the project, the researcher obtained from the current administration a list of names of school personnel, who had chosen to discontinue their participation in year two,. Using this information all staff members who were continuing participation in a study group were contacted via electronic mail with an introduction to the study, the nature of the research, and an outline of the ethical guidelines the research would follow. This communication took place approximately five days before the surveys were distributed.

Questionnaire packages were hand-delivered to teacher mailboxes located in the staff lounge of the school. Each package contained the following information: Cover letter (Appendix A), Consent Form (Appendix B), Consent Form return envelope, Questionnaire (Appendix C), and Questionnaire return envelope. The questionnaire was distributed following a long weekend in November, 2002 which culminated parent-teacher-interview week at the school. It was deemed an appropriate time, as it was assumed that staff members would be well-rested from their time off, and the perception was that more time was available to complete a questionnaire since the preoccupations of ensuring marks were up to date and other factors involved in preparing for the parent conferences had passed the week previous to the questionnaire distribution week.

Participants were given eight days to complete and return the questionnaires. This was considered an appropriate amount of time to balance ensuring participants had adequate time to thoughtfully respond to the questionnaire, with avoiding a window of time that was so long that participants forgot to complete it. Within ten days after the questionnaire was collected was the end of the trimester and report card week. Understandably this is a very hectic time for school staff. The researcher wished to avoid adding another activity for staff to balance during such a busy time. Separate collection envelopes were located on the secretary's desk for both the sealed consent forms and the questionnaires to be returned. Each participant was asked to seal their completed questionnaire and consent form in the specified return envelopes found within their packages.

Instrument

The main data collection instrument consisted of a nine-item questionnaire (Appendix C) that covered the following themes:

1. Consent of participants

2. Background

3. Study Group Action Plans

4. Goals and Vision

5. Study Groups and Professional Growth

6. Professional Collaboration

7. Strengths and Weaknesses of Study Groups

8. Professional Development Focus

The survey was designed to get an overall picture of school-based staff's perceptions of the impact of study groups on professional growth. The use of this survey

gave insight into the individual and group growth that occurred as a result of the study group experience. The survey was based upon what the literature indicated as critical elements of authentic professional development. These elements included a change in focus towards teacher-directed professional growth, collaboration, goals and vision, and action related to goals and vision. The point of the survey was to develop a base of knowledge. The survey did not ask school staff to comment specifically on other staff members or members of their study groups. Participants were asked to comment more generally in relation to their experiences as a member of a study group. Participants who felt uncomfortable with any category or question on the survey were free to opt out of the whole survey or to eliminate parts of it.

A questionnaire was chosen as the primary data collection instrument because it allowed for a diverse range of data to be collected in an efficient and time-respectful manner. Like all school personnel, the staff at Lacombe Junior High School are busy people, attempting to maximize their efficiency while on the school site. All have equally busy lives outside of their jobs. It was believed that a short, efficient questionnaire would offer the best source of data collection in addition to being considerate of other demands on participant's time.

More substantive revisions to the questionnaire came following a pilot test of the document in its draft form. A group of seven school personnel were chosen from the Lacombe Junior High School site to pilot test the questionnaire. Members of the larger subject group were chosen for field-testing because the questions were developed with the Lacombe Junior High experience in mind. Six pilot tests were returned by the pilot-test participants. The pilot-test group consisted of five teaching staff and two support staff

members. Of this group, one member has discontinued study group participation in the current year. Each of these participants was asked to anonymously complete the pilot survey and return it within a one-week time frame. In addition to completing the survey, participants were asked to give feedback on the technical features of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of a variety of questioning techniques, each chosen for its unique ability to clearly glean pertinent information from participants. Multiple choice questions were used in approximately twenty per cent of the questionnaire. This type of question was believed to be appropriate for seeking demographic information from questionnaire participants. Since the questionnaire was anonymous, the researcher was limited to the type of demographic information that could be sought without infringing on the anonymity of respondents. As stated before, the study has been limited to participants who were members of study groups at Lacombe Junior High School for both school years of the project. Since all staff participated in study groups in year one, it was necessary to be certain that the people who received the questionnaire were indeed participating in study groups in the current year. The initial information regarding who was and was not continuing their participation in study groups was received from a third party. Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher solidify the assumption that if a participant received a questionnaire, they were indeed a current participant in a study group. No questionnaires were returned without the bottom portion of a consent form that matched a consent form envelope.

Based on the pilot testing, it was evident that the number of people in a study group correlated positively with the quality of perceptions that members had on the level of effectiveness of the group. Multiple choice questions were utilized to gain some

insight to the number of members in each study group being participated in currently and in the past.

In addition, the pilot test revealed some common types of activities in which study groups appeared to be engaging. These common activities were listed in an additional multiple choice question in order to efficiently ascertain the types of activities upon which individuals were basing their perceptions of study groups.

Approximately forty percent of the questionnaire consists of a five-point Likert Scale. This section requests respondents to rank their level of agreement with a series of statements about the study group process and appeared to be an efficient way of gaining important information. A neutral position was included on the scale in order to eliminate a situation where a participant avoided replying to an item if they sensed none of the "agree" choices applied to their experiences. It was also utilized in an effort to avoid the false choice of an non-applicable "agree" option because a neutral response was not available. From an analysis standpoint, a neutral response is less misleading than a false agreement or disagreement. The Likert Scale was chosen for the lion's share of the questionnaire because of its ease of analysis. Since the study's purpose is to describe and explain perceptions of the study group process, not to quantify them, the Likert Scale appeared to be a logical choice. In addition was the fact the researcher was confident that participants would be familiar with completing this type of question format.

Two ranking questions appear on the questionnaire. These questions were chosen as effective tools for better understanding participant's perceptions of both the strengths and weaknesses of the study group process. The strengths and weaknesses featured in the ranking questions were drawn from the pilot-test questionnaire. In the pilot-test,

respondents were asked to describe the differences between study groups and individual

enhancement plans. Pilot-test respondents had variable levels of enthusiasm for study

groups, and as a result, the responses received in this section gave some clear insight into

the strengths and weaknesses of the study group model for achieving professional

growth. The five most frequently mentioned strengths were:

1. Ability to tackle larger projects.

2. Professional relationships built on common beliefs, goals and motivation.

3. Collaboration in a relaxed environment.

4. Positive pressure from group ensures goals remain active.

5. Time to share experiences, materials, ideas.

The five most frequently mentioned weaknesses were:

1. Some group members do not contribute as much as others.

2. Uneven distribution of tasks.

3. Study group time not always focused on group's goals or objectives.

4. No one specifically accountable for realizing group's goals.

5. Need to compromise may take away from individual interests or needs.

There were two main areas where it was considered appropriate to elicit a more

detailed response from participants. In particular, the researcher was interested in

subjects' perceptions of what impact the activities of study groups had on classroom

practice or school climate. In order to ensure confidentiality, the question was phrased in

a way that participants could respond based on their own study group activities or based

on their perceptions of the activities of other groups in the school. The researcher chose

to include only one comment-on item in the questionnaire for two reasons, as outlined by

Anderson and Arsenault (1998). First, these types of responses, while they have the ability to encourage in-depth answers, tend to be biased toward the responses of those who are verbally expressive (p. 173). The researcher wished to avoid a situation where the perceptions of staff members on the impact of the activities of study groups were not confused with the willingness or aptitude of respondents to give in-depth responses. Second, Anderson and Arsenault (p. 173) caution that these types of responses are difficult to analyze and perceived as being more time-consuming by respondents. Much of the information that was originally sought by comment-on type questions in the pilot-test questionnaire has been better elicited in other question formats that are more efficiently analyzed.

Lastly, respondents were asked to list the qualities that they felt characterized an effective professional development activity. In order to draw conclusions based on whether school personnel, in this context, perceived study groups to be an effective vehicle towards professional growth, it was essential that an understanding was gained on respondent's views regarding the qualities of a good professional development activity. In order to avoid leading respondents into pre-selected qualities, a variation of a list question was chosen for this item. Participants were asked to list, in order of importance, three qualities of effective professional development activities. In doing this, the question provides additional information on the "potency of each suggestion" (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998, p. 173), allowing for analysis of the responses based on common features and similarities.

The survey was administered early in the second year of the Study Groups Pilot Project. Some staff study groups were well on their way to achieving many of their goals,

while others were still getting used to the change in process, using it as a catalyst for continuing professional growth. Some participants were working for a second year with some of the same study group members, while others had completely new study groups in the second year of implementation.

A cover letter, included in the questionnaire package (Appendix A) was used to convey important information about the researcher, the purpose, and methods to be used for the study. It also explained timelines and outlined the ethical principles involved. Participants were invited to contact the researcher, Faculty Supervisor, or the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee in the event of any questions regarding the research.

It is the belief of the researcher that any potential ethical conflicts arising from a pre-established professional relationship between the researcher and the subjects involved in the research was attended to as thoroughly as possible. Due to the fact that participants had the opportunity to opt out of the entire questionnaire or parts of it at any time, it was believed they should not have felt unduly obligated or coerced by their relationship with the researcher to participate in the survey.

Free and informed consent was secured from participants. The connection between free and informed consent and research ethics was clearly outlined in the cover letter. Participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) and return it in the consent form return envelope to a separate collection envelope. To ensure that consent had been secured for each completed questionnaire, participants were requested to place the bottom, unsigned section of the consent form in the questionnaire return envelope with their completed questionnaire. This section was numerically coded with the top

portion of the consent form in addition to the consent form return envelope. Bottom sections were verified with return envelopes to ensure that the consent form had been returned. It was made clear to participants that consent form envelopes would only be opened in the event that a question regarding the free and informed consent of a respondent arose. No consent form envelopes were opened by the researcher.

Because of the qualitative nature of the study, the researcher's interest was in interpreting the data within the specific context of Lacombe Junior High. In this situation, the professional connection to the staff of Lacombe Junior High was highly appropriate as it allowed the researcher to better understand the unique dynamics affecting the participants of study groups in this context. An understanding of this dynamic was essential to her ability to formulate useful and valid conclusions. A professional goal of the research was to seek ways to improve professional development at this school, therefore there existed an interest in finding the specific perceptions of staff at Lacombe Junior High.

By using a non-personal method of data collection in the form of a questionnaire consisting of non-leading questions, as well as through assurances of anonymity, all possible attempts were made to avoid a situation where participants felt obligated by their relationship with the researcher to give responses which they believed would be pleasing to the researcher. By using a survey format, participants were given the opportunity to reply honestly to the survey questions while remaining anonymous.

Participants were assured anonymity in two different ways. First, they were asked to note that their names and positions were not requested on the questionnaire. Past, unrelated survey experience with this staff had demonstrated that they indeed did respond

to survey questions in a frank and honest manner when their anonymity was secured. Second, by having the consent forms collected separately, participants should in no way have an infringement on their right to anonymity.

The statements and questions on the survey were formulated in the most straight-forward way possible in order to assure, to the best of the researcher's ability, that participants were able to respond in an honest fashion. To avoid any issue of deception, careful attention was paid to wording the statements in a positive and non-leading way.

Despite every effort to ensure the clarity and anonymity of the survey, it should be noted that there is never a guarantee with any data collection method that participants will respond to questions in a truthful manner. As a researcher, one can never be assured, beyond reasonable predictions, how any human subject is influenced by the researcher. The best that any researcher can do is to ensure all of the obvious impediments to the validity and reliability of the data collected have been attended to.

Since one of the anticipated benefits of participating in the study was to improve the study group experience leading to enhanced professional growth and school improvement, it was believed participants would be forthright in their feedback on the survey. No deception of subjects occurred with this survey.

Analysis

A complete and detailed description of the analysis process is outlined in Chapter Four: Analysis of the data. Once the surveys were completed and submitted, each completed survey was given the identification number shown on the bottom section of the consent form accompanying the questionnaire. The frequency of each response in the multiple choice, Likert Scale, and List questions was recorded in the raw data stage. This

data is displayed in visual form throughout the chapter. Once the raw data was collected, the researcher began looking at which statements, activities, and key words appeared most frequently in the raw data. From this, the researcher was able to make some inferences about the perceptions of staff members towards the ability of study groups to assist staff in attaining their professional development goals. For the comment-on question, participant's responses were transcribed. The researcher searched this transcribed raw data for common keywords or phraseology used by participants to describe the impact of study group activities on classroom practice and school climate. These keywords and phrases were then correlated to the list of basic teacher knowledge, skills, and attitudes as outlined in the Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Learning, 1997). Some examples of these categories were teaching variables, school variables, and student variables. With this information, the researcher was able to understand more clearly the impact that the study group process had on individual teachers and their classroom practice. It was the hope of the researcher that this section of the study was a useful reflection for those who have participated in the process, as it gave them an opportunity to articulate how this vehicle of professional growth led to school improvement both in a broad and narrow sense.

In an effort to eliminate bias, errors, and anomalies in the research, the research findings were validated by triangulating the responses from the sample group with theories found in the literature review as well as the researcher's perceptions of the impact of the study group process in this context.

There is an implicit assumption with the goal of this research project that study groups do indeed impact professional growth, therefore this study's aim has been to

understand to what extent that impact is perceived by participants.

Chapter Four: Findings

Due to her close proximity to the rich context of the findings, the researcher struggled with the balance of narrative voice and literal attention to the questionnaire results. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, interpretations were naturally constructed while reading participant's responses. As a result, it was deemed appropriate by the researcher to include those interpretations with the following report of the questionnaire's findings.

There was a level of disappointment in the return rate of the questionnaire, as it was the hope of the researcher to have a more statistically significant sample in order to make slightly more general conclusions. However, even based on twelve of 23 respondents returning completed questionnaires within the given timeframe, thematically and qualitatively, it is evident that study groups are an effective means of improving professional development.

Two electronic-mail reminders were sent to participants, one four days after the questionnaires were distributed. The second reminder message was sent one day before the deadline for returning questionnaires. Most participants responded to all items on the questionnaire. More details of items with no response will be given in each applicable section.

Consent

All participants indicated they understood the terms and ethical guidelines of the study as outlined in the accompanying cover letter. More importantly, all returned questionnaires contained a bottom section of the consent form which corresponded with a sealed consent form envelope, indicating that informed consent had been granted by all

participants who responded to the questionnaire. Participants were previously informed in the cover letter that consent form return envelopes would only be opened in the event that a question or concern arose over a participant's free or informed consent. No consent form return envelopes were opened. In addition to securing consent from participants, it was also necessary to obtain some important contextual background information in order to better understand the questionnaire responses.

Background

This section was concerned with gaining some demographic information regarding the experiences of study group participants in order to better understand their frame of reference for subsequent responses.

Are you currently participating in a study group at LJHS? All twelve respondents indicated they were indeed current participants in a study group. This item was necessary to solidify the assumption based on the list obtained from the current administration of the school, that all members of the sample group based on the list obtained from the current administration at the school had continued their study group participation into year two of the pilot program.

How many members were in the study group you participated in last year? It is clear from the responses that in the initial year of the study groups project, the majority of study groups had four or more members. Lick and Murphy (1998) recommend that an effective study group contain no more than three members. Although this guideline was communicated to staff in the initial stages of the project, no formal limitations were set by the administration of LJHS on the size of study groups. This was done in an effort to allow the process to be as grass roots as possible, and to allow staff members to form and

join teams they felt would be relevant to their individual and collective professional growth needs.

How many members are in the study group you are participating in **this year**? Interestingly, in year two of the study group project, five respondents indicated that their study groups comprised two members. This data is consistent with information gleaned from the pilot tests and through informal communication with study group participants last year. There appears to be a clear correlation between the size of the study group and participant's perceptions on its ability to effectively lead them to professional growth. One respondent did not choose any of the options in this section, rather wrote the phrase "only one" beside the choices. It is unclear what the intentions or meaning of this statement were, therefore this survey was not included in the analysis of this section.

Study Group Action Plans

This section asked participants to indicate the types of activities in which they were participating in relation to their involvement in a study group. Participants were also asked to share their perceptions of the features of the study group process. Respondents were asked to draw upon their experiences from both years of study group participation in indicating their responses.

Indicate the study group activities you engaged in last year or are engaging in this year. This item gave participants an opportunity to define what actions took place in relation to the goals established by study groups. Goals and visions that do not result in actions are not fulfilling the purpose of professional growth or study groups.

The most common response to this question was the sharing of materials. Eleven of twelve respondents indicated this as an activity they were engaging in either in the

current year or in the first year of the project. This activity was further substantiated by the next largest numbers of participants who indicated they also participated in or were participating in the development of materials and team planning with seven and six respondents respectively responding to those two categories. In the two years of the pilot project, staff have been faced with new curricula in the areas of science and health. In the two years prior to the study group project's beginnings at Lacombe Junior High, new language arts and physical education curricula were implemented. Although staff meet reasonably regularly in a departmental capacity (Humanities Department for teachers of social studies or language arts and Science / Math Department for teachers of science or math), the emphasis of these meetings has been on information dissemination, Achievement Test analysis, correspondence, and conferences. The climate of these meetings has been, for the most part, business-like due to time constraints. Although sharing of resources and team planning is encouraged at these meetings, it is the opinion of the researcher that the business-like format of these meetings in addition to their scheduling after the school day was over were major obstacles to successful sharing and team planning occurring in this situation. Even when they did take place during Professional Development days, the amount of time allotted for department meetings either formally through scheduling or informally due to the fact that staff members have a host of other constraints to their after-school time, simply did not allow for effective sharing or planning to take place. While it is true that many staff members previously and currently use much of their personal time to address team planning and material sharing, this is not perceived by the researcher to be adequate.

There are currently no formal accommodations such as common prep time or

team teaching arrangements within teacher timetables in which team planning or goal setting could take place. As a result, it is obvious that many school personnel have used study groups as a mechanism in which to deal with the planning and assessment needs of changing curricula. It makes sense that these demands would be more efficiently met with a team approach since all members of each department have the same requirements when it comes to curriculum implementation. Study groups have offered a structured but relaxed environment in which to approach these challenges. Typically, study groups have been allotted larger chunks of time on professional development days.

Smaller numbers of respondents (5) indicated that research on teaching or learning, or the applications of innovations or learning theories were activities that study groups were taking part in. Many staff members were interested in increasing their own learning on many popular theories being referred to in the world of education. These theories included brain-based learning, and the effects of nutrition on learning. The staff of Lacombe Junior High, like all educators are fully aware of the benefits of professional reading and research as a vehicle to improving teaching and learning for students. All teachers have built-in preparation time in their timetables. Most teachers would indicate that this time is used to try to keep abreast of the daily responsibilities of marking, individual planning, and photocopying. It seems fair to say that most teachers, in any school, would indicate that they would welcome more prep time just to assist in keeping up with these daily demands. Obviously, not a lot of prep time is being used for professional reading or research. Study groups have offered a scheduled environment conducive to giving staff members opportunities to pursue this type of activity. This has led not only to research but also to activities resulting in the application of learning

theories in classrooms and in the school in general.

Of particular note was the fact that not one respondent indicated that peer observation was an activity engaged in by study groups in either year of the project. There is an assumption here that although the teachers of Lacombe Junior High know the merits of participating in peer observation, this activity has not been a result of study groups goals and activities because the act of observing peers must take place during teachers' own prep time. As an administrator, the researcher can list many occasions where she has offered to cover classes for teachers wishing to engage in peer-observation, but has not been approached to do so by any member of staff. Perhaps the notion of peer-observation still carries some evaluative qualities that make staff members feel unsettled or uncomfortable either visiting or being visited by their peers. It seems obvious that such an activity would be of benefit, most notably to those staff members engaging in material sharing, team planning and development of materials.

Goals and Vision

In order to be effective, professional growth activities need to be firmly rooted in the goals and vision of all stakeholders in a school. This includes provincial and district goals in addition to the goals of a school and its staff. Activities that are not linked in some way to these goals can not be considered professional growth.

All participants in the questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements in this section. Obviously, all respondents perceived study groups as a vehicle for linking professional development goals that were meaningful or important to school personnel with school improvement and actions that enhanced classroom practice. This section appears to give some insights into participant's perceptions of the purpose of the

study group process and the relevance of its activities towards improving the school or classroom practice. All too often, the perception communicated by this staff has been that large group PD sessions, conference, or convention sessions are often irrelevant or lack meaning for participants. Often, staff attend conferences or conventions and are hard-pressed to find sessions that address their needs or goals. It seems that participants are able to see study groups as an opportunity to address some of those needs or goals at a grass-roots level.

<u>Study Groups and Professional Growth</u>

This section attempted to discover information about participants' perceptions of the study group process as a vehicle towards achieving professional growth. It drew upon participants' current and past professional development experiences. It should be noted that at the time of the survey's distribution, only one formal time for study groups to meet had been allotted since the beginning of the school year.

<u>Study groups are an effective use of PD time.</u> Ten of twelve respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Two participants disagreed with it. Some interesting correlations will be made between this statement and subsequent responses in the conclusions section of this research project.

<u>Participating in a study group helps me better pursue my professional development goals.</u> Nine respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Two participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. The assumption here is that participants perceived the process as being an improved or more effective vehicle toward the achievement of professional growth.

<u>I achieve more professional growth through study groups than I did with an individual enhancement plan.</u> The purpose of this item was to understand participants' perceptions of their level of professional growth both before and after the study group process began. Prior to the use of study groups at LJHS, all staff completed an individual enhancement plan. Since some of the shortfalls of completely individually managed professional growth through the enhancement plan process were some of the catalysts for attempting the study groups pilot project in the first place, it was of interest to the researcher as to whether participants felt it was an improvement over the use of the individual plans. Interestingly, seven respondents indicated they agreed with this statement, yet five respondents were either unsure or in disagreement with the statement in spite of the fact that responses to the effectiveness and improved method of professional development were much more favourable. Part of this discrepancy is likely attributed to the fact that study groups have not had sufficient time in which to pursue their group's goals and activities. Therefore, in the context of this second year of the project, participants are possibly feeling they have not had an opportunity to pursue their individual or group professional development needs in any capacity.

The study group process has contributed to more freedom in terms of PD activity selection. This item was concerned with understanding whether participants felt they had been given more independence and control over their own professional growth as a result of the study group process. Eight of twelve respondents indicated they felt more freedom in terms of activity selection. Four indicated they were unsure or disagreed with the statement. Study group time has been preoccupied with a district inservice on gifted and talented students and first aid training sessions which all staff were required to attend and

those who were unsure or disagreed with the statement may have interpreted this situation as extending less freedom in terms of PD activity selection, since the activities planned by study groups were pre-empted for other types of professional development.

Professional Collaboration

One of the strengths of the study group model is that it offers a foundation upon which collegial relationships and collaborative cultures can be built. These types of cultures and relationships have the power to shift schools, classroom practice, and professional growth to new levels. All participants, with the exception of one indicated strong agreement or agreement to the three items pertaining to professional collaboration, namely, enhanced relationships with staff members, increased professional dialogue, and opportunities to work collaboratively with others on staff. More details of the specific context of this collaboration will be explored in subsequent sections, as these results correlate specifically to many of the responses to the comment-on question at the end of the questionnaire. Again, in the business of a large junior high school, opportunities for this type of collaboration and collegiality are few and far between. Professional dialogue and enhanced relationships can only improve the culture of a school.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Study Groups

A ranking item was used in this section to ascertain the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the study group process. Of particular interest is the fact that in both the strength and weakness ranking, factors relating to time were the most frequently ranked as being the most important factor. It appears that time is seen both positively and negatively in terms of participants' experiences with study groups. Time to share experiences, materials and ideas was ranked most frequently as being the most important

strength by questionnaire respondents. Once again, participants are implying that study groups have provided an opportunity whereby this type of professional dialogue and collegiality may take place. The factor and importance of time and its relationship to study groups was also clearly indicated as an important weakness of the study group process. Most frequently, respondents indicated that study group time was not always focused on the group's goals or objectives. Two meanings can be inferred from this clear statement by participants. First, as often occurs with any type of group activity which occurs in a casual, relaxed environment, the focus of a group may sway towards socializing, and other discussions not necessarily directly related to the goals at hand, leaving the amount of time actually spent on actions related to the group's professional growth goals to be diminished. Second, and perhaps more accurate, is the statement being made by participants that professional development days have been spent on whole-group activities or institutes rather than on providing time for study groups to pursue their action plans.

The second most highly ranked strength of study groups was the perception that positive pressure from the group ensured that goals remained active. This data correlates specifically to one of the chief reasons for beginning the study group pilot project in the first place at Lacombe Junior High School. Many school personnel had vocalized a concern that goals and good intentions characterized the beginning of the school year when individual enhancement plans were being crafted. However, often, due to the pressures of other responsibilities and the solitary nature of the personal enhancement plan, the excitement and good intentions of those goals waned over the course of the school year, leaving some or many of the goals inactive. By working in study groups,

many participants experienced a sense of responsibility and obligation not only to the study group action plan, but also to the members of the study group. Many groups delegated certain tasks or information gathering among their members. This work was often required to be completed for the next study group meeting. For many, this team approach was a good opportunity for ensuring that members continued their professional growth throughout the course of the school year.

The team approach was, interestingly, mirrored as the second most frequently rated weakness of the study group process. Many respondents indicated that some group members did not or were not contributing as much as others towards the study group action plan. It appears that just as team work can have an advantage in terms of applying positive pressure to a group, teamwork can also fall dismally short when all the members of a group are not contributing equitably to the study group's action plan. Just as study groups can be an energizing environment for the power of positive teamwork, they can also be a convenient hiding place for participants who wish to get maximum results from minimum effort. This is an unfortunate side effect of any group endeavour. Due to personality, assertiveness, or level of ambition, the reality is that some members of groups work harder than others. This is particularly troublesome in a situation where all school personnel are required to be a member of a study group team. Add to this situation groups that are too large, and the perception is often that few do much and many do little. This weakness appears to have worked itself out to a certain degree in the second year of the project, where school personnel were not required to be a member of a study group team, and teams appear to be more manageable in size. The perception of the researcher, based on the overall findings of the survey, is that despite a high level of

active participation in the actions of study groups, even those members whom others perceived as not contributing equitably, probably still achieved more professional growth in a study group capacity than they did with an individual enhancement plan. It should be noted that almost the same number of respondents indicated the fact that no one appeared specifically responsible for realizing the goals of the study group was a second-most-important weakness of the process. Unless a group member took on this responsibility herself or himself, there appeared to be a lack of ongoing reflection or evaluation by study groups to ensure that their actions were consistent with the goals and objectives set out by their group at the beginning of the year. Administration at the school met with participants, individually, half way through the school year to discuss the process, and the progress of the goals and objectives of the action plan. However, at no time did this type of meeting occur collectively with the study groups themselves.

The ability to tackle larger projects was most frequently rated the least important strength of study groups. This correlates with the other strength ratings in that participants were most affected by study groups' ability to provide opportunities for sharing and collaboration. Essentially, study groups were seen as an effective vehicle to find the time to achieve the grassroots, important functions of everyday teaching and learning occurring in classrooms, not to take on larger-than-life projects or goals. Participants most frequently indicated that the need for compromise and its draw away from personal interests or needs was the weakness of the least importance. Perhaps this could be a result of members perceiving an opportunity within the process to voice their preferences for topics, direction, and actions within their study groups. If study groups offered an opportunity for collaboration and collegiality, then study group members

should have felt a sense of ownership over the activities of that group.

Effect on Classroom Practice and School Culture

Respondents were asked to detail their perceptions of what was happening differently in classrooms or the school as a result of their own or others' study group participation in a comment-on item. All participants responded in some degree to this item. Responses were transcribed and key words from the responses were categorized into several of the descriptors of the knowledge, skills, and attributes of quality teaching as described by Alberta Education's (1996) *An Integrated Framework to Enhance the Quality of Teaching in Alberta* (Quality Teaching Document).

Enhanced student learning. The Quality Teaching Document formalizes the connection between enhanced teacher practice and enhanced student learning. Since the single most important function of a school is student learning, any quality professional growth for teachers should always have a correlation with student learning, otherwise the purpose or significance of it should be questioned. The Quality Teaching Document indicates that "all students can learn albeit at different rates and in different ways...They [teachers] understand the need to respond to differences by creating multiple paths to learning..." (p. 26). Respondents at Lacombe Junior High mentioned enhanced student learning as a result of study group participation six times in the raw data. Many of these responses detailed how study groups had assisted them and others in enhancing classroom presentation, developing common teaching practices, and trying new ideas. Others indicated that study groups had created an opportunity for reflection both during and following study group time, resulting in more intentional, purposeful teaching moments in the classroom. Sharing and improving resources were also mentioned as

having direct implications to student learning.

Teacher planning. Teacher planning, as previously mentioned, was a commonly cited activity in which study groups engaged at Lacombe Junior High. It was the most frequently mentioned outcome of study groups by respondents. The Quality Teaching Document specifies that quality teaching demonstrates a recognition of the need for variation in planning in order to translate curriculum outcomes into quality learning opportunities for students (p. 26). Although all members of the teaching profession recognize this obvious skill, successful and meaningful planning takes time, especially when teachers are faced with a change in curriculum. If this time is not scheduled into other areas of a teacher's timetable, the ability for it to occur in its most successful sense is severely limited. Study group participants at Lacombe Junior High indicated that study time had been put to good use by creating an opportunity for school personnel to gather resources, develop new units, troubleshoot program glitches, and create more diverse groups of lessons and ideas.

Instructional strategies. Quality teaching involves knowledge and attendance to the fact there are many approaches to teaching and learning. Teachers "know a broad range of instructional strategies appropriate to their areas of specialization and the subject discipline they teach, and they [teachers] know which strategies are appropriate to help students achieve different outcomes" (p. 26). Frequently, participants indicated that study groups have given them an opportunity to discuss, learn and better accommodate various instructional strategies which could be applied to their own classroom practice. Strategies mentioned by respondents from Lacombe Junior High included ideas for the implementation of specific curricular objectives, effective troubleshooting, strategies

linked to social and academic characteristics of students, and classroom management strategies. It appears that study groups have been an excellent sounding board for both experienced and inexperienced school personnel to share and gain new insights into teaching and learning. This is particularly powerful when the members of a study group teach the same students, curriculum or grade level.

Collegiality. Collegial staff cultures are characterized by collaborative efforts to improve teaching and learning. Quality teachers recognize the importance of contributing both independently and collegially to the overall quality of a school (p. 27). Collegial relationships are not only about contributing to the quality of a school, but also extend to seeking strategies for maintaining that quality. Respondents at Lacombe Junior High repeatedly mentioned that the study group process provided a foundation in which school personnel had a relaxed opportunity in which to network, communicate, formally support one another, work more closely with one another, and promote professional relationships with one another. Study groups provided a small niche in the busy schedules of teachers in which to engage in professional dialogue in a small-group safe environment.

Quality of school. On the same note, some participants elaborated that the professional relationships built or strengthened through study groups had a positive effect on the atmosphere in the school. A sense of community was the result of some study group's experiences, where members felt a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves. In essence, the attitude could be described as small communities of professionals working together for the benefit of the school.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

In order to ascertain whether participants perceived study groups as an effective

professional development activity, it was essential to understand how respondents defined effective professional development. The assumption here is that respondents were using these definitions as a frame of reference upon which they experienced participating in a study group. The researcher was interested in seeking common features among the various responses from respondents and triangulating this data with previous responses on the questionnaire. Participants were requested to rank, in order of importance, three characteristics of an effective professional development activity.

The Alberta Teachers Association's (2001) policy on Professional Development defines professional development as "the wide range of activities teachers do individually or collectively to improve their professional practice and to enhance student learning" (p. 1). As listed in the background section of this study, in addition to elaborating on the importance of adequate time and funding for professional development, this document also discusses twelve characteristics of effective professional development programs as previously outlined on page four.

A number of descriptors from this list were used to categorize and interpret the multitude of responses on this item. Attention was also paid to the frequency of responses in each category and the ranking each of those responses received from participants.

Ongoing and school-based. Respondents indicated that quality professional development activities were characterized by long-term usefulness and the results of the activity had permanent value to school personnel. This attribute was ranked second and third by participants who indicated qualities that fell into this category. By the nature of the responses, it was the permanence of the value of a professional development activity

rather than the fact it was school-based that characterized the responses in this category.

Provides a climate of trust, peer support, open communication and collaboration. With the exception of one response, all descriptors listed by respondents in this category were ranked first or second. Keywords such as commitment, collaboration, and cooperation were mentioned frequently by participants as qualities of effective professional development activities. Again, the data clearly leans towards the need of school personnel to engage in opportunities where professional dialogue and collaborative cultures can occur. The word *commitment* is of particular interest. It is the interpretation of the researcher that this term could imply one of two things. First, it may indicate a need for commitment of time, money and opportunities to encourage the engagement of quality professional development. It may also be implying the need for commitment by and to all those involved in the professional growth activity, be that a study group or otherwise.

Provides practical experience to teachers in a variety of activities. Responses that could be categorized by this descriptor of effective professional development activities were the most commonly mentioned by participants. They were also the most commonly ranked first or second in importance. Far and away, the most common theme of the responses to this item was the importance of professional development activities with direct relevance to the learning needs of classrooms. Respondents cited characteristics such as the importance of professional development being related to classroom happenings, practical, and resulting in improvements to teaching or planning. Clearly, participants are looking for professional development opportunities that provide them with the knowledge and skills that enhance their quality of teaching with an obvious

correlation to quality learning opportunities as a direct result of enhanced teaching. This seems to be a logical need from a group of very busy school personnel. As previously indicated, this group wishes to maximize their time "on the job" so it seems logical that they would also have the same requirement from professional development. No one wants to sit through professional development that appears to be a waste of one's precious time or irrelevant to the realities of classroom life.

Provides adequate time for participating in ongoing professional development. A definite importance has been placed, in all aspects of the questionnaire responses, on the factor of time. Time was again frequently mentioned by respondents, in this case in relation to the qualities of effective professional development activities. One participant mentioned the need for sufficient time for implementing new skills or knowledge gained through professional development. Time was also mentioned in its most literal sense several times in this item. Once again, participants are communicating that time must be allotted for professional growth within the school day and that time must actually be given to participants in order to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion.

Based on a flexible long-term plan that provides opportunities for evaluation and monitoring. It was somewhat surprising to see a number of responses that reflected the desire of personnel to have professional development activities monitored to ensure their benefits and impact on classrooms. Perhaps these responses shed some light onto a potential shortfall of large group professional development sessions at conferences or conventions. School personnel attend these activities, but there is never any follow-up by the individuals themselves, nor by administration or others to measure the impact, implementation, or benefit of that particular activity on classrooms. Study groups, whose

members meet regularly, and who are committed to common goals create an environment

of peer support and follow-up.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the general impression is that school personnel at Lacombe Junior High School perceive study groups to be a worthwhile professional development activity. As with any pilot project, the perceptions of those participating are of the utmost value in fine tuning and adjusting the experience for the benefit of all who are involved. Therefore, the perceptions communicated by staff on the questionnaire have come at an important time in the evolution of study groups in this context. The findings of this study have contributed to an understanding that school personnel perceive study groups to be an effective use of professional development time. In essence, it is clear that this sample of study group participants feels that an effective study group experience is one that enables individual gains through a group effort. School personnel at Lacombe Junior High School have communicated that any professional growth activity must meet this criterion in order to be described as effective.

Recommendations

The conclusions drawn from the data gathered in this study have numerous implications for school personnel and administrators wishing to establish or maintain a study group program as a means of pursuing professional growth. Although the sample group size in this study is small and limited to the experiences of study group participation in one site, the responses of participants are consistent with the theoretical arguments for establishing quality professional growth in schools. The guiding questions listed in the methodology of this study have been addressed in the findings of the questionnaire. On the basis of this study, the researcher recommends the following conditions for ensuring quality professional development through the study group

process:

1. Adequate time is allotted in which study groups may pursue their goals and activities. This professional development time must be worked into the school calendar and can not be solely reliant on participants' personal time outside of school hours.

2. All members of a study group are committed to its goals and to the actions required to meet those goals. This means that in order for the group process to be successful, the tasks and responsibilities of each group member must be equitably divided among and executed by participants.

3. Study group members are supported in the pursuit of activities that have meaningful and practical connections with their classroom practice. Participants in study groups maintain the right to formulate their goals and direction based on the needs and interests of the group provided these goals and directions lie within the framework of the school's goals.

4. Participation in study groups should be optional. School personnel who wish to work individually, in the traditional enhancement plan format, are free to do so. This allows for more autonomy in terms of professional growth direction, and maintains a better chance that all members of a study group are indeed committed to a common goal and direction.

Time. As with most things which occur within the school setting, the notion of time is consistently cited as the most important catalyst or obstacle for ensuring the success or failure of an activity, be it professional development or otherwise. Time has been a key factor in the establishment of the Study Groups Pilot Project at Lacombe

Junior High. As previously indicated, a widespread shift has occurred in education in relationship to the pursuit of professional development. This shift has involved a move from solely whole-group activities towards a consideration for more teacher autonomy in professional development choice and activities. This shift occurred in the context of Wolf Creek School Division with the decision to move towards seven whole-day professional development days written into the school calendar. The allotment of time is clearly not an issue from a district perspective nor from a Lacombe Junior High perspective. The shift has had its most far-reaching implications on the decisions about how to ensure effective utilization of professional development time. It appears that it is in this area that this change of focus for professional development has had the most effect on these decisions.

In order for activities such as study groups to be effective vehicles for professional growth, schools need to make the shift from "filling time" to "using time" when it has been allotted to them. This problem stems from the traditional approach to professional development where time was not written into the school calendar, and when it was, it was done minimally at best. Now that the resource of time is not a concern, a commitment to using that time in ways that are the most effective to teaching and learning must be made. More importance must be placed on the value of teacher dialogue, sharing and team-planning as legitimate professional growth pursuits. It is assumed that, traditionally, these activities have been seen as extras and fillers for time on PD days which had not been filled with whole-group style activities. Dialogue, sharing, and team-planning can no longer be seen as extras, but rather must be regarded as professional development priorities. When school communities begin to see these activities as valuable and important, the amount of time granted to them will increase.

More importantly, the amount of time taken away from them will be minimized.

Time is also directly related to the second of the guiding questions for this study, dealing with the relationship between school culture and the study group experience. Collaboration among school personnel occurs when they have an opportunity to engage in professional dialogue, collective inquiry and experimentation based on a shared mission and goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 25). None of these activities can be accomplished without the gift and commitment to quality time. School administrators who ensure that adequate time is scheduled within the school calendar as well as within individual professional development days for these pursuits to occur send a clear message to school personnel that these activities are not only important, but are priorities for ensuring staff development and, more importantly, enhanced student learning. Taking time away from these activities sends a contradictory message to school personnel on the original importance of the activity in the first place. DuFour and Eaker describe collaborative cultures as "relentless" in their pursuit of answers and learning (p. 25). As previously noted in the review of the literature, the momentum of such collective inquiry is a powerful vehicle for enhancing classroom practice. However, when large frames of inactivity occur between inquiry sessions, the effectiveness of these groups is seriously challenged and the excitement and purpose is left behind.

Although time has been communicated as the single most important characteristic for the effectiveness of study groups by respondents in this study, it should be noted that the notion of time is indeed a perceived entity. School personnel have more time than ever before in which to pursue professional development within the school calendar. However, the perception is that it is still inadequate for meeting the needs of professional

growth. One has to wonder if there exists a magic number of minutes or hours when the perception would be that adequate resources of time were available.

We live in a culture that encourages, if not dictates, the importance of being busy and occupied at all times. Professional growth is only one of many areas, both professional and personal, in which school personnel perceive a lack of time to be a major obstacle. This perception should, however, not take away from the necessity of prioritizing professional development activities with direct connections to the classroom needs and interests of school personnel. Instead, it should be used as a catalyst for future research on determining the perceptions and needs of school personnel in regards to the actual amount of time required for the pursuit of professional development activities. It should be a catalyst for leaders to commit to being present and participant stakeholders in authentic professional growth programs.

Support. Related to the scheduling and prioritization of study group activities at the school level is the need to continue administrative support and district sanction of these activities through supervision of group members on an individual basis as well as through informal "drop-ins" while study groups are in progress. Both of these activities enable school-based administrators to increase their awareness of how study groups are interacting and how they are using their time. In addition to an increase in awareness, such drop-ins make the administrator available as a resource to study groups as they work together.

Key, committed leaders who take the time to become familiar with the activities of study groups as well as observe their actions in process, go beyond the supervisory capacity of an administrator. Obviously, an administrator has a responsibility for ensuring

school personnel are accountable for their time during professional development days. More importantly, inquiry such as this speaks volumes to the importance that an administrator places on this type of professional development. Such support clearly indicates that the administrator sees the activities of study groups as worthwhile and important. As a result, the study group no longer works in isolation, and a reciprocal bridge is formed between the study group and administrator which facilitates the kind of collaborative cultures that enable dialogue and growth to occur.

Reflection. Like the traditional Teacher Professional Growth Plan process, study group participants need to continue reflecting on their goals and actions. This element can and should continue to occur in a variety of both formal and informal formats. Informal "drop-ins" or inquiries made by the administrator allow for this type of reflection to occur. This activity allows the administrator and the participant to make the connection between the goals of a study group and the actions pursued during professional development time to carry out the commitment to the goals set at the beginning of the school year. It allows members of a study group to "take stock" of this relationship when an inquiry or visit by an administrator occur. On a more formal basis, when the administrator meets with members or the group as a whole, midway and at the end of the school year, it is appropriate to maintain some reflective component to the meeting. Study group participants should be required to articulate either individually or collectively the relationship between their goals and their actions throughout the school year. This type of discussion validates the importance of the relationship between goals and actions in addition to articulating bench marks and progress points of the group's activities to date.

Professional Development occurs for numerous reasons. Most importantly, the goal of professional development is to improve the quality of teaching and enhance the learning of students. Study groups, when characterized by the conditions perceived and outlined in this study, are one vehicle for effectively reaching the goal of professional development.

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Appendix A
Cover Letter

November 12, 2002

Dear Study Group Questionnaire Participant:

As a Master of Education student with the University of Lethbridge, I am conducting a study to determine how school personnel perceive the impact of study groups on professional growth. The purpose of the study is to explore the factors that contribute to the following guiding question: How do school personnel at Lacombe Junior High School perceive the impact of study groups on school improvement and professional growth? Embedded into the research are the following sub questions:
1. How are study groups a change in focus for professional development?
2. What is the relationship between staff culture and study groups?
3. What is the relationship between goals or vision of professional growth and actions that carry out those goals?

For the purpose of the study, school personnel includes teachers, teacher assistants and library technicians who participate(d) in study groups at Lacombe Junior High School both last year and this year.

I anticipate that you and others will benefit from participation in this study by providing some direction for improving professional growth programs. As participants in study groups, your perceptions are the most accurate in terms of indicating the impact of study groups. You have had an opportunity to experience directly how study groups have left an impression on your professional growth and how they have impacted learning in your classrooms.

This study will be used as part of my Master of Education two-credit final project with the University of Lethbridge.The current working title of this project is "Professional development and study groups: Perceptions of school personnel."

Research Ethics

You can be assured that all information will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. I will be the only one with access to the survey data. When responses are released, they will be reported in summary form only. All names, locations, and any other identifying information will NOT be included in any discussion of the results. A copy of the summarized results will be made available to the L.J.H.S. upon completion. Individual participants may contact me by phone at 342-6758 or e-mail (cmthorsteinson@shaw.ca) for a personal copy of the results. The summarized data will be used as part of my culminating Master of Education project that will be published by the University of Lethbridge and housed in the University's library collection where it may be lent to other students and researchers. A published copy will be forwarded to the Lacombe Junior High School Library upon completion.

You have the right to withdraw without prejudice from the study at any time. This includes not participating in the study.

As part of this research project, I am requesting the following of you:

1. *Read this cover letter closely.* This letter includes important information on the details of the study, the attention to ethics it follows, and how participants may access the research findings.

2. *Follow the directions on the attached consent form.* Research ethics obligate researchers to obtain free and informed consent from their participants. The consent form has been designed in such a way as to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, the privacy of participants. This form indicates that you understand the nature of the research study and agree to participate in the study under its terms. You are not required to complete the consent form if you do not wish to participate in the survey.

3. *Complete the attached survey by November 19, 2002.* The survey is concerned with your perceptions of how the study group experience differs from the individual enhancement plan process. The survey also seeks participant's views on how study groups are linked to collaboration, school culture, goals, and actions related to these goals. The survey consists of a Likert Scale, multiple choice, ranking and comment-on questions. It is anticipated the survey will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete. Please note that you have not been asked to identify yourself or your position anywhere on the survey.

4. *Place your completed survey in the envelope provided.* Please seal the envelope and place it in the large collection envelope on Linda Harink's desk. Surveys will be returned to me at the end of the day on November 19, 2002.

The enclosed survey was field tested earlier this fall with a sample of study group participants at Lacombe Junior High. Modifications have been made to the survey as a result of the feedback from the field test.

I very much appreciate your assistance in this study. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at 342-6758 or cmthorsteinson@shaw.ca. Also feel free to contact the supervisor of my project, Dr. Leah Fowler by phone at 403-329-2457 or e-mail (leah.fowler@uleth.ca). You may also contact the chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee if you wish additional information. The chair of the committee is Dr. Cathy Campbell. She may be reached by phone at 403-329-2459 or e-mail cathy.Campbell@uleth.ca

Kind regards,

Corrine Thorsteinson

Appendix B
Consent Form

Research Ethics dictate that in order for a researcher to use data collected in a study, the researcher is obligated to obtain written, and informed consent from participants in the study.

This consent form has been designed in a way that optimizes participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality.

Both sections of this form, as well as the consent form return envelope have been numerically coded. The codes from the section of this form submitted with completed surveys will be verified with the consent form envelope to ensure the consent form has been returned. Consent form return envelopes will only be opened in the event that a question or concern over the free and informed consent of participants arises during or after the research has been completed.

<u>Consent Form Directions</u>

Please follow these steps for completing the consent form:

1. *Sign the top portion of this form.* By signing this section, you indicate that you understand the nature of the research study and agree to participate in the study based on the terms and research ethics outlined in the cover letter.

2. *Place the top, signed portion of this form in the<u>consent form return envelope</u> included in your package.* **Do not include this section with your completed questionnaire.**

3. *Include the bottom, unsigned section of this form <u>with your completed questionnaire</u>.* **In doing this, you indicate to the researcher that you have signed the consent form,** understand the terms of the study and agree to participate in the study based on the terms and research ethics outlined in the cover letter.

I understand the terms of the research study entitled "Professional Development and Study Groups: Perceptions of School Personnel." I agree to participate in the study based on the terms and ethical guidelines outlined in the attached cover letter. I understand that identifying codes on both sections of this form will only be verified with one another in the event that a question or concern over free and informed consent arises during or after the data collection. I understand that I am free to withdraw, without prejudice, at any time from the study. This includes not participating in the study.

(signature)

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By returning this section of the consent form with my completed survey, I am indicating to the researcher that I have signed the consent form, understand the terms of the study and agree to participate in the study based on the terms and research ethics outlined in the cover letter.

Appendix C
Questionnaire

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDY GROUPS

Questionnaire for Study Group Participants

The purpose of this survey is to determine how school staff perceives the impact of study groups on professional growth and school improvement. For the purposes of this study, school staff is defined as any teacher, teacher assistant, or library technician who participated in a study group last year and this year. Please be open and honest—this study is interested in your frank perceptions of the process. Do not sign your name. The results of the questionnaire will be grouped and individual questionnaires will be kept confidential.

CONSENT

1

> I understand the terms of the study "Professional Development and Study Groups: Perceptions of School Personnel" as outlined in the attached cover letter.
> ❑ yes
> ❑ no

BACKGROUND

2   Are you currently participating in a study group at LJHS?   ❑ yes ❑ no

3   How many members were in the study group you participated in **last year**?
❑ Two   ❑ Four
❑ Three   ❑ Five or more

4   How many members are in the study group you are participating in **this year**?
❑ Two   ❑ Four
❑ Three   ❑ Five or more

STUDY GROUP ACTION PLANS

5   Indicate the study group activities you engaged in last year or are engaging in this year. Check as many as apply.

❑ Sharing Materials   ❑ Peer Observation

❑ Team Planning   ❑ Development of materials (i.e. lessons)

❑ Research on teaching or learning ❑ Application of innovations (i.e. software)

❑ Application of learning theories

GOALS AND VISION

6 Please rank your level of agreement to each of the following aspects of the study group process. Place an **X** under the response which best indicates your experiences in a study group either this year or last year. Please only give one response per statement

⇨ The goals of study groups are linked to school or classroom improvement.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ The goals of study groups address needs that are meaningful or important to the group's members.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ The goals of study groups lead to actions that enhance classroom practice.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

STUDY GROUPS AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

⇨ Study groups are an effective use of PD time

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ Participating in a study group helps me better pursue my professional development goals.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ I achieve more professional growth through study groups than I did with an individual enhancement plan.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ I prefer the use of study groups over the individual enhancement plan to pursue professional development.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ The study group process has contributed to more freedom in terms of PD activity selection.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

⇨ Participation in a study group enhances my relationships with other school staff members.

Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Not Sure*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
❏	❏	❏	❏	❏

⇨ Participation in a study group increases professional dialogue.

Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Not Sure*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*

❑   ❑   ❑   ❑   ❑

⇨ Participation in a study group allows me to work more collaboratively with others on staff.

Strongly Agree   *Agree*   *Not Sure*   *Disagree*   *Strongly Disagree*

❑   ❑   ❑   ❑   ❑

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF STUDY GROUPS

7   Rank, in order of importance, the following strengths of study groups. Indicate the *most important* strength with a 1, the next most important with a 2, and so forth. Please rank all five strengths, using each rank number only once.

Strength	*Rank*
Ability to tackle larger projects	
Professional relationships built on common beliefs, goals, and motivation	
Collaboration in a relaxed environment	
Positive pressure from group ensures goals remain active	
Time to share experiences, materials, ideas	

Rank, in order of importance, the following weaknesses of study groups. Indicate the *most important* weakness with a 1, the next most important with a 2, and so forth. Please rank all five weaknesses, using each rank number only once.

Weakness	*Rank*
Some group members do not contribute as much as others	
Uneven distribution of tasks	
Study group time not always focused on group's goals or objectives	
No one specifically accountable for realizing group's goals	
Need to compromise may take away from personal interests or needs	

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

8   Please comment on what is happening differently in classrooms or the school as a result of your own or others' study group participation. If your response exceeds the space below, please attach additional sheets to this questionnaire.

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9   Please rank, in order of importance, the characteristics of an effective professional development activity.

1._____

2._____

3._____

Thank you for your cooperation!
Please seal your completed questionnaire in the provided return envelope. Please place your sealed return envelope in the *collection envelope on Linda Harink's desk by November 19, 2002.*