A STUDY IN CREATING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: TWO SCHOOLS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Throughout the province of Alberta many schools are working to attain the somewhat elusive goal of becoming a "Learning Community". This study is about the journey two schools in East Central Alberta, separated by distance and a lack of cooperative tradition, undertook to become a Learning Community. It is also a study that looks at the nature of a Learning Community, and the consequences – intended and unintended – that result when school staffs engage in professional development with the learning community as an organizing principle. It is clear that professionals, working in a supportive and nurturing context, will be motivated to seek out meaningful professional development (PD) opportunities that will benefit their classrooms. Parents and students expect that teachers will network in order to seek out the PD that will create the most positive changes within their classrooms. However, trust and motivation among teachers are the essential intrinsic ingredients in the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC), and as the schools involved in this study have shown, they cannot be encouraged or developed overnight. These ingredients have to be slowly mixed in for the PLC model to become sustainable over the long term.

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Introduction

About three years ago a colleague and I, both in the U of L Masters of Education programme, met for coffee with our school division's Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) Coordinator and the District Principal during the division's annual two day teachers' convention in Edmonton. The meeting was intended to be a discussion about the possibility of two graduate students undertaking some research for the district. Instead, the meeting became a discussion about where Professional Development (PD) in our district was headed.

Much of what happened in the meeting, and later, took place against the backdrop of considerable leadership change and turmoil. While the four of us continued to explore directions for PD, the division was searching for a new Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent. At the same time, three school principalships and one vice-principalship became vacant.

The impetus for our discussions was simple. There was a growing sense of dissatisfaction among younger staff members over how many PD days we had as a staff, and what we did on those PD days. At the time, by contract, we had two PD days, in addition to the convention days. One of these days was typically taken at the end of the Thanksgiving holiday, and the other day at the end of the first semester. The first PD day of the year was usually a mini-convention with a keynote speaker in the morning, and then a set of workshops in the afternoon. Costs for this day were split 50 – 50 between the Alberta Teachers' Association Local and the school district. However, there had been growing problems, one with cost escalation and another with the availability of speakers.

We have a small district of 160 teachers and few speakers were willing to attend our PD day. Those who were willing often charged too much.

The second problem was that of attendance in the afternoon sessions. Many of the younger teachers, including me, were often unwilling to attend sessions all afternoon because what the sessions were about was often unconnected to the realities of the classroom within which we worked. It amounted to a 'sage on the stage' situation where there was little opportunity to reflect on the session's content, and no opportunity to revisit the content once we were back at school. It was not job - embedded, and it was not sustainable professional development. As a result, many of us lost interest.

During the coffee meeting I discovered that a quiet mutiny was erupting amongst the district's school administrators. They, too, were concerned about the attendance issue, and the applicability of the PD content. At an administrators' meeting around this time they, too, demanded changes.

The four of us decided on the following course of action. We would all become involved with the school district's PD Committee in order to bring about the changes we felt had to be made, the first of which we felt was the number of professional development days. We agreed we needed at least five days so we could attend to sustainable PD practices. Secondly, we felt that what we did in those five days had to change as well. We could no longer afford the big name speakers – but we felt we no longer needed them. There were (and are) many wonderful examples of educational practice going on within the district. We had to bring our own people to the forefront and have them share their best practices with the rest of us.

Essentially, what we did was begin the process of negotiating (or re-negotiating) a primary aspect of our professionalism. The District Principal went first to the school administrators for agreement, then to the School Board. The case was made that in order to have more effective professional development within the district we needed more time. This would allow for reflective practice, and sustained improvement. Our School Board agreed to put this into policy – with the proviso that there would be reportable results showing improvement.

Our first idea for the five days was to establish a Professional Learning Community centered on a cluster of study groups. Each study group would have a leader, and each would be centered on a topic of interest. These topics of interest were determined by a needs assessment survey conducted by my colleague and me. Staff members were to join the study group of their choice at the first PD day of the year in August 2002.

There soon arose a number of problems with this way of organizing PD. The first was that the District Principal, who had done the most groundwork in this area, had moved on to a job at Alberta Learning. The change in leadership produced confusion in the PD Committee, as well as the general teaching population, over what this style of professional development should look like. The expectations of what the study groups were supposed to do were too vague, and so some groups took the opportunity to do nothing.

As a committee member, I have to take some of the blame for this failure of leadership. I did not completely understand what we were attempting to the extent that I now have come to understand the topic. However, unlike many of the other teachers in

my district I may have a higher tolerance for working in what may seem to be chaotic situations. I was willing to commit to the change and see what would happen, while most of my colleagues were not. They were more concerned about the unknown than they were in the disappointing reality of the current situation. While I tried to convince members of the PD Committee, and other staff members, that what we were trying would work if given a chance, I was not successful. The collective sense of being overwhelmed by the change was too great, and the initiative collapsed.

Fundamentally, we did not do enough groundwork in making our case for the change with all staff members. We made the shift suddenly and dramatically when I think we should have taken a complete school year to fine - tune our ideas before putting them into action. That might have given more people an opportunity to get their heads around the idea of study groups, and what a study group had the potential to do. In other words, we should have taken the opportunity as educators to educate ourselves, and our colleagues, in what we were trying to do before we sat down to do it.

Finally, some people who had been put in charge of study groups as facilitators refused to be facilitators, or refused to do the job effectively, actually sabotaging the process. That was really a key point to be understood by the Professional Development Committee for our district. What we had hoped to be a selling point to the process – that of staff members taking responsibility for their own learning as a matter of professionalism – was not something everybody was willing to accept. In fact, if we had 20 percent of our district's staff upset before the change happened, we now had at least a different 20 percent upset with the process after the change.

However, there were also some positives about the process. Firstly, there were some groups of teachers who became very energetic and did some positive things. One of these was a group of K - 2 teachers. They had existed as a group before we tried the study groups. In fact, they had come together three years before to implement an Early Literacy Initiative (ELI) as part of an AISI project. Thus, they did not have to go through additional formative experiences before they could get anything done. What we, as a PD Committee, should have done is some inquiry into what made this group so effective so we could have had at least one good example for the new study groups to observe and learn from.

This is an important point about study groups – they take time to become fully functional teams because people in the groups do not just become a team by virtue of being at the first meeting. They have to negotiate roles and build up trust and confidence especially when do not have daily contact with one another. In retrospect, the largest problem we had, as a district, was that we did not give enough time to the groups. In reality, over the course of our five PD days we gave our study groups 3.5 hours in total to have some meaningful and fulfilling professional development. We did not give the groups the opportunity to flourish, and so we defeated the process, and ourselves.

At the end of the day our experiment with study groups was deemed to be an incomplete success at best. As a result, for this year, we made another change to a staff – based development model where teachers, for their PD days, would be in their schools doing PD together. Leaders in the district hoped to create a division of "Learning Communities" centered on our schools. The idea was to have each staff determine their PD needs and goals for the year, and then to work on them collaboratively.

This brought up an interesting issue for my school. I have three other teachers (one of whom is part – time), and three support staff (two part – timers there as well). In other words, I have seven staff members – quite a small community. We are in constant contact with one another, so teacher isolation is not really a big issue. A different problem is that we are constantly sharing and discussing issues of best practice but we do not have a large enough body of staff members, a 'critical mass' as it were, to make that kind of thing really effective.

As a result, this year we teamed up with another small K – 9 school in our district. These schools are essentially mirror images of one another with the same number of staff members, almost the same number of children distributed fairly evenly throughout the grades, and the same small PD budgets. Predictably, we often encounter the same issues and problems. The largest issue both schools had when it came to PD was maintaining some collegial contact with other schools – and so we came together, starting a journey of creating a community out of two schools separated by 75 kms.

During the time this project was being developed, the provincial education system was the subject of some scrutiny by the Alberta Learning Commission. One of the recommendations of the Learning Commission was a mandate for all schools to operate as a "Professional Learning Community". This was another piece that formed the backdrop for this study.

I had two goals in starting this process with my school. The first goal was the improvement of student learning and achievement. This is, after all, the primary reason why we are in school. I felt from the start that this method of professional development

would really only be successful if we could translate the collegiality and group work into better classroom practice, and an improvement in how students learn.

The second goal was really more self-serving: to turn my school into a learning community, as defined by the people who work in the building, and extend that definition to include the larger parental community outside of the school. I have an expansive view of the definition, one shared by Faris (2003). Faris uses the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) definition of a "Learning Community", the whole community (staff, students and parents) being organized round the principle of life-long learning for the goal of social development of the community. This is really a definition of a "Community School" with the school being a centre of learning and other activities for the community.

Research Question

My main research question was:

> To what extent can two small schools, separated by some distance, create an effective *Community of Practice*?

Sub-questions included:

> How effective is a distributed community of practice?
>
> To what extent can the larger parent communities outside of our schools be brought in to our Community of Practice?
>
> What impact will Recommendation 13 of the Alberta Learning Commission have on the development of our Community of Practice?

Literature Review

As a practicing teacher I chose to begin the examination of professional development with my professional organization. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has done, and is currently doing, a lot of work in the area of professional development. This work is being pursued under the Association's current policy and directives (2001), the latest updates of which were completed at the 2001 Annual Representative Assembly (ARA). Since professional development is a continuing issue for the teaching profession, this long - range policy states that effective professional development integrates the activities *[below]* into a long - term continuous form (p. 133). Furthermore, the 2001 policy states that professional development may take various forms, including action research; peer coaching; study groups, joint planning; reflection on student learning; and school and classroom visitations (p. 132). Finally, the policy makes professional development a shared responsibility of all stakeholders in education: teachers; school boards; the Alberta Teachers' Association; the Alberta Department of Education, and Alberta's universities.

The report of the Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) *Every Child learns. Every Child succeeds.* (2003) takes a holistic approach to teacher professional development. After spending over a year talking to people concerned with the provincial public education system, the Learning Commission made some sweeping recommendations. One of those recommendations, Number 13 (p. 65), mandates that all schools in the province operate as learning communities. This recommendation is the first in the Report's chapter entitled "The Schools We Need". It is no accident that this recommendation is the first one in this chapter because, as the Report notes, the entire

goal of a learning community is that of continuous improvement in student results (p. 64). The Report explains that learning communities link student results with research and data analysis on the part of teachers, reduce the sense of teacher isolation and lead to improved staff morale, job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism (p. 66).

Lee (2003) has made some observations about professional development in the school district in which we both work. His paper is a work based on the results of the initial set-up and first year of our district's new professional development focus. He points out that we were really unsure of where we were actually headed –so we were not clear on what sorts of outcomes would result. Lee (2003) writes that our district changed its allocation of time for professional development from one to five days in order to create a common calendar for all schools, not because of any perceived necessity on the part of the school board.

When writing about a needs assessment that the two of us constructed, administered and analyzed, Lee (2003) notes some rather critical findings. For example, the professional staff of our district told us that they had the greatest responsibility for their own professional development, and that they were quite willing to participate in interest - based study groups. Furthermore, teachers themselves identified the topics to be chosen for the groupings. However, as Lee's (2003) report shows, while the initial ground work of identifying topics had been completed, the organizational task of grouping staff was not done, leading to a sense of confusion, frustration and, ultimately, protest by some disaffected staff members. Perhaps the most important conclusion from Lee's study is the idea that literature on teacher development echoes that of literature in adult education.

A paper that is a foundation for many of the following works is that of Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991). What is proposed in this work is a method, called "Dialogue", for groups of people to explore ideas, beliefs and values in order to facilitate collective learning. Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991) point out that this process is exploratory – it is uncertain and unique – with no firm rules other than that of creative participation between peers leading to collective learning. The authors also make the point that this process, while not concerned with deliberately and obviously changing behaviours, will not leave any of the participants unchanged, because reflective thought and discussion is its essence.

Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991) also warn people about to embark on a journey of dialogue. The first warning is that in its early stages the journey will be difficult. Because there is not supposed to be a predetermined end to the process, participants may experience anxiety or annoyance. In fact, as Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991) point out, polarization and conflict over values will happen initially – but that should be seen as a natural part of the creative process, instead of being seen as a problem hindering the process. As time goes on there will be a building of trust and shared meaning that transforms the group from a collection of individuals into a 'fellowship', or community, of equals.

There are a number of prominent writers in the field of school improvement. One of the best known is Richard DuFour. In 1991, DuFour wrote *The Principal as Staff Developer.* It is a bare bones guide to school improvement for principals and school administrators. DuFour (1991) identifies the school and its needs as the best place to start in considering what forms of professional development will be accessed by the staff.

After all, the needs of the school and its community are, in large part, a result of the climate in the school. The key to effective staff professional development is, at its heart, an atmosphere and attitude of professionalism in the school. DuFour (1991) writes in his chapter on school climate about teachers having a sense of no autonomy – which translates into feeling a lack of empowerment on school issues, and a feeling that their judgment and skills are not valued either by the principal or the public at large. This sense of a lack of autonomy translates into a decline in the professional atmosphere around the staff in particular, and the school in general.

Secondly, DuFour (1991) identifies the principal as the key player in determining levels of staff effort, both in their classroom and in their professional development activities. Because of their inherent gatekeeper role, principals have to be actively and constructively involved in the consideration of the professional needs of the school, and then involved in making sure every staff member is working towards meeting those goals. DuFour (1991) defines leadership as the process of *persuasion and example* that a principal uses to influence the group (staff) to take action. Such action will be consistent with the purpose of the leader or in accord with the shared goals and values of the larger group. DuFour (1991) states that it is the job of the principal to do three things: (a) to empower the staff; (b) to make sure the workload is shared equitably; and (c) to make sure the staff is invested in the vision. If principals do these things, DuFour (1991) contends, they will be able to lead a staff that knows where it needs to improve professionally (identifying the need); and then a group that is able to go out and effectively meet those needs (taking action).

Finally, DuFour (1991) makes the point that professional development, at its most basic level, is people improvement. If the needs of staff members are met professionally, the instructional quality for students will improve as a result. DuFour writes that the major goal of professional development is not to develop teachers who follow the same 'cookbook' as everyone else on staff but, rather, to create a group of educators who are reflective practitioners creative in the moment. DuFour calls this the ability to be able to use abstract thought concretely, when the situation demands it. Finally, DuFour warns principals that, to be effective, professional development must have concrete and compelling evidence that it will improve the practice of the staff involved. If not, then the staff will not 'buy in', and it will become a meaningless exercise and a waste of time of both staff and students.

Duff, Brown and Van Scoy (1995) provide valuable insight into some basic philosophy behind professional development. The authors contend that professional development is, at its core, really a process of self improvement. They also note that as there is greater stress around the idea of teacher professionalism, teachers need to put greater emphasis on taking personal responsibility for their professional development. Duff, Brown and Van Scoy write that the critical keys to professional development are reflection, self evaluation and self direction. These keys, the authors say, allow teachers to "...internalize professionally acceptable practices and standards"(p. 83). While Duff, Brown and Van Scoy feel a reflective process will empower and invigorate most teachers, giving them a sense of enhanced control over their professional lives, they provide a warning regarding young teachers, pointing out that young teachers may feel

intimidated by the process because they may not be comfortable with such things as professional goal setting or collaboration.

In a recent article, Couture (2003) examined the steps, or pathways, towards creating a professional learning community in an Alberta school. The first pathway is developing a shared sense of identity by taking responsibility for one another. Secondly, Couture (2003) states that teachers will improve their personal practice only by collaborating with other teachers. Finally he makes the point that the staff has to collaboratively define what successful student learning looks like.

One of the critical points that Couture raises is that when people talk of a "professional learning community" they are talking about what is happening between staff members. Couture (2003) clearly illustrates that to embark on this journey is to change the way the adults in the school interact with one another. He writes about a relational change on the professional level that is based on trust, reflective professional conversation, and a professional environment that is democratic and respectful of the judgment of all. In other words, Couture (2003) suggests that the learning community concept is as much an attempt to address workplace ecology issues as it an attempt to address student learning issues.

Skytt (2003) also explores this concept of workplace ecology in her article. She feels that the

> ...power in this model is not in the structural and procedural changes that can be implemented in the school but in the cultural and professional changes that teachers and administrators experience as they take back the education process. (p. 5)

Context is important here in understanding this comment. Skytt (2003) herself admits that beneath the six professional development projects that this article is based on was the undercurrent of labour strife present in Alberta schools during the 2001 – 2002 school year. She writes that developing professional learning communities is an opportunity for educators to deal with external pressures by focusing on what is going on in their classrooms and schools. Skytt (2003) writes that the frantic pace of curriculum change, technology integration, an intense focus on results and the implementation of various models of school based decision - making made teachers increasingly frustrated. The professional learning community model project, then, was an attempt by Skytt (2003) and the Professional Development staff of the ATA to encourage more collaborative dialogue, reflective practice and teacher empowerment.

In the article "Georgia finds Staff Development Link in High Achieving Schools" (September, 1998), the journal *Results* asked the following simple question: how is staff development linked to student achievement? The journal found that as the time spent by teachers on effective professional development increased, the achievement of their students also increased. *Results* (September 1998) wrote that this is because the teachers who spend more time on professional development are more likely to use new practices in the classroom. As well, staffs in higher achieving schools are more likely to have some, or all, of the following characteristics: (a) increased staff collaboration on decisions about professional development; (b) increased emphasis on student learning; (c) increased focus on the classroom; (d) increased focus on effective professional development; and (d) increased support for professional development from school educational leaders. Staffs in lower achieving schools are likely to show some or all of

the following characteristics in their professional development: (a) more individualized and haphazard professional development; (b) a professional development focus on individual needs and desires, certification and increased pay rather than school needs; (c) less use of effective professional development models; and (d) reduced or minimal support from the school's educational leaders.

Glenn (1995) encourages teachers to take the view of professional development as a way to revitalize and recharge their classroom. He argues that the teaching profession encourages teacher isolation, and teachers themselves do not go out of their way to share their 'best practices' because they may be seen as pushy or arrogant. Glenn offers a number of practical suggestions for professional development activities that are designed to break teachers out of their isolation and let them share their practices in safe situations. Most of his ideas are collegial in nature, from visiting other classrooms or other schools, to networking with teachers outside their home school system. Glenn (1995) states that it is only through professional development that teachers stay 'fresh', constantly renewing their classroom practice and keeping the learning environment for their students energetic and creative.

Elmore (2002) states that teachers need to take a hard look at not only their instructional practices, but also how their schools are organized, in order to understand how they impact on student learning in his article, "Hard Questions about Practice". Elmore (2002) feels educators need to know these things because they have a direct bearing on what sorts of learning (and working) conditions are present in those schools. These conditions make up the climate surrounding the school, and set parameters for student learning.

Fullan (2001) is the author of *Leading in a Culture of Change*. It is a work with which school administrators, and teacher – leaders involved in facilitating professional development activities for their staffs should be familiar, given the sweeping changes education is currently undergoing. Fullan writes that he looks at the core aspects of leadership, of which he identifies six that effective leaders show and understand. They are: (a) moral purpose; (b) understanding the change process; (c) successful change brings an improvement in relationships; (d) knowledge creation and sharing are all important; (e) coherence making; and (f) energy - enthusiasm – hopefulness. The reasoning behind the work is found in the Preface where Fullan writes that "the more sophisticated society becomes, the more sophisticated leadership must become"(p. ix), and societal complexity means that change is often a non - linear process.

Professional development is a process of change. Fullan (2001) makes the point in his chapter about knowledge creation that the very act of knowledge construction is a social process. Thus, the nature of relationships among participants is critical. This is where Fullan identifies a central role for school leaders. He says that they have to set the context for the creation of knowledge. In other words, they have to create the environment that is conducive to learning and the sharing or transmission of that learning. Fullan (2001) also points out that it is not knowledge creation that is the difficulty; rather, it is the transmission of that knowledge throughout the organization that is difficult. Accordingly, Fullan concludes that knowledge sharing has to be a core value of any learning community.

Arnold (1995) proposes a new model of staff development in her article, "Teacher Dialogues: A Constructivist Model of Staff Development". She proposes that teachers

should pursue professional development opportunities that relate to their experiences, personal needs and conditions. After all, she believes, learning is constructed in a personal context, after concepts are personally manipulated and vetted through a personal system of reflective problem solving. Arnold points out that fear of failure stops many teachers from experimenting with new classroom practices and ideas. Through a collaborative, non - threatening process of collegial networking and sharing, teachers should be able to acquire new ideas about classroom practice. As the participants reflect on new ideas they put them into their personal and professional contexts, and translate them into practice in their own classrooms.

Hiemstra (1997) describes in some detail how all members of a community may be actively engaged in some aspect of the education system. Hiemstra's approach is based on the idea that a community education setting provides for school programmes aimed at improving the entire community. He promotes a holistic approach to education. This means that a school facility has to be more than just a center for academic programmes for K – 12 students. He argues that the school has to employ its untapped resources (space and equipment especially) and put them at the disposal of the community. This would allow for use of the facility for adult education classes, community recreation, and so on.

A framework for shared leadership was published by Lambert in 2002. She makes the point that staff developers have to start to tap the talents of all staff members to have sustainable improvement in our schools. Lambert argues that instructional leadership must be a shared, community undertaking involving everybody on staff. She feels all staff members have the right, responsibility and ability to become a leader

(formal and otherwise) within their school. Lambert contends that to become leaders, teachers have to become better at being obviously reflective about their practices. As long as they do this, they will engage in more considered action and, thus, help promote more effective and sustainable action and reform within the school system.

Todnem and Warner (1994) analyzed the QUILT Program from the Appalachian Educational Laboratory. They found that the QUILT (Questioning and Understanding to Improve Learning and Thinking) Program produced some very interesting results. On the surface the program was about improving questioning techniques and procedures to improve student learning. However, what the program really showed was the benefits of intensive collegial professional development. Todnem and Warner (1994) report that collegial staff development improves school climates, and empowers teachers in terms of their perceptions about their own classroom effectiveness. Finally, they also warn staff developers that time has to be given to any professional development model for it to take root and start to produce results.

Purkey and Novak (1984) tell teachers that they have to be both personally and professionally inviting with others since they are, after all, working in a social environment. They offer a reason for the problem of teacher isolation, suggesting this is a by - product of the tendency of teachers to sacrifice, constantly, their own goals and needs for those of others. To help fight teacher isolation, the authors tell young teachers to ensure that they are professionally inviting through professional development of all types, so they can remain active in their growth as professionals.

Purkey and Novak (1984) also suggest that as teachers ensure that they create a sense of being personally and professionally inviting to others, they can have a huge

impact on the climate of their classrooms and the school. The authors suggest that as a school staff adopts this inviting attitude, it will create the sense of what they call an "Inviting Family School", which is something they contrast with the "Efficient Factory School". They point out that in an "Inviting Family School" there is the sense, on the part of both staff and students, of togetherness, that it is "...our school, our work, and all of us together" (p. 97). The atmosphere around the school is one of everybody being a part of a caring and learning community that stresses a "being with" and "doing with" set of attitudes, perceptions and behaviours.

Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) tell teachers that they "...are involved in one of the most complex, demanding and important professions in the world – a profession where changes emerge in the blink of an eye". Furthermore, they write that teachers are being pressured to create effective learning environments, and that requires the creativity of effective teaching. This book, *Beyond Monet*, is really a collection of teaching strategies, but it makes some penetrating comments about the need for teacher professional development. Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) comment "...that over time teachers are socialized towards mediocrity"(p. 7). This is because "...the organizations and systems responsible for the initial development and sustaining of teachers' professional growth often unwittingly urge teachers to work against what is in the best interests of students, teachers and society" (p. 7). Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) contend that teachers are engaged too often in low quality professional development that is based on the latest innovation, and does not allow for reflection or collegial contact with other staff members on subjects like best practice.

Bennett and Rolheiser comment that there is a "...multiplicity of unassimilated knowledge in the educational community" (p.15) swirling about. Furthermore, they feel that "specialization and balkanization" have created a division that works against clarity. In other words, too many teachers have specialized in a particular academic field, such as Language Arts or Math, and they have pursued knowledge particular to those areas. They have ignored the generalized topic of what it means to be an effective teacher, and they have lost a sense of collegiality within their staffs because of it. The authors suggest high school physics teachers are missing out on a potentially valuable experience if they do not talk to the grade one teacher about effective and creative best practices in the classroom.

In "Leadership for the Learning Community", University of Saskatchewan professor Sackney (2003) considers the problems of educational reform and the applicability of the learning community model as the best model for effective school change. In this paper Sackney argues that certain preconditions must exist before a learning community can be created in a school. He states that the preconditions include a particular type of school climate; leadership style, and a common vocabulary about student learning and professional development. The principal also has to promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. Sackney (2003) argues power relationships and respective roles, either formal or informal, may undermine attempts to create such a community. He makes clear that creation of learning communities relies as much on affective acts as it does on effective acts.

In an early work centered on systems theory, Brager and Holloway (1978) write about the collaborative processes of change. Their first point is that the most effective

form of change for a human service organization is centered amongst the "line workers" because they know the needs of their clients, given their everyday contact with them. The authors argue that the number one goal, the "social mandate", of any human service organization is that of supporting and improving the general well being and functioning of people.

Buchler (2003) states very clearly that teachers need time to reflect on the challenges facing today's students, and their need for academic role models. Most of this article discusses many of the component behaviours, policies and pitfalls of the learning community concept. Buchler (2003) comments that if teachers become truly responsible for their own learning, then not only will these teachers become lifelong learners, they will foster a classroom of lifelong learners. In other words, their classrooms will be engaged, effective and vital learning communities, in large part due to the role modeling of the classroom teacher.

The key to the discussion is the concept of teacher as independent learner and student. To be effective as independent learners, Buchler (2003) argues, teachers have to deal with three problems. The first problem is that of "Learned Behaviour": teachers teach the way they were taught, and learn the way they were taught to learn. While independent learning consists of the bread of graduate studies and kindergarten, teacher directed learning is the meat, lettuce and tomatoes of the sandwich from Grade 1 through the teacher preservice education. Buchler (2003) writes that the second problem facing teachers is one of motivation; she feels the motivating factor for most teachers is that of bettering their students. If there is an encouraging and enthusiastic commitment within the school linking teacher learning to student achievement, then motivation on the part of

the teacher for effective PD is the result. The third challenge identified in this article centers on pedagogical philosophy. Buchler (2003) argues that teachers who are constructivists in their own teaching approach will be more comfortable with independent learning. In addition, she argues that constructivists are inherently reflective since they are involved in seeing education as problem - solving and a time for the creation of knowledge and understanding.

"Supporting and Facilitating Self – Directed Learning" is a short paper by Lowry (1989). She argues that learning can be considered self directed only in the context of the following four questions: (a) who sets the curriculum, (b) who is offered the opportunity to learn the curriculum, (c) what resources are available, and how is the curriculum delivered, and (d) by what standards of success will the curriculum and participants be evaluated. The greater the influence of the learner in those decisions, Lowry argues, the greater the degree to which the curriculum or programme can be considered self - directed learning. This implies there are degrees of self - directedness that may be possible as long as some sort of institutional standard has to be achieved. Lowry (1989) contends that 90 percent of all adults engage in some form of self - directed learning in any year, and the typical (motivated?) learner engages in five such projects of about 100 hours each. Most of these projects are in the area of improving job - related skills, knowledge and attitudes.

In much of the discussion about professional development, the role of the superintendent is often overlooked. Hord (1992) suggests that while the school should be the central focus of any professional development model, it is surrounded by what she calls a "series of contexts" at the school district and provincial levels. As a result, while

professional development is centered on the needs of the individual school site, the school district superintendent plays a critical role in the success of any school change. She makes the compelling case for the following three strategies superintendents must employ to help foster successful school change: (a) creating an atmosphere for change, (b) communicating vision, and (c) cultivating principals as colleagues.

Through role modeling and communication with principals, staff and the school communities, superintendents can be effective in the first two. However, it is the third one that may be the most important. Hord (1992) writes that cultivating principals starts right at the process of hiring. She says that effective superintendents may be involved in the actual interview process, or they may choose to establish the policies and procedures for the hiring process to ensure new principals have certain desirable attributes, and not be present for the interviews themselves. Yet, Hord points out that successful superintendents have the following characteristic, which is the communicated belief that principals can improve student achievement. Furthermore, these superintendents are hands - on people who provide advice, assistance and resources to principals and their staffs for improvement. In addition, they role model the behaviours and changes they expect, and they monitor and evaluate progress.

Neil Postman (1996) asks a very simple question: what is the purpose of education? In his book, *The End of Education*, Postman proposes that the real purpose of schooling is to educate children in how to "make a life" and not necessarily how to "make a living", these things not being the same. He also makes the point that an effective education is one that is holistic and is unified, from K – 12, by some common narratives or ideas that thread their way throughout the school system.

Similarly, a text by Littky and Grabelle (2004), *The Big Picture: Education is Everybody's Business,* ostensibly a work advocating for a fairly open (in terms of formalized structures) system of school climate, asks fundamental questions about the purposes of education – for students, parents and staff. Littky and Grabelle (2004) assert that the first three educational goals for their students are (1) to become lifelong learners, (2) be passionate, and (3) be ready to take risks. With these goals in mind, they describe the attitudes adults in schools, and the parents of the students, have to have in order to produce students who achieve these goals.

Littky and Grabelle (2004) write that education is about "the three Rs – relationships, relevance and rigor" (p. 39). This is a philosophy that goes for both teachers and students. The authors make the point that all members of the community should have the sense that they are both "...an individual *and* a member of a community" (p. 77). Littky and Grabelle (2004) approach professional development in the same fashion that they approach establishing the academic programme for their students – each staff member has a plan that fits within the overall school plan. They advocate ongoing, job - embedded just - in - time professional development. They advocate not pigeon - holing students into a one – size – fits - all education system. They ask, why would school systems not see their staff members as learners, or students, as well, and resist the temptation to do this to the adults in their system? After all, if the teachers are passionate about their own learning, then they will be able to role model lifelong learning and growing for their students.

One of the sources of theory that directly spoke to this project was the work Ryan and Deci (2000) have done in the area of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). As I have

worked through this project, I have become more convinced that it's success failure or something in between is, in part, based on innate psychological factors specific to the people involved. SDT is an investigation into the growth tendencies of people, their psychological needs, and how these set the foundation for self-motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) look at the reasons why people can be rated somewhere along the spectrum from *inspired to learn responsibly* to *rejection of growth and responsibility*. SDT looks at social contexts people in an attempt to understand which conditions promote inspiration and acceptance of responsibility and which do not.

Ryan and Deci (2000) write that the concept of motivation deals with energy, direction, persistence and equifinality; put another way, motivation is action. Authentic (self - authored or endorsed) motivation leads to greater interest, confidence, creativity, vitality and general well being. SDT looks at the various kinds of motivation, and their consequences for learning, performance and well - being. Ryan and Deci (2000) have divided up motivation into three general types – *Intrinsic*, *Extrinsic* and *Amotivation.* They further subdivide extrinsic motivation into four smaller categories, each based on the degree and type of outside compulsion and regulation brought to bear on the individual in question – and to the extent the individual self – identifies with the intended goals.

SDT theorists, Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, W., Sheldon, K. M., & Deci, E. L. (2004), advance these ideas in "Motivating Learning, Performance, and Persistence: The Synergistic Effects of Intrinsic Goal Contents and Autonomy-Supportive Contexts" These authors use SDT to analyze the content of goals people set for themselves regarding their education, and the learning context in which those goals are pursued.

They studied 200 Belgian women between the ages of 19 and 20, who were in their first year of college studying to become preschool teachers. In all, the authors used three separate tests, each test utilizing a differing degree of extrinsic pressure or motivating factors upon its group of subjects.

Vansteenkiste, Simons, et al. (2004), developed critical data surrounding the nature of the social contexts within which people work, and how they impact on motivation. They found that people who are within autonomy supportive social contexts – that is, environments that minimize external incentives and threats, avoid controlling language and acknowledge the learners' frame of reference – enhance autonomous motivation and facilitate learning. Furthermore, Vansteenkiste, Simons, et al (2004), found that social environments that have a high degree of extrinsic motivation feature people with a depressed sense of psychological well – being, increased levels of depression, anxiety and narcissism, an increased likelihood of high risk behaviours, and an increased chance of conflicted relationships. SDT contends that learning is an active process that functions best when motivation is intrinsic for learning activities and the processing of new information. This is because the pursuit of intrinsic goals enhances personal satisfaction, and helps meet needs such as autonomy, feelings of competence and relatedness (to both people and the subject matter). Of course, this raises a question about pursuing professional development "for credit" to move up the pay scale, or maintain, or qualify for, professional advancement.

In 2001 the staff of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory produced "Understanding Motivation & Supporting Teacher Renewal". This paper is an exploration of teachers' motivation in changing their professional practice, and is solidly

grounded in SDT research. One of the most compelling arguments that this paper makes is that motivation is not just the directing of behaviour, it is also the energizing of that same behaviour. The reasoning behind this statement is that personality, the social context, and the satisfaction of psychological needs are important components of motivation (p. 4). "Understanding Motivation & Supporting Teacher Renewal" (2001) points out that teachers become involved with professional development activities that "ring true" with their personalities – in other words, activities that reflect who they are as professionals, and as people. As the paper goes on to say, teachers who have the freedom to be the people they are (from school authorities) will take greater responsibility for self - directed action (p. 4). Finally, they need to have three inherent needs met – autonomy, competence and relatedness (p. 4).

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) wrote, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*, which is, above all else, a work about school climate and culture. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, like Littky and Grabelle (2004), argue that the education system has become depersonalized. It has arrived at this state because of the drive for data - based management (and planning) and bottom line cost efficiency. People have become alienated from their own institutions and schools, and from each other within these institutions and schools. The authors argue that this leads to problems with students, and, to prevent these problems, we need to move towards a more inclusive, less competitive, school climate. This changed school would operate on a holistic approach based on fostering self - worth.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) write that this concept has four components: (a) significance or belonging, (b) competence or mastery, (c) power or

independence, and (d) virtue or generosity. While this text is, first and foremost about what students need, I think it has as much to do with what teachers need as well. It is true students need to experience all four components of self - worth in order to become productive, independent learners. However, teachers need to experience these components as well in order to be productive learners in their own right. Without such experiences, teachers may not be any more productive than their students in similar situations in their classrooms, and they may, indeed, become "discipline problems" like some of their students.

The basic guide to Action Research (AR) for the purpose of this study is the *Action Research Guide for Alberta Teachers*, from the Alberta Teachers' Association (2000). This publication was developed as a result of a project undertaken in the late 1990s on the subject of collaborative action research in Chinook's Edge School Division. The guide is more than a checklist of AR steps; rather, it goes into a little bit of depth in terms of AR theory. The *Action Research Guide* (2000) makes two useful points for neophytes entering the realm of AR. The first is that this type of research encourages collegial sharing of educational experiences. The second is that AR is not only a methodology to help people apply knowledge; it is also a methodology that helps people produce (or create) knowledge.

One of the most influential writers in the field of AR is Stephen Kemmis. Kemmis (1993) offers an explanation of the history of AR, and its modern forms. He states that there are three basic forms of AR: (a) technical, (b) practical and (c) emancipatory. Kemmis (1993) openly states that he favours the third form because it links, in a clear and unmistakable fashion, research to social action of some kind. He

makes a compelling case for this form of AR, because he writes that the people in education that undertake this type of research aspire to change their world for the better. It is through AR, Kemmis (1993) argues, that participants come to understand themselves as not only products of history, but also as agents of historical change.

Another influential writer in the area of AR is the University of Bath's Jack Whitehead. Whitehead (2000) writes more about the transformative, or Kemmis' 'emancipatory' nature of AR, embedded in the creation of what he calls a 'Living Theory of Education'. Such a living theory results from linking one's professional/social context with one's identity and one's body of professional knowledge. Whitehead believes that one way to gain this knowledge is through the AR process. The final result of this process allows the creation, in a sense, of a personal "Discipline of Education". Whitehead (2000) argues that this process frees people from being constrained by either canned research that does not apply in their professional situation, or 'teacher - proof' curricula that box the teacher in with respect to strategies, content and assessment. He asserts that all AR can flow from the asking of two simple reflective questions: how do I improve what I am doing and how do I live my values more fully in my practices? The search for answers to these questions can grant the AR practitioner greater freedom and autonomy in the educational system from what Whitehead (2000) sees as systemic forces that seek to dominate and/or assimilate all ideas into the mainstream of educational theory and practice.

The emancipatory idea of AR has been taken up by McBride and Schostak (2004), who ask whether or not AR is anti-bureaucratic because it breaks down the conscious, and the unconscious, traditional roles and power relationships in the school

system. They write that AR is effective because it narrows the gap between theoretical practice and what is happening "where the rubber meets the road". In fact, it should not be something that teachers shy away from because, as McBride and Schostak (2004) point out, when teachers examine the fallout from a lesson that may not have been as effective as they intended, and they ask themselves how it may have been presented (improved) in a more effective fashion, teachers are doing a form of reflective AR. However, McBride and Schostak (2004) say that one of the reasons why teachers may resist participation in formal AR is because, at its heart, AR is a discomforting process. It takes people out of the areas where they are comfortable and safe because it makes the researchers take a critical view of practice (often their own) and where it may be improved.

Auger and Wideman (2000) conducted research into the benefits of AR through research exposing preservice education students at Nipissing University to the methodology. Their question was whether or not the students could actually begin to use AR during practicum sessions and how it changed their classroom practice. The responses to the study shows the following benefits: (a) an increase in professional autonomy in the classroom; (b) an enhanced sense of personal responsibility for professional development; (c) a change in how one thinks, in this case a change from student thinking to thinking as a professional teacher; (d) an enhanced sense of linking professional theory to everyday educational practice; (e) an increased sense of collegiality amongst staffs; and (f) a reduced sense of professional isolation. Auger and Wideman (2000) feel that, like Whitehead, the sense of empowerment of participants in AR comes from the belief that they are developing their own 'Living Theory of

Education'. However, like many of the other authors in the field of AR, they are at pains to point out that because of its potential to transform personal practice, it cannot be rushed and forced to fit within a given time frame (such as a school year). This is what makes AR a 'messy' process.

O'Brien (1998a) makes the case that it is through AR that the idea of the teacher - as - researcher changes to become one of teacher as informed innovator. O'Brien (1998a) suggests theory informs or is the foundation for practice, but practice refines theory due to local conditions. This is may be a strength of AR, as long as the problem, or concern, being studied is considered authentic by the participants. One of the checks on authenticity, according to O'Brien, comes from the fact that at a number of steps along the AR path not only is there group collaboration on the research, but the members of the group have to justify findings and assumptions, and negotiate within the group the new understanding that will, ultimately, transform the practice of the group. If the problem is contrived, then the process will not be transformative as a result.

J. A. McKay (1992) writes about AR in an article entitled "Professional Development Through Action Research". The author proposes that there are two things that make for enduring and successful change – the people involved in the change have to be involved, and they have to have ownership of the change. McKay's argument is that AR is the way to bring about effective educational change because it happens when educators initiate and control the research surrounding questions relevant to the day – to day activities in a classroom or school. Furthermore, it becomes all the more powerful when the created learnings are put back into everyday practice in those various

classrooms and schools. The key to the process is that AR is job – embedded; it is not an add - on, something to be done at the end of an already filled schedule.

McKay (1992) makes another compelling argument in favour of AR, one that relates to the subtle changes that happen in the teacher participants. Action Research provides an opportunity for teachers, administrators (and students) to explore and experiment with different teaching and leadership models in a positive fashion, in addition to trying solutions on the problem being studied. The collegiality and new methods of problem solving ultimately lead, in McKay's (1992) argument, to a greater sense of professionalism amongst the participants. This is because the teachers themselves see that they have taken general educational theory and have applied it – and undoubtedly modified it in some fashion to suit their local concern. They gain a sense of accomplishment, as well as a renewed sense of problem solving ability.

Miller and Pine (1990) echo the sentiments of McKay with respect to AR being an important step towards the (re?)professionalization of the teaching community. Miller and Pine (1990) explain that teachers have been socialized to receive knowledge created by others rather than themselves. In effect, teachers have become disenfranchised by many of the recent educational innovations – especially "teacher proof" curriculums. To fight this trend, then, teachers have to begin to create "knowledge" on their own. The advantage to this is that they can begin to create solutions to problems (and begin to develop curricula) that apply to their own professional context.

Miller and Pine (1990) argue that AR is a vehicle to empower teachers to look at their own circumstances and begin to develop the professional knowledge appropriate to the context. They point out that there are many different types of AR, all of which can

transform professional practice. However, they identify four central benefits of AR: (a) an increased understanding of curriculum and how it relates to scheduling and school philosophy; (b) the creation of new patterns of communication, sharing and collegiality; (c) the building of a common body of knowledge; and (d) an increased ability to identify, analyze and solve classroom problems. The authors point out that the central benefit to staff is that AR empowers teachers as leaders, it values them as experts, and it promotes teacher initiative to take a look at difficult problems in their everyday practice and develop solutions to it.

Calhoun (1993) goes one step further than the previous authors. She writes that AR can improve the practice of the individuals involved and, also, the overall health of the organization in which it is being conducted. It does this in a number of ways. First of all, AR supports the idea of site - based decision - making because it spreads out the decision making process for a school, and its programme. Secondly, as this leadership change spreads through the school it has the potential to generate energy amongst the staff, re-energizing them, and revitalizing the entire learning community (staff, students and parents). Finally, Calhoun (1993) contends that aspects of AR including data collection, research, problem solving and reflection promise to improve the professionalization of the staff. This is because staff members work on such things as collegiality and how they internally manage group decision making. However, Calhoun (1993) also makes the point that AR is not an easy process – it is 'messy and uneven' but practitioners new to AR are told to expect this given the complexity of the methodology.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects for this project are the teachers of two small schools in an east central Alberta public school division. Each school has approximately 4 FTE professional staff members, and 2 FTE para-professional staff members. The student population of each school is about 55 students. Each school is organized in a multi-graded structure since they both offer K – 9 programmes. Neither is really a complete programme as the Junior High students in both situations are bussed to a neighbouring high school for Fabrication and Food/Fashion Studies.

The two schools are facing similar issues. Both schools have declining enrollments, although school closure is unlikely at this time. The saving grace for both schools is that they are some distance away from larger neighbouring schools and communities. Because of their small enrollments both schools have extremely small budgets. This limits the types of services the schools can offer. They are unable to access extra professional resources such as special education help, or counseling. In fact, both schools are considered "on call" schools in their jurisdiction. This means that they have few student issues requiring outside assistance, and the school jurisdiction is confident in the ability of the staffs to deal with emergent issues. Finally, both schools have had a problem with larger schools with more comprehensive programmes poaching students from the margins of their attendance areas.

The results of this study are presented in three parts, each part representing one of the major stakeholder groups in our schools, the teachers; the parents; and the students. Each part of the study was further broken down into two or three sub – parts in order to

check various perceptions about professional development. Teachers participated in an interview, completed a survey, and provided a reflective statement about what they had done in professional development. Parents and students completed a similar interview and survey.

Procedures

In general I approached this study intending to use an Action Research strategy. Although there are many different models of AR that I could have selected, I felt one of the most applicable models for this project was that proposed by Schmuck (1997), the Proactive Action Research Model. The reasons why I chose this model were fairly simple. My school was committed to a course of action, that of attempting to build a Learning Community. This activity began before the study started, and that is the first step in the Schmuck model. The other important reason was that it involved the students. Schmuck (1997) places a great emphasis in his model on measuring change in students' behaviours and attitudes. I proposed to measure changes in student behaviour and learning after teachers had engaged in professional development aimed at the needs of their classrooms.

During the early part of summer 2004, I read two articles from O'Brien (1998b), the second being an overview of action research in general that offered illuminating steps one could take in preparation for undertaking an AR project. O'Brien (1998b) suggests that it is of benefit to the participants in the research to be able to have access to some background documents before the project begins. These documents would, for example, give a brief explanation of the project and its various aspects – including answering the question what is AR? I combined this idea with another suggestion by O'Brien (1998b),

that of creating a website. In my case, I created a new section of my website, www.clearview.ab.ca/~cvanzandbergen, dedicated to AR and this project. On it I posted copies of background documents I wished to provide other participants. As well, the site served as a device for gathering and spreading information about the project.

McBride and Schostak (2004) helped me understand that the researcher has to be able to allow the data to speak for itself in the research stage, and only after the data has been collected should it be examined, and judgments made. A potential problem is that the researcher will interpret the data as it is being developed, thus compromising the data's ability to provide a fair representation of the problem under study.

McBride and Schostak (2004) suggest there are really three sources of data: (a) observation, (b) interviewing and (c) documents and artifacts. I used all three sources in this study and attended as carefully as I could to the authors' admonition that my own intentions should interfere as little as possible with the evidence I was gathering.

Once it began, this project was, in effect, a *Case Study*. As Merriam (1988) says, I was studying a "bounded system", a system where I essentially had a captive audience. The subjects were the staff members, both professional and para-professional, the students and the parents of the two schools coming together to begin to work on creating a "Learning Community".

A key source of data that I used was reflective data from the staffs of the two schools. Borg and Gall (1989) call this *anecdotal record*. I analyzed teacher reflections and observations about student behaviour and learning throughout the study. As Borg and Gall (1989) say, the key to the usefulness of such data is the objectiveness of the teachers in their reflective thought.

Another data source that I used was interviews. I interviewed all staff members, ten students from Grades 7 to 9 and ten parents from each school at the end of the study to look at how they saw the process unfold. As Borg and Gall (1989) state, with interviews there is much greater opportunity for supplementary questions, and they provide a richer source of data than one can get from a 10 question, anonymous questionnaire. Borg and Gall (1989) also point out that there are potential problems with this data source, ranging from lack of cooperation, to subjects being overly cooperative to 'please' the interviewer.

Another major source of data came from surveying staff, parents and students about their perceptions of professional development, and its relationship to perceived improvements in student learning. As Anderson and Arsenault (2001) point out, a survey or questionnaire is easy to use to collect routine data from respondents in a number of locations. Because the study involved two locations, I felt this was an acceptable way of getting some of the context information that I needed. I used the responses from the questionnaire to help develop the interview phase of data collection.

Analysis

One of the most intensive aspects of the project was the coding of data created through the journaling and interview processes. Neuman (1997) writes that coding is the process of organizing data into conceptual categories, creating themes and concepts that are then used for analysis. Neuman (1997) says that this technique encourages the researcher to move beyond the raw data, towards the synthesis needed for theory creation and generalization. The researcher imposes "order" on the data in three ways: (a) open coding; (b) axial coding; and (c) selective coding. Each form of coding is a review of the

raw data. Neuman says that *open coding* is the first pass over the data where the researcher looks for themes found in critical or key terms or events. Richness and depth of the data sources may determine how much detail is seen at this point. *Axial coding* is the term Neuman uses to refer to the second pass through the data. The primary task at this stage is a check on the initial categories created in the first data review, ensuring that these are either edited or modified; new ones are created; or categories are folded into others because they are redundant. Neuman calls this task *clustering* the data. Finally, *selective coding* allows for comparing and contrasting the themes, establishing the basis for movement towards theory creation and/or generalization. Neuman proposes that at this stage the emerging major themes are the ultimate guide to where the researcher goes. This could be in the direction of more research, or towards completion of the project. The coding provided a solid reliability check on the perceptions of the subjects, and how their anecdotal data aligned with their survey results.

A final component to the methodology was document content analysis. Anderson and Arsenault (2001) describe this methodology as a systematic examination of the contents of documents. They state that there are four common uses of this type of research: (a) to describe relative frequency and importance of certain topics; (b) to evaluate bias, prejudice or propaganda in print materials; (c) to assess the level of difficulty in reading materials; and finally (d) to analyze the type of errors in students' work. This project looked at the importance placed on professional development in documents from the Ministry of Learning, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and my own school district. However, as Anderson and Arsenault (2001) point out, the limitation of this method is that what can be analyzed is only what is written down. They say

nobody can analyze what is not written down, so the researcher has to guard against speculation about what was omitted from the document.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for the course of this project:

Professional Learning Community:

Also known as Learning Community, or by the evolving term *Community of Practice*. These terms may be used throughout the study and should be considered as having the same meaning. For the purposes of the project the definition by Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002) will be used. It generally refers to a school that exhibits the following characteristics:

1. A shared sense of mission, vision, values and goals; and
2. A collaborative, interdependent team working to achieve those same goals; and finally
3. A commitment to continuous improvements as measured by student learning results.

However, Faris (2003) has applied the term to mean a community organized around the principle of lifelong learning for the purpose of social development for the community. This is not the definition used in the project, although it is the ultimate goal of the project being undertaken.

Student Learning:

This term refers to all of those behaviours, actions and values a student exhibits while at school. It does not refer solely to actual achievement or marks; rather it encompasses a holistic approach to looking at how the whole child is developing while at school.

Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations to this study. The first limitation was that the researcher was, in fact, an active participant in the attempt to create the learning community. This may have led to some important points being overlooked or, at the same time, other points being accorded too much importance. The second limitation of the study was that the two schools involved were very small schools in rural Alberta. The total number of subjects being sampled was less than fifty and, so, one person's responses may have made a disproportionately large difference to the results. they may have contributed somewhat to results that were exceptional in favour of, or in opposition to, what the two schools are trying to achieve. A third limitation was the fact that the researcher was Principal of one of the schools involved. This may have contributed to a power imbalance between the researcher and the subjects. As well, it may have led some people to try and avoid being interviewed.

Another potential limitation of the study was the political situation of the time and the intensive political focus on the Alberta education system. For eighteen months the province had a Commission examining the education system in some depth. During the course of this study, the Learning Commission reported 95 suggestions for improvement of the system. How these recommendations were enacted, even which of the recommendations were enacted, may have influenced the findings of this study.

Benefits of the Study

This project provided an opportunity for the leaders of the school district to learn new ways of maintaining small schools and to understand and document change as it occurred in those schools. This project provided a small glimpse into the trials, tribulations and successes of two small schools, their staffs, students and parents, as they attempted to create a vibrant and meaningful professional community of practice. Ideally, the results of this study will be useful for other schools of various sizes, and other school jurisdictions.

Findings

Teacher Survey Responses

Tables 1 to 4 show the basic demographic information concerning the participant's length of service within the two schools, and their length of service with the school division.

Table 1

Staff of School A: Length of Service with School

Teacher	Length of Service
A1	1.5 years
A2	No Response
A3	2 years

Table 2

Staff of School B: Length of Service with School

Teacher	Length of Service
B1	3 years
B2	18 years
B3	7 years
B4	26 years
B5	1 year

Table 3

Staff of School A: Length of Service with Division

Teacher	Length of Service
A1	13 years
A2	No Response
A3	3 years

Table 4

Staff of School B: Length of Service with Division

Teacher	Length of Service
B1	On and off for the last 18 years
B2	19 years
B3	About 15 years
B4	26 years
B5	1 year

First they show the mix of experience levels between the two schools. The average length of time the teachers had been at the two schools was 8.3 years, and the average length of time they had been in the school division was 13.5 years. However, the average length of teacher service at School A was 1.75 years, although the average length of service for those teachers within the division was 8 years. Teachers at School B had an average length of service at the school of 11 years, and service within the division of 15.8 years.

Tables 5 and 6 show teacher participant responses to the following question: what words and phrases would you use to describe the model of Professional Development within your school over the past year?

Table 5

Responses from School A

Teacher	Descriptors
A1	Learning groups
	Community of learners
	School based
A2	No Response
A3	School based (until this year)
	Proactive
	Timely

Table 6

Responses from School B

Teacher	Descriptors
B1	*No response indicated.*
B2	UbD *[Understanding by Design]*
	Never ending
	Teacher driven
B3	New and different
	Nice mix of school based and division wide days

B4	Cooperative, informal but professional
	Staff are eager to go to at least 1 or 2 PD conferences per year
	Staff generally has an open mind to new methods of effective teaching
B5	Informative
	Positive

These descriptors are the product of some reflective thought, and discussion amongst colleagues, of the participants. Generally the terms used by the staff members were positive indicating that they value PD as an important professional activity. The terms indicate that staff members were thinking along the lines of PD being a group or community activity.

Tables 7 and 8 provide perceptions of teacher participants regarding the change in professional development models within the school division to the following question: how has Professional Development delivery changed in your school and district since you have been a staff member?

Table 7

Responses from School A

Teacher	Descriptors
A1	We used to go to a central place and listen to speakers on different topics. Now, there is a mixture of approaches. There are still speakers like the one we had as an UbD speaker in August. We do get a chance to get together with colleagues and plan a unit with this approach, so in that way it is a little different than 13 years ago. Last year when we had

	learning groups it was a very different approach than the "old" approach. We got into groups and shared ideas and learned what was of interest to us and what we thought would be beneficial in the classroom.
A2	No Response
A3	We are moving away from school based PD towards a more centrally directed PD model.

Table 8

Responses from School B

Teacher	Descriptors
B1	The focus has changed from central control to a system that allows more teacher input at the individual school level.
B2	We are now responsible for our own professional development. We are now no longer getting PD done to us.
B3	Much more professional development because it has increased by 3 or 4 days per year. It is much more teacher initiated (teacher driven). More traveling as most days are in "C".
B4	Rather than just "listen to" the latest teaching models or innovations PD workshops have been more hands on, more challenging. School district superintendents, PD reps and individual teachers have taken a more hands on approach.
B5	I'm not sure, I don't have anything to compare to.

They tended to see the change as one from a model where everyone in the division essentially did the same thing to one that allows for greater flexibility at the school level. Most believe this model also allowed for greater input by teachers, and greater responsibility for the PD activities that they wished to pursue. However, one teacher, A3, generally felt the move was, in fact, from a school - based model towards a centrally run model, which was opposite to the perceptions of the other teachers.

Tables 9 and 10 present the responses of teachers to a question concerning the impact PD has had on student achievement in their classrooms.

Table 9

Responses from School A

Teacher	Responses
A1	It keeps you up to date on new programs because education is constantly changing. It is good for the students because they benefit from current approaches that may make learning easier.
A2	No Response
A3	A large impact. This year, for example, I have done more around the incorporation of computers, Smart Boards and computer based scientific sensors in my classes. I have used more self – directed student projects in science. I have done networking with a teacher teaching the same course load under the same circumstances.

Table 10

Responses from School B

Teacher	Responses
B1	The PD that I have attended has helped me to develop different teaching strategies in the classroom. I have found the principles of UbD and understanding backwards design has been especially helpful.
B2	I think it has helped in the class because I am now more aware of learning styles and teaching strategies for those learning styles. It has also made me far more aware of the curriculum.
B3	It encourages teachers to use new methods and varied methods of teaching. Most of our teachers come home from PD days with some new ideas. It was nice to work with the staff of School A at PD days as they are a similar sized school with many of the same strengths and areas in which to work on improvement.
B4	I think that teachers have tried to use more varied modes of program delivery and variety to reach their students. We all know that students learn differently and teachers are trying to reach all those different learning styles.
B5	It positively impacts the students. I can implement new ideas into the classroom.

The participants all felt that PD has played an important, positive role, within their classrooms. They felt that they have developed a greater awareness of learning

styles and teaching strategies. Two teachers also stated that PD has been a critical factor in allowing them to keep up with the changing provincial curriculums.

Teacher Interview Responses

Tables 11 and 12 show how many PD days the professional staff members thought they had during the school year.

Table 11

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	5 days
A2	5 days
A3	5 days

Table 12

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	5
B2	5
B3	I think 5
B4	At least 6

Most of the staff members knew they had 5 days provided within the school division. Teacher B4 thought that there were 6 days within the school year. None of the staff members indicated that they considered the regular teachers' convention days as professional development days.

Tables 13 and 14 present teacher participant perceptions of the strengths of the school based PD model.

Table 13

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	We have had money set aside for PD so it would not impact on other programmes. There is money for subs. Administration support for PD. It is viewed as important by both the school administration and the school division's administration. It tries to focus on things important to teachers. Teachers have input into topics that are approached. Our "buddy school" is similar with respect to size, organization, and so on.
A2	Teachers are able to find a colleague to share with in terms of planning, resources, assessment strategies, and so on. Networking is important. There is greater choice and flexibility.
A3	It handles problems faced daily at school, specific to the school. There is not a one glove fits all approach. It is flexible and timely, and has an immediate impact in the classroom. The school's PD plan is good because areas of interest and/or need can

be addressed.

Table 14

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	It allows for teacher choice.
B2	I get to work with people who are teaching the same stuff I am. There is more shared learning and networking.
B3	The fact that you can work with other similar sized school staffs that face some of the same situations, problems, stresses and so on.
B4	The idea of PD being driven by the teachers. It made us do hands on things, and change can sometimes be good.

Teachers made comments about the importance and value of networking between staffs of similarly sized schools through the course of this project. They also suggested that teacher choice or input into the kinds of PD activities that the two schools pursued were strengths of the model.

Tables 15 and 16 show teacher respondent perceptions of the weaknesses of the current PD model.

Table 15

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	The distances to our "buddy school".
	A lack of time for PD, and the time to spend with the staff from "B".

	Too much central control of PD.
	It is nice to meet the specific needs of staff and students in each individual school.
A2	The other school is far away (in distance) but distance is a problem with any small school. Isolation is another problem, e-mail helps but…
	Centrally planned PD is a weakness for the division even though it helps with networking but doesn't deal with issues directly related to their own school.
A3	At the division level the programmes try to be too inclusive. These are not necessarily specific to the needs now within the classroom.
	There are too many division days and too few school days.
	The school's PD plan is too ambitious with respect to the reality of the division's PD plan taking 3 of the available 5 PD days.
	Does the division need a PD Committee? They are too top down and directed in their PD philosophy. They are telling us what to do too much because a few schools took previous PD days as prep days instead of real PD so everybody gets fettered with the same yoke.
	The issue is one of professionalism because it is lacking within some staffs – institutional culture is so important – if professionalism is valued then PD is committed to and valued.
	There is a lack of follow up on divisional day's PD.

Table 16

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	The distances that we have to travel to access PD.
B2	Finding the time afterwards to follow up on shared activities. Time is always at a premium. PD is too often on a Friday.
B3	The distances to travel especially for division – wide PD. It is difficult in larger groups to find common ground. The cost is difficult for small schools in money, time because of meals and other added expenses not seen in "C" and other centers close to it.
B4	There are no real weakness except for PR and getting people to see that the change was positive and good for them.

Both staffs highlighted problems such as the distances between the two schools involved in the project. However, they also noted that distance, and other costs, were problems when it comes to any PD activity undertaken within the school division. Isolation was seen as a constant problem with the staffs of both of these schools. Another problem brought up several respondents was the tension between school based PD and centrally - based PD models.

Tables 17 and 18 show the staff member's explanations of their role within the planning and implementation of the current school based PD model.

Table 17

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	I have been asked for input into topics, and so on. There has been a chance for greater participation in areas of expertise.
A2	Input into implementation.
A3	Participatory, including helping to make decisions on PD topics where the staff discusses & compromises on topics.

Table 18

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	I helped with presenting school – based Special Education strategies at a number of sessions.
B2	On the whole I got the ball rolling.
B3	I worked with the PD Committee member with ideas, etc. I also promoted it to the rest of the staff.
B4	I was a lead learner in UbD, and I promoted it a little because there are so many different teaching and learning styles.

All of the staff members indicated they played a role in providing input, while several also participated as lead learners, and session facilitators, both opportunities for shared leadership within their schools.

Tables 19 and 20 show the supports for PD that the staff members perceived to be present in their schools.

Table 19

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	Administration support. School philosophy. The financial support.
A2	Administration support, and some money where needed.
A3	Technical supports: (a) the purchase of reliable laptop computers for staff (b) the purchase of a new *[data]* projector (c) the purchase of new computer based science equipment Financial supports: (a) new equipment (b) the use of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) money School Administration: hands off & supportive as long as things are being done.

Table 20

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	There is some money for a limited number of yearly events. Teachers have to have a willingness *[sense of professional responsibility]* to keep up with their professional development. This is especially true for part – time teachers. There should be a greater sense that PD is a part of the job instead of being an add – on (or just a paid day).
B2	There is lots of PD going on. There is CARC and at the divisional level with our PD Committee and the networking going on.
B3	A small amount of money. There is also encouragement to go to activities paid for by Central Office.
B4	The collegial atmosphere, the professionalism of the staff because of their desire to improve, our school's PD rep, and the many PD opportunities.

Respondents focused on the support from administration, both moral and financial, and the collegiality of their colleagues when it comes to PD. Staff members also pointed out the large number of PD opportunities at the school, divisional or even extra – divisional levels.

Tables 21 and 22 show the additional supports the staff members would like to see for their PD activities.

Table 21

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	It is questionable if anything could be added.
A2	Questionable if more supports are needed.
A3	Permanent Smart Boards, perhaps.

Table 22

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	As above *[answer to question 5].* I would like to see more of an appreciation for part – time teachers.
B2	Money. More of it is needed. There also has to be greater flexibility in planning. Days off in lieu of for PD *[done in the summer].*
B3	All PD activities should be paid for by Central Office or there should be a flat rate on a per pupil basis or per staff member basis to pay for PD on a more equitable basis between larger and smaller schools. There are many disadvantages in PD opportunities based on cost due to school size. There has to be a greater equity in PD opportunities.
B4	More time (release time) to digest stuff, as well as a little more money.

Respondents from School A had limited suggestions for additional support. Respondents from School B offered a number of suggestions. Most of these had a financial component, from additional financial support to small schools to support PD, to additional release or in lieu time during the school year as recognition for PD done in the summer.

Tables 23 and 24 show what role the staffs of the schools feel the School Board and Central Office should play in PD.

Table 23

Responses from School A

Teacher	Response
A1	The role of the School Board and Central Office should be financial mostly. Central Office could set the number of days and guidelines, but their role in the actual content of the PD days depends on whether or not the content has universal application.
A2	Central Office should make it easier for teachers and schools to do PD on their own schedule. They should also provide greater cash infusion. They also need to allow flexibility and have more trust in PD implementation and planning. They should not tell me what to do on my "staff – based" PD days.
A3	The Central Office and School Board should expect school based PD is being done, and they should hold principals accountable for meaningful school based PD being accomplished.
	Central Office and the School Board should back up administrators to

	ensure school based PD is happening. Their role depends on their PD philosophy. They should set central guidelines by stay away from setting content in a school based PD environment. Traditional site based management areas are being impacted upon by the School Board and Central Office.

Table 24

Responses from School B

Teacher	Response
B1	The School Board should support Central Office funding with respect to staff's interests and needs in PD. There should be no real role beyond this for the School Board because they do not have educational expertise. Central Office has more time to consider new approaches. The School Board needs to trust Central Office and the educators to know their own needs.
B2	They should play the role of an observer. There should be support there, but they should not push an agenda or plan. Teachers need to be increasingly responsible for their own PD, but this is hard to monitor or/and evaluate.
B3	To encourage PD and support it financially, as well as organizing division – wide PD.
B4	They have to have a PD policy, and be facilitators for the PD needs of the

staffs.

Essentially, most staff members felt the role of Central Office staff, and the School Board, should be basically financial in terms of supporting the model. Some respondents suggested Central Office staff, and the School Board, needed to trust and respect the choices made in terms of PD by the teachers because they are in the best position to know their, and their schools', needs. Two respondents felt, Central Office staff may also need to serve as facilitators in certain PD activities, or even some planning support for certain divisional PD activities.

Teacher Reflections on Professional Development

Table 25 contains a summary of reflections sent to me by the staff participants in the study.

Table 25

Teacher	Response
1	Me develop. Me develop lots. Me develop lots & lots.
2	What did I do? Do you realize how old I am? 1. I went to PWIM sessions 6 or 7 times. 2. I attended new SS curriculum for 5 different sessions. 3. Went to "B" and worked on curriculum with B2 (science). 4. Attended special needs AISI meeting for new document for ECS 5. Worked on UbD with math with grade 2/3 teachers Decided that PD is not all that it is cracked up to be and have chosen to stay home for the 2005/06 school year!
3	Over the past year I've been involved in the following PD activities:

1) Two day Barry Bennett conference on Instructional Strategies. Used & incorporated various aspects into my Science and math programs (mind maps, etc...)

2) Two Day Understanding by Design PD. Used it mainly as a reflective process, Re: my methodolgy in approaching how to ensure curriculum is being covered.

3) Inservice on use of computer interface probeware for Science program. Introduced use of probeware this year.

4) Increased my knowledge base and use of Smart Board tech in class.

5) Attended conferences and in - services on video conferencing. I will be teaching part of the grade nine Math program with this tech.

For the coming year I will be concentrating on a continuation of items 3,4, and 5 for the coming year. In particular how I can integrate all three components together.

4 In the past year I have attended the following PD activities:

1. A Barbara Maraconda writing workshop
2. Our convention in Edmonton
3. Our AISI Special Education project meeting for a day once a month.
4. School PD days

Next year's PD:

I don't know. I suppose that's not what you want to hear. Well, to start

> off with, we're working on growth plans and I'm signed up for the Smart Board session. Another guaranteed thing is the convention. I like to pick sessions related to Language Arts if possible. I'll be on the 3rd and last year of the AISI project with *[the Division's Special Education Coordinator]* as well. Other than that, I will try to keep my eyes open for relevant courses through CARC.

These reflections refer to what the staff members did for PD in the last year, and what they plan to do next year. Staff members focused their PD activities within their teaching assignments, according to their identified needs.

Parental Survey Responses

Tables 26 through 29 provide basic demographic information about the parents involved in the study. This information is focused on how long they had been associated with the schools in the study, and how many children they had go through these schools.

Table 26

Length of Time of Children in School A

Parent	Response
A1	1 year
A2	9 years
A3	11 years
A4	12 years
A5	3 years

Table 27

Length of Time of Children in School B

Parent	Response
B1	8 years
B2	4 years
B3	9 years
B4	16 years
B5	3 years

Table 28

Number of Children in School A

Parent	Response
A1	1
A2	2
A3	3
A4	3
A5	1

Table 29

Number of Children in School B

Parent	Response
B1	3
B2	2
B3	4
B4	4
B5	2

The parents with students in School A had an average of 2 students present in the school for an average of 7.2 years. Parents from School B had an average of 3 students in that school for an average of 8 years. The cumulative averages between the two schools were 2.5 students in the schools for 7.6 years.

Tables 30 and 31 show parents' perceptions of professional development.

Table 30

Parent's Knowledge about Staff PD in School A

Parent	Response
A1	This is where the staff of each school in the district go to learn what resource and what new information is available to help with their teaching the students in the school.
A2	Not much.
A3	It is a chance for teachers to get together to compare situations and for more experienced to share their knowledge with less experienced.
A4	Very little
A5	I believe it is to develop and learn new teaching skills.

Table 31

Parent's Knowledge about Staff PD in School B

Parent	Response
B1	It is made up of workshops for teachers and staff.
B2	Occurs regularly, and all staff attends. These are paid days (except when it happens on Fridays for B's teachers).
B3	They get 5 days through the school year.
B4	The staff learn more about teaching and programs they need to know to better educate our children.
B5	A day set aside to prepare for the new year or meeting with other

instructional staff for betterment.

Parent responses show that they did not have a good idea of what goes on during the PD days, although most guessed it was used for networking and working on teaching skills and strategies.

Tables 32 and 33 show how parents perceive the influence of PD on the classrooms of their children.

Table 32

Parent Perceptions of the Impact of PD on Learning Conditions in School A

Parent	Response
A1	I think that any kind of teaching resources that are available for the staff of the school will only enhance their teaching or guidance for every student.
A2	Yes
A3	Probably more than we know.
A4	I am sure it has.
A5	Yes

Table 33

Parent Perceptions of the Impact of PD on Learning Conditions in School B

Parent	Response
B1	Yes
B2	Definitely! As a professional they need new ideas and encouragement that comes from staff development.

B3	Yes
B4	Yes – over the last 16 years learning conditions have improved (this is a very broad question).
B5	Yes

Parents felt that PD has been a positive influence on the learning conditions of their children. This is because the teachers are exposed to new resources, strategies, and even encouragement from other teachers.

Tables 34 and 35 show the expectations of parents of the activities of teachers during scheduled PD activities.

Table 34

Parent Perceptions for Teacher PD in School A

Parent	Response
A1	I think that all teachers should participate in any courses or sessions available through our school district or teaching association to bring back new ideas to help in our children's development.
A2	Learning new ideas to keep children interested in school - work. Learn to identify problems in children (such as ADD, dyslexia, hyperactivity, comprehension problems, etc.) Keeping in contact with other teachers.
A3	Courses, situations, seminars and time to discuss or share different situations between experienced staff with not so experienced staff.
A4	Learning new skills and keeping up with the changes in the education

	system.
A5	Learning

Table 35

Parent Perceptions for Teacher PD in School B

Parent	Response
B1	Learning new information that will aid in helping students through a variety of learning techniques.
B2	Networking (which is almost as important as any education that occurs). Learning new strategies and techniques. Finding out about new research – "best practices". New curriculum discussion. Dealing with issues in classrooms and schools.
B3	Learning how to implement the Alberta curriculum in new ways. Coming away affirmed in their profession and feeling refreshed. Enjoying speakers, motivators, etc.
B4	Learning more to keep our children as educated as other children in our country and continent.
B5	Staff, teachers, shall be keeping up to date with all new teaching techniques. Principals and directors shall be concerned about budgets and funding to keep smaller schools open.

They expected teachers to be focused on those things that are going to help out their classrooms immediately, as well as keeping up on curriculum changes. A couple of parents included networking as a valuable activity.

Parent Interview Responses

Tables 36 and 37 show whether or not parents know how many PD days there are within the school calendar.

Table 36

Parent Responses about the Number of PD Days from School A

Parent	Response
A1	There are 2 or 4.
A2	5
A3	8…or 4
A4	Probably about 5.
A5	2

Table 37

Parent Responses about the Number of PD Days from School B

Parent	Response
B1	There are 4 or 5.
B2	They sometimes happen on Fridays when school is closed, so 4 to 6, plus teachers' convention.
B3	4 or 5.
B4	2 or 4.

B5	2 or 3.

Most parents guessed at how many days there were. They were generally close in guessing there were 5 PD days within the school year. Interestingly enough, only one parent identified the days of teachers' convention as additional PD days, while the other nine did not.

Tables 38 and 39 show the perceptions of parents about the role of Central Office staff and the School Board in PD.

Table 38

Parent Perceptions of the Role of Central Office and the School Board in PD from School A

Parent	Response
A1	The Central Office and School Board should be more supervisory. They should make sure PD happens on the PD days. They should also make sure people are doing what the division's policies require.
A2	They should keep teachers current on educational matters. They should be knowledgeable. Central Office should play a role in setting the PD programme, but not necessarily the School Board.
A3	Central Office should have guidelines about how PD days should be used. They should allow for flexibility, and they should allow for a combination of "business" and "pleasure" but there should not be any wastage of time or money (an example would be a company Christmas Party because staff morale is important). The School Board, being

	elected, should play an important role in having guidelines and play an important role in morale setting. Teachers' associations are too strong, they, too, need to have flexible guidelines.
A4	They should make sure that there are PD opportunities and make it mandatory someone from each school attends (smaller schools should have subs funded for them because of the lack of resources and personnel). They have to make sure the staffs and students in the smaller schools do not fall behind *[with curriculum and strategies]* and so have to help with funding.
A5	Their role is to help teachers develop skills, and help benefit the kids in the long run.
	People in offices cannot really decide what is best because they do not really know what the kids need.

Table 39

Parent Perceptions of the Role of Central Office and the School Board in PD from School B

Parent	Response
B1	The School Board and Central Office should suggest topics. They know what the requirements of the Department of Education are. They should suggest resources and guidelines for PD.
B2	They should understand the needs of staff(s) and assist in establishing programmes. They should be a resource and help plan and identify

	curriculum change for staff. They also need to have connections to find facilitators for PD.
B3	They need to see what the education needs are of the teachers so they days aren't wasted. They need to be in tune with what the staffs need and then go out to meet the needs of the staffs.
B4	Their role should be to facilitate and ensure professional development reaches the teachers. They should provide experts, etc.
B5	They should be facilitators through providing money and other resources.

Parents felt they should provide access to resources and PD opportunities, or assist in the development of PD activities themselves. Most parents stated their belief that these bodies needed to be in touch with the wishes of the teachers, and they should plan things that are of use for teachers. One parent suggested that a critical PD role for Central Office and the School Board is that of morale (team) building on a divisional basis.

Tables 40 and 41 show the perceptions of parents on the PD needs of school based administrators.

Table 40

Parent Perceptions on the PD Needs of Principals from School A

Parent	Response
A1	Principals should monitor staff and make sure that they have the best interests of the school at heart.
A2	Administrators should have more management courses in human

	resources, finance and marketing.
A3	School finance and personnel.
A4	Classroom needs are as important as are the areas of finance, and so on. There should be a balance, but we are here for the kids (school needs to be run properly at the same time).
A5	There has to be a balance between the classroom and administration/supervisory role for all, including students who are struggling with either their schoolwork or ones who have not been challenged by the school system because they are developing poor study habits.

Table 41

Parent Perceptions on the PD Needs of Principals from School B

Parent	Response
B1	The classroom and curricular aspects are the most important. Usually when you get to the position of principal there is some knowledge there of management *[school finance, etc.]* things.
B2	There is no 1 area more important than any other. It depends on a person's background and experience because each administrator has different needs. But, all areas are equally important.
B3	How to balance the administration and curriculum challenges are important. Budgeting, etc. is difficult because principals *[of small schools]* start as teachers so support is needed there. The priority for a

	small school is having someone with a good relationship with the community and kids.
B4	They should be up on administration functions as much as possible. However, they also have to keep up on curricular things because of their classroom duties.
B5	For a small school it comes down to money so management things like budgeting is important. The issue is one of keeping quality people in the system because of their cost.

Parents felt that there had to be a balance between traditional teacher education and what might be termed more management type education in the areas of finance and human resources. Parents recognized that administrators of small rural schools had a challenging dual role, which complicates their PD needs.

Tables 42 and 43 show what parents saw as the important PD needs for classroom teachers.

Table 42

Parent Perceptions of the PD Needs of Teachers from School A

Parent	Response
A1	The role of the teacher is to be the best manager of their classroom environment, therefore they have to be current on the up to date resources.
A2	They should be learning material to make their classes fun with new

	ideas and new approaches.
A3	Core subjects are critical. There needs to be change and update with the curriculum, but not to the point of making it too challenging.
A4	Keeping up with the changes in curriculum.
A5	Many things. New methods and strategies and discipline, whatever needs to be worked on. New curriculums should be taught as soon as possible as long as there is someone qualified to do it. There should be an increased focus on day to day/practical living.

Table 43

Parent Perceptions of the PD Needs of Teachers from School B

Parent	Response
B1	Knowledge of the curriculum is the most important. *[Knowledge of]* resources and strategies for enrichment for both the low and the high achieving students is important. They also need to be ahead of curriculum changes.
B2	Teachers are the best judge of what they need.
B3	Strategies for curriculum implementation. PD is to help keep teachers' fresh and enjoying their job.
B4	They should be current on curriculum, strategies and resources.
B5	They need to be knowledgeable about new strategies, and so on.

Parents felt that teachers needed to be up to date on curriculum, resources and strategies in the core subjects. A couple of parents expressed a need for differentiated instruction for students of differing abilities.

Tables 44 and 45 show the responses of parents to the question of when PD activities for teachers should be scheduled.

Table 44

Parent Perceptions on When PD should take place from School A

Parent	Response
A1	Professional development is a part of the school year, so we should not change when the PD programming is provided.
A2	Like it is now, closing the school throughout the year every two months or so.
A3	There is no problem with how it is offered now, throughout the year because it makes for a nice break. Teachers should be off together for networking, etc.
A4	Some could be done in the summer, but it and weekends should be for the teachers and their personal lives. Throughout the year is fine.
A5	It doesn't matter as long as the required classroom time is being met. However, I have no trouble with PD over the summer because the school system as a whole needs it.

Table 45

Parent Perceptions on When PD should take place from School B

Parent	Response
B1	PD programming should be provided throughout the year like it is now. This is so the PD is ongoing.
B2	*[Being]* scattered through the school year is reasonable. Teachers need their weekends, and how they are now helps kids by giving them a break because the school year is pretty long.
B3	Throughout the school year. However, it is also great if PD options are provided during the summer.
B4	Professional development should be earlier in the year. This should be in the summer and early in the school year (before Christmas) so they could be used all year. Too late in the year has questionable utility because it is too late to help now.
B5	They should be throughout the year like now because it keeps the PD current. Vacations are important.

Parents felt the current system of the days being scattered through the year was fine because it offers long weekends and a nice break for students. One parent wanted to see the days earlier in the year to get the maximum utility out of the activities. The idea of PD in the summer was not discounted because it was seen to offer options that might not be chosen in the school year because of time. However, parents also recognized the need for personal time for teachers as well.

Student Survey Responses

Tables 46 and 47 show years of attendance of the 8 students who participated in the study.

Table 46

Length of Student Enrollment in School A

Student	# Of Years
A1	10
A2	2
A3	9

Table 47

Length of Student Enrollment in School B

Student	# Of Years
B1	3
B2	4
B3	9
B4	10
B5	3

The students have a cumulative attendance average of 8.4 years, with those in School A having an attendance average of 7 years while those in School B having an attendance average of 9.7 years.

Tables 48 and 49 both show the knowledge students have of teacher PD activities.

Table 48

Student Knowledge of PD from School A

Student	Response
A1	It gets us a day off school.
A2	The staff discuss' stuff and we have no school.
A3	We get a day off, and the teachers do some things, they learn to be better teachers, I guess.

Table 49

Student Knowledge of PD from School B

Student	Response
B1	It is where teachers go to a conference and learn new ways to improve their teaching skills and bring them back to the school.
B2	We miss school but the teachers go away and learn better and more efficient ways to teach.
B3	It is a day that we don't have to go to school and teachers do.
B4	PD days are extra days that we get off school and that the teachers go to school in the city.
B5	It is a day where teachers go to conferences to learn ways to improve the school and help the kids.

Their responses show that students have only a vague idea of what teachers do during their PD days. Essentially, they know they get a day off, and that is about all.

Tables 50 and 51 show the students' perceptions of the impact of PD on their learning conditions.

Table 50

Student Perceptions on the Impact of PD from School A

Student	Response
A1	Yes, because these Lions-Quest "Books" *[a staff member]* uses in advisory are helpful and fun.
A2	Yes
A3	Yes, because they are always coming up with new ideas, which help with learning.

Table 51

Student Perceptions on the Impact of PD from School B

Student	Response
B1	I think it has helped me because they learn new ways and strategies to teach a variety of different children's learning ways.
B2	Yes, because they learn more and have more ability to teach.
B3	Yes and no. Yes because we learn more and are taught better. No because when we miss a day we have to cram stuff in our head the next day and then we get things mixed up.
B4	Yeah, because our old teachers are learning new things to teach us, and new ways to teach us old things.
B5	I think it has helped me quite a bit because we got new textbooks and I

find they have more information and the teachers have found a variety of ways to teach the kids.

Most students felt that the PD activities pursued by their teachers had improved their classroom learning conditions. One student highlighted this perception by naming some favorite resources, but most students felt the teachers came back from their PD activities with new strategies. One student suggested that PD days actually led to a compression of the regular teaching programme, and this may actually serve to cause problems with student achievement.

Tables 52 and 53 show what students expect of teachers during their PD activities.

Table 52

Student Expectations of Teacher PD from School A

Student	Response
A1	Learning
A2	Discussing decisions in the school.
A3	Learning to be better teachers, developing better skills.

Table 53

Student Expectations of Teacher PD from School B

Student	Response
B1	I think there should be more sports clinics offered through the school on PD days.
B2	So that they also learn more so they teach us better.
B3	They should be learning how to communicate and teach us better, and

	learning how to make us understand stuff more.
B4	Teachers should be learning new things so that they can teach us new stuff.
B5	I think that they should have 2-J teams playing against 2-J teams instead of 1-J teams. They should also find new and improved ways of teaching. Especially the new computer thing *[Smart Board]*.

Students suggested they expected their teachers be concerned with working on strategies, and skills.

Student Interview Responses

Tables 54 and 55 show students' perceptions of the number of PD days in a school year.

Table 54

Student Perceptions on the Number of PD Days in a School Year from School A

Student	Response
A1	There are 6.
A2	10, maybe.
A3	4

Table 55

Student Perceptions on the Number of PD Days in a School Year from School B

Student	Response
B1	3 or 4
B2	I think there are around 5.

B3	5, I think.
B4	5 (but we miss most since they are on Fridays).
B5	5

While the students really did not know how many PD days there were in a school year, most of them were close in guessing within a day or two. One student noted that many PD days are on Fridays, but students missed these because the school ran a 4 - day modified calendar.

Tables 56 and 57 show the role students feel Central Office staff and the School Board should play in PD.

Table 56

Student Perceptions on the Role of Central Office and School Board in PD from School A

Student	Response
A1	There should be little to none. Teachers should have an idea of what they need to work on, and they need the freedom to pursue those professional development goals.
A2	Central Office and the School Board should help plan and be a resource.
A3	They should help plan PD and give ideas. They should also provide money as long as everyone knows what it is spent on.

Table 57

Student Perceptions on the Role of Central Office and School Board in PD from School B

Student	Response
B1	Central Office and the School Board should provide money and

	resources. They should allow teachers to teach and do PD according to their teaching styles (and the learning styles of their students).
B2	The Central Office and School Board should allow teachers the flexibility to address the needs of their students.
B3	They should help plan and organize PD. They should also set guidelines but not tell people what to do.
B4	They should let teachers set their own PD needs and priorities (because they are not really teachers).
B5	They should supply money and resources.

Students felt that teachers needed the flexibility to set their own needs, but that they should be able to get assistance from Central Office and the School Board in terms of money and resources when they asked for it.

Tables 58 and 59 show the ideas students had for the PD needs of school based administrators.

Table 58

Student Perceptions of the PD Needs of Principals from School A

Student	Response
A1	The teaching principal should focus their professional development around their teaching needs. Non-teaching principals (larger schools) need to focus on management issues such as finances.
A2	School finances

A3	Their PD should focus on school wide issues.

Table 59

Student Perceptions of the PD Needs of Principals from School B

Student	Response
B1	They should do both things like school finances and also stuff for their teaching assignment because that is what a school is about.
B2	They should be focused on their students. The priority should be the students.
B3	Understanding kids.
B4	They should learn how to budget time if they are a teacher as well.
B5	They should focus on what the school and the kids need such as more Phys. Ed. and sports.

The students felt that administrators needed to have PD for both their dual teaching and their management roles within the school.

Tables 60 and 61 show students' perceptions of the most important PD needs for teachers.

Table 60

Student Perceptions of PD Needs for Teachers from School A

Student	Response
A1	Classroom teachers should focus on new curriculum and teaching strategies. They should not focus on new technologies because they are too expensive, and take too much time to set up.

A2	They should do things relating to their classrooms.
A3	Their PD should focus on their classrooms.

Table 61

Student Perceptions of PD Needs for Teachers from School B

Student	Response
B1	They should focus on strategies and building on their knowledge of their students' learning styles.
B2	They should focus on the weak points of the students. Teachers here are doing a great job addressing those weak points.
B3	Being able to communicate well. They also need to work at speaking to kids at their age appropriate level.
B4	They should be learning how to make things fun, especially if they are an older teacher. They need new techniques of teaching the same old stuff.
B5	They should be finding new ways of teaching.

Most students felt teachers needed to be focused on classroom - centered issues such as teaching strategies and new curriculum. Several students stated that teachers should learn new ways of dealing with the learning styles of the students.

Tables 62 and 63 show students' preferences for PD delivery.

Table 62

Student Preferences for PD Delivery from School A

Student	Response
A1	It should be kept as is because it allows for greater flexibility and

	problem solving if problems (needs) creep in during the school year.
A2	A few should be in the summer for planning for the year, and the rest should be spread out throughout the year.
A3	They should be scattered throughout the year like now.

Table 63

Student Preferences for PD Delivery from School B

Student	Response
B1	It should be provided as it is now because they are in school and so can use *[employ]* the PD now.
B2	Throughout the school year like now.
B3	Throughout the year like now. Teachers should have a break in summer and on the weekends.
B4	They should be on weekdays like Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays.
B5	They should be throughout the year like now because teachers need vacations.

These tables show that students prefer to have the PD days scattered throughout the year like they are currently. This is because it allows the PD to address current problems in a timely manner. It also allows teachers to have a break in the summer and on weekends.

Document Analysis

One of the first documents that I considered was the annual School Satisfaction Survey authored by Schollie Research & Consulting (2005). Our school division is placing increasing pressure on school - based administrators to use "school - based data" in order to make annual and three year school improvement plans, and the survey results compiled by Schollie and Company is a component of this process. Schollie has been contracted by a partnership of 14 Alberta school divisions in the central part of Alberta comprising just over 200 schools. The results are supposed to be analyzed and compared within school cohort groups of similarly sized schools. Both schools within my study are included in the K to Grade 9 cohort of 38 schools. Schollie (2005) cautions users of this data that results and trends from small groups, such as small schools like the two in my study, may not be representative of a "broader group's sentiment" (p. i). In other words, the numbers surveyed from small schools may not be "statistically significant" to really represent a large number of people.

Schollie's (2005) report surveyed both parents and students. Parents with students in grades 2, 4, 6 and 8 were sent their surveys through a mail out from the school, and they returned their responses directly to the research company. Students in grades 4, 5, 6 and 8 had the surveys administered at the school during class time, after which they were collected and returned by the school to the division's Central Office. Both surveys were completed during the first half of February, and the compiled results were returned to the schools by the May meeting for school based administrators, to be used is for their next year's school planning cycle.

Of the 22 questions asked of parents, the results of two of the questions directly impact on the previous analysis I made of some parental responses. One question asked whether or not parents felt educational dollars were "well spent" and, for School A, 100% of the parent's were satisfied. In contrast, 90% of parents in all of the K – 9 schools were satisfied, and, overall, the school division had an 87% satisfaction rating. The second question had to do with student academic achievement. Again, 100% of parents in School A felt satisfied with the academic achievement of the school's students. 96% of parents in all the K – 9 schools were satisfied, and 93% of the school division's parents were satisfied with the level of academic achievement.

One other question from the Schollie Report (2005) directly impacts on this study. The question was whether or not parents were satisfied with the "process for improving the quality of education it offers the students". In School A 100% of parents were satisfied, while 92% of parents in the other K – 9 schools are satisfied, and 88% of parents within the division were satisfied.

In July 2001, Alberta Learning established two committees to look at teacher supply, demand and retention issues within the province. The Advisory Committee on Teacher Supply and Demand Report (2003) examined the long - term issues in this area, and suggested a number of strategies for the next decade in Alberta. The committee noted that while there is a year – by – year surplus of young teachers graduating from provincial universities, or teachers moving to Alberta, there are shortages of teachers in specific areas. In their Report (2003), the Advisory Committee identify the specific areas of Senior High Math, Physics, Chemistry, Science, CTS, School Administration and French as having shortages. In addition, the committee also points out that shortages are

magnified in rural Alberta because problem factors in hiring teachers for country schools are centered around the characteristics of the community where the school is located. The third problem, right behind community characteristics, is competitiveness of salary between education and other professions. In other words, there are too many jurisdictions chasing too few specialists (especially at the high school level), and, if the teacher receives more than one offer of employment, location of the community, and/or salary, become the determining factors.

The report also addressed factors influencing teacher retention. The most important factor identified in this Advisory Committee Report (2003) was the offering of professional development opportunities (identified by 97% of school boards); the second most important factor was teacher induction and mentorship programmes (94%) (p. 9). In one of the attached appendixes (Nichols Management, *Final report*) to the Report (2003), Superintendents advocated, amongst other things, focusing professional development in areas of critical shortage such as math, science and technology.

The Advisory Committee Report (2003) has another attached appendix of comments by Superintendents. One, from North Central Alberta, wrote that more money had to be provided for teacher collaboration on best practices, planning, and so on. This Superintendent felt it was through acting like a collaborative community – which required money – that teachers would increase their engagement in the "big questions" of how to ensure all students were successful at learning. Another Superintendent of a northern jurisdiction felt issues around teacher isolation had to be addressed.

One of the most influential recent documents in the Alberta education system is the Alberta Commission on Learning (2003) report. This set of 95 recommendations

addresses most, if not all, aspects of the education system, including the topic of teacher professional development. Teacher PD is included within two separate chapters, the first chapter being "The Schools We Need", and the second chapter "Excellent Teachers and School Leaders". Coming out of the labour problems of 2002, this report's recommendations have largely been accepted by the Alberta government.

The first recommendation of the ACOL (2003) report to deal with PD is number 13, the first recommendation of the chapter "The Schools We Need". Recommendation 13 states that every school will be required to "...operate as a professional learning community dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement" (p. 65). The report states that the PLC model is the portal to a number of other changes or recommendations that will flow naturally from it. These recommendations include the proposed class sizes for the province, the centering of other community services within the school to be available to students and parents, enhancing the use of schools as community recreational centers, and ensuring professional and para – professional staff members can work effectively together. The report states that there is no single model for developing a PLC but suggests it is a school where teachers use a variety of strategies to seek and share information, and to act on this learning to improve student results (p. 64). Furthermore, the ACOL (2003) states the objective of operating as a PLC is to enhance the effectiveness of teachers as professionals in order to benefit students (p. 66).

The ACOL (2003) Recommendation 72 also deals specifically with PD under the bullet "Expand Professional Development". It identifies the need to "...develop and implement comprehensive professional development plans for every school jurisdiction and every school" (p. 119). This suggestion is already standard operating procedure for

most schools (see Appendix E). In addition, the ACOL (2003) report contains a sizable set of explanatory notes that go along with this recommendation. The notes make the point that because these plans are expected, the government will require them as part of the annual school reporting process, and that evidence of improvement in student achievement must be shown (p. 120). The writers of this recommendation see PD as an ongoing process which is an investment of time and money – so there should be improvement in student achievement (p. 119). Recommendation 73 from the ACOL (2003) report also deals directly with PD. This recommendation requires teachers to link their annual professional growth plans with the school's annual improvement plans, and then with the division's annual improvement plan. One additional detail of this recommendation is that a teacher's growth plan be "linked…to ongoing evaluation of a teacher's performance" (p. 120).

Another area of analysis was the minutes and policies of the school board. In total I examined the publicly-released portions of my school board's minutes for the past two years. In that time they had 26 official meetings, sitting for approximately 100 hours. PD was noted in the minutes five times; the last meeting from May, 2005 saw the greatest description of PD, some three lines in the minutes. School boards have a difficult task, and what happens in the classroom is only a part of what they must consider each time they meet. This division has a budget of about $25 million to distribute throughout the system so financial reports are a regular occurrence, and transportation delegations with disputes over bussing, a regular feature of rural school districts, easily occupy twice the time of PD discussions. There are literally hundreds of other issues, and so PD becomes absorbed in the day - to - day operations of the

divisional organization. As a result it is not surprising that PD gets mentioned a total of five times in two years.

Discussion

Process

Action Research is a process that lends itself to school – based inquiry. The *Action Research Guide* (2000) makes the point that action research encourages collegial sharing. Based on my experiences with this study, I would amend this to collegial sharing within a framework, and for a purpose. Teachers from both schools highlighted the collegial aspects of our PLC project as one of its strengths. For example, in the survey responses reported in Table 6, Teacher B4 writes about the "cooperative, informal but professional" aspects of our project and Teacher A1, in Table 7, writes about the collegial nature of the PD programme. In the teachers' responses, the vocabulary of collegial sharing occurs frequently.

Couture (2003), McKay (1992), Glenn (1995), Purkey and Novak (1984), and Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) all emphasize the need for collegial discussion to be the center of effective, high quality PD. It can help break down the teacher isolation created by, in the words of Bennett and Rolheiser (2001), the "specialization and balkanization" (p. 15) of the profession into grade and/or subject groupings. Collegial discussion is at the heart of AR because it means people are engaged, as a group, in problem solving. Why does it make PD more effective? In the words of teacher A1 in Table 13, "It tries to focus on things important to teachers. Teachers have input into the topics that are approached."

In action research collegial discussion happens around issues and problems that are authentic to the teachers involved, according to O'Brien (1998a). This is one of the critical factors that make action research an effective form of professional development.

In this study, the process brought people together in a structured way that has continued after the formal part of the project has been completed.

What were some of the other results of committing to an action research process? Did we succeed in creating a "Living Theory of Education", in the tradition of Whitehead (2000)? Can the results of this study be organized into one or more of Kemmis's (1993) three categories of (a) technical; (b) practical; or (c) emancipatory? With reference to the Kemmis categories, this study had overtly technical and practical aspects. For example, Teacher A2 in Table 15 identified technical aspects that challenged this process, especially the distance and time involved in making the project work. Teachers B2, B3, and B4 also identify technical challenges in Table 16, in commenting on concerns around follow – up time, costs, and convincing people that change is a good thing. Indeed, one of the guiding questions to this study was a technical question, focusing as it did on the problems of creating a distributed learning community.

Many of the successes enjoyed by the participants in this study dealt with issues of practical action research. For example, Teacher A1, in Table 9, and Teacher B2 in Table 10, stress the changes in PD have made them more aware of curriculum and teaching strategies. Further in Table 10, Teacher B3 emphasizes that the working between the two schools was very beneficial because they could effectively collaborate on similar types of issues and problems that relate to the schools' size. In Table 13, Teacher A1, and in Table 14, Teacher B3 again points out the similarities of the two schools in size, organization and stresses. The project allowed the staffs of two similarly positioned schools to collectively address the same problems – and to share solutions that occurred to one staff, but not to the other.

Regardless of any other concerns, it seemed that the teachers generally welcome the networking and team building aspects that were characteristic of this project. By default, could this be seen as Kemmis' (1993) emancipatory result? Was this social action creating historical change? I do not think I can go that far based on the evidence of this study. We have only just begun the process of creating a distributed learning community. "Historic change" could only be clearly established as part of a long - term study. Accordingly, it is far too early to pronounce that historic change happened during the course of this study.

Whitehead's (2000) ideas might have more application to the results of the study than those of Kemmis. One reason is that while the study was informed by the body of knowledge about PLC creation it did not follow any one process as laid out by any one particular author. It is not my intention to declare that a new, all - encompassing model for PLC creation has been developed by this project. Rather, I think the study indicates that any PLC is unique because of its geographic location(s), and the social context within which it arises.

In this study the contexts are clear. Both schools have somewhere between 50 and 60 students from grades K – 9. They each have between 3 and 4 FTE professional staff. For the most part, as seen in Tables 1 through 4, the professional staff members are experienced teachers and, in School B, the staff members are highly experienced in the small, isolated, rural school environment. Yet, Tables 13 and 14 show that despite the practical and technical challenges faced in this project, it was successful in part because it allowed for networking, timely and flexible PD focused on the small school context, and collegial time with people in a similar context.

One additional reason for success may be found in the psychology of the people involved. The work of Ryan and Deci (2000), Vansteenkiste et al. (2004), the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2001), and Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) suggests that success may have arrived because the professional staff members were motivated to work together. Tables 17 through 20 seem to indicate this, although one of the limitations to the study is the possibility that these people told me what I wanted to hear. Nevertheless, the professional members felt encouraged and were engaged in the process because they wanted to be a part of the PLC project. They were motivated to network because of their isolated context, and this motivation tended to be more important than the practical and technical challenges of those contexts.

Partly as a result of this level of motivation, it is possible that the project resulted in the creation of Whitehead's (2000) version of a "Living Theory of Education", even though participants did not pursue this as a goal. For example, in Table 13, Teacher A2 noted that the project encouraged staff to collaborate on resources, planning and assessment strategies. In Table 14, Teachers B1 and B4 indicated that the project gave teachers freedom of choice, and responsibility, for their own professional development. Furthermore, in Table 15, Teacher A3 responded that there should be more opportunities for school – based networking and fewer divisionally - developed PD opportunities. It is clear the teachers saw the project as a way to address issues of interest and immediacy to themselves and their classrooms through the PLC model – quite clearly addressing Whitehead's two reflective questions.

Auger and Wideman (2000), and McBride and Schostak (2004), are among many authors who describe how action research changes practice, and changes traditional roles

and power relationships within schools. Certainly many staff responses indicated that practice had changed. For example, in Table 6, Teacher B4 stated that the PD model had led to a greater discussion around effective teaching practices and, in Table 13, Teacher A2 commented on the benefits of working more closely with colleagues. According to these teachers, the action research process, and the resulting discussions, led to changes in classroom practice. Moreover, responses in Tables 7 and 8 show teachers were aware that changes in the PD model from a "traditional" passive, non-participatory model to an active, collaborative model, was influencing their teacher role in PD delivery. Specifically, responses in Tables 17 and 18 show teachers were taking a greater role in planning, initiating and leading PD in their schools. I am not sure of the magnitude of the change that can be attributed to the action research process because of the small number of professional staff members involved in the study. In both small schools there has been a history of informal leadership as a way of spreading responsibility among staff because the principals also teach for much of the school day. These roles give power and influence to the staff members who fill them – our small schools are, in reality, a working model for distributed leadership. The PLC model does give teachers much greater responsibility for their PD, but in a school where everybody had a leadership function already, I am not convinced that the new model created a sudden change in how the staff members related to one another, and to their principal. In effect, the action research process became a more effective way for organizing roles and responsibilities, building on and strengthening pre – existing relationships.

Change

Important changes did occur as a result of this new model. Some are described in Lee's (2003) paper, and others are consistent with a process of change described by Fullan (2001). Lee (2003) writes about a particularly messy result when we attempted to make changes without a complete understanding of the changes we were trying. Fullan (2001) warns that change is inherently non-linear, but the critical factor is the relationships between the participants. Tables 9 and 10 show some of the relationships between the participants. As Teacher A3 noted in Table 9, some relationships were based on networking with people "teaching the same course load under the same circumstances". Teacher B3 noted in Table 10 that the staffs shared the "same strengths" and needed to work on the "same areas". Under the old PD model, not only were some teachers not engaged with the content, they did not develop the meaningful professional relationships with their colleagues that might have led to the development of a flexible learning community.

Another change documented in this study related to the quality of professional discussion. Bohm, Factor and Garrett (1991) write about the creative aspects of dialogue when it is based on reflective thought. Couture (2003) and DuFour (1991) also emphasize the role of reflective conversation between professional colleagues, while Duff, Brown and Van Scoy (1995) stress reflection as one of the keys to effective PD. Teachers in this study drew similar conclusions. For example, in Table 7, Teacher A1 commented on the positive collegial discussion in the new PD model and, in Table 8, Teacher B4 commented on the much more engaging PD that had been taking place. Tables 15 and 16 also reveal aspects of this process when the staff members, such as

Teachers A2 and B2, both stated their need for more time for dialogue as a way of dealing with isolation and limitations of time.

Most respondents confirmed that discussion was happening among colleagues, and that it was positive, but it is not so easy to determine if it was reflective. However, the responses of the students provided more evidence. Tables 50 and 51 show that Students A1, A3, B1 and B2 all mentioned changes in teaching style, and changes in the resources being used in their classrooms. These students felt that there had been a largely positive consequence as a result of the PD model being pursued. Since the model is based on professional discussion focused on improving classroom practice, it seems reasonable to conclude that reflection on practice occurred during the discussions that contributed to the changes the students perceive.

While I can conclude that reflective discussions happened, one of the aspects of this project that I found disappointing was the written reflective component. Table 25 contains the written reflections of the staff participants. I received only four submissions, and two were by the same person. My initial conclusion was that while teachers were becoming comfortable in reflective dialogue with some colleagues, they were less comfortable writing in a journal, for instance. Perhaps that was because there was no immediate feedback to a written submission. This is one of the attractions of a networked environment, that there are colleagues who can provide feedback. In a written form, the feedback is not immediate, and so teachers probably have a great deal of discomfort reflecting on their practice in this fashion.

There are other possibilities for this result. One is that the participants saw this as my adding work to their already full workload, and that they did not have the time or

energy to fit this into an already crowded day. This is extremely likely as the staffs of both participating schools have heavy workloads, and what might have been put off today to work on tomorrow sometimes becomes forgotten in the daily crush.

Secondly, there may have been a concern over who would have access to the comments made in the study. People are naturally worried about their positions, and nobody can afford to be identified as "the person" making an extremely negative comment. It would be easier to say nothing at all than to take a risk if there was the slightest doubt in this regard. These possibilities emphasize the importance of trust. Sackney (2003) calls it a precondition for a PLC to develop, and Purkey and Novak (1984) state that it is a precondition for their "professionally inviting" school. If no trust exists between colleagues, there can be no effective reflective discussion. There is no clear example in the data showing for certain that trust existed, but a number of responses hinted at it. In Table 6, Teacher B4 commented that the PD model was "professional" and, in Table 15, Teacher A3 connected the professionalism of the staff in PD ventures to how PD was valued by the school administration. In these cases, the term "professionalism" was interpreted as showing the participants were committed to, and valued, their PD time with their colleagues. There was a spirit of collaboration and trust, seen in the joint commitment to the improvement of the classroom conditions for students in both schools.

In School A, 14 parent surveys were returned and used to develop the percentages. This was essentially 40% of the parent body for the school. School B had 12 surveys returned, also about 40% of its parent body. I suspect that 26 responses for the two schools, combined, represented the most satisfied and committed parents in each school.

Nevertheless, there were no negative responses from parents so, accordingly, the Schollie Report (2005) results show, for School A, 100% of parents were satisfied with the process of improving academic achievement in the school. A major component of this process is our evolving PLC model.

The answers to questions the Schollie Report (2005) posed to students were not so instructive for purposes of comparison with the results of this study because the questions were centered on the classroom lives of the students. Their usefulness for school improvement planning is also questionable. I am unconvinced many of the students understand the questions they are asked. For example, an average of 60% of Grades 4, 5 and 6 students agreed the learning activities in the school were "interesting and meaningful" (p. 5). When asked what would help change this, students answered with examples such as "bake sales, games and relay races". In contrast, on the same question, Grades 7 and 8 students suggested a move towards more project - based learning and looking at a wider range of assessment strategies. Junior High students have a higher level of maturity, and have developed the critical thinking and comprehension skills necessary to provide a greater degree of guidance for school planning than the Grades 4 – 6 students.

Challenges

Despite the seemingly complete acceptance of the change from one PD model to another, along with the evolving requirements for participation by staff members, there are still significant challenges facing the project's schools. The first challenge is political. There are many stakeholders in Alberta's education system, including the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Government, school boards and parents, not

to mention teachers and students. Each stakeholder has expectations regarding PLCs that, on the surface at least, seem to be different.

The Alberta Commission on Learning (2003) and ATA (2005) publications seem to be at odds with one another. For example, *Every child learns* (2003) mandates that all schools operate as PLC's, while the ATA (2005) makes PD a personal responsibility for each teacher, and the PLC model, while preferred, is only an option. There is danger in this tug - of - war, because teachers may comply with the ACOL requirement, but not be committed to it, making it a change of questionable effectiveness. Alternately, the ATA's 'gentle shove' in the direction of a PLC may not be effective because it might allow too much choice and freedom. The real question here is one of leadership: who should be leading the charge towards the creation of a PLC model?

Should the ACOL report (2003) lead with its mandate that schools operate as PLCs? This causes some concern for teachers, since the entire report was created in a time of extreme labour stress. It could be seen as a case of the government setting a policy which forces teachers to operate in ways only the government can sanction -- not the most effective way of establishing productive policy. It seems clear that the ACOL document tried to show teachers who had the final say. Unfortunately, that could create new reasons for resistance both to PD and the PLC model. The ACOL Report may have only succeeded in introducing a new element of politicization into a model of organization where politics of trust and confidence building, and sharing leadership, already make establishing a sustainable PLC a long - term project. Full of constant challenge.

Of course, many positive changes flow from a change to the PLC model, and the ACOL Report has identified a number of these. One is the encouragement for para–professional and professional staff members to work more effectively together to ensure the best possible services are provided to students. As a PD facilitator, I have found that having para–professional staff members coming to PD days is a great way to build their capacity in enhancing student achievement, and it is also a great opportunity to work on team building with the professional staff members. However, as a school administrator, I know that having para–professional staff members at PD days is an added cost. Building staff capacity has a cost, and principals have to decide whether or not that cost is sustainable for their schools. The cost issue could help determine how effective the PLC model becomes, since it will define the level of inclusiveness each PLC can achieve and sustain.

In this study's schools, teachers, parents and students all felt PD's locus of control should be at different levels. Tables 23 and 24 show how teachers felt about School Board and Central Office officials being involved in PD. Teacher A2 suggested the need for greater flexibility and trust in the staffs' ability to schedule effective PD on their own, while Teachers B1 and B3 advocated only a financial role for the school board in PD. These responses are not surprising, given that the teachers surveyed felt that their PD had been effective and meaningful. These teachers felt that they should be entrusted with the responsibility of knowing their own PD needs, and knowing how to meet them. Tables 56 and 57 show how students felt about this question. Student A1 suggested that the board and central office should have very little control, while Students A2 and A3 thought those agencies should assist in planning and funding. Students from School B

echoed these sentiments, with Students B1 and B2 suggesting teachers know best what they need to work on.

The parent reaction was somewhat different. While the Schollie Report (2005) showed parents felt confident in the new model, it also showed they have high expectations around PD. In Table 38, Parent A1 saw a supervisory role for the School Board and Central Office officials in PD, suggesting they needed to set guidelines to be followed by the teachers. Parent A4 wanted it mandatory that someone from each school be present at central PD opportunities – at the cost of the Board. In Table 39, Parent B1 echoed the comments of Parent A1, while Parents B2 and B4 saw the role of the School Board and Central Office as one of resource provision and facilitation of experts. Most parents saw PD planning, and implementation, as a cooperative venture between school staffs and their employers. Generally, they felt that while there has to be flexibility in PD programming, there also has to be guidelines, and Central Office and School Board officials have to ensure there is not wastage in time and money on frivolous things, which might leave schools short of money for PD on really important issues. Additionally, the parents surveyed saw an important role of the School Board as one of guardian of public money. However, they also saw their role as one of assisting teachers with resources and experts because they recognized that individual schools might not have the necessary contacts or resources to make some of the needed PD happen.

Parents did *not* say that teachers should do what the School Board and Central Office told them to do, which is one of the responses I had expected. There may be several reasons for this. First of all, while the Alberta Education publications for this study came out after the 2002 labour strife, the school division did not have a looming

labour problem. The topic of school closures because of a strike was not in the forefront of parents' thoughts. Neither were contract negotiations and the age-old discussion of how much money a teacher should make. It is possible that parents were not so forceful in their views about labour relations in the education system because there was little local public political conflict between teachers and the School Board.

Another possible reason why parents did not give the answers that I assumed they would is that they realized where they were, geographically speaking, in relation to the division's central office. The study's schools are the centers of their local communities - communities that are tightly knit, and self - reliant. Parents know that in small communities people create networks so they have a safety net in times of need, such as seeding and harvest times. They know teachers need to do this as well, and they expect their teachers to make contacts with other teachers doing similar jobs. In fact, Tables 34 and 35 show this is a parent expectation of teachers in how they use their PD time. Parents A2, A3, B2 and B3 all stated they expected teachers to be networking in order to enhance their knowledge of teaching strategies. Obviously, a functioning and productive PLC is a way of fulfilling parent expectations around PD.

Fulfilling expectations is a difficult process in the education system. Skytt (2003) wrote that PLC schools and their divisions had turned to the PLC model of PD delivery in response to the increasing pace of curricular change, so that they could have increased opportunity for collaborative dialogue and reflective practice. Having attended the 2005 Social Studies Institute, I can conclude both the ATA and Alberta Education see the PLC model as the most effective way for implementing new curriculum. For example, during the 2004 – 2005 school year, sessions were held on a zone – by - zone basis to prepare K

– 3 teachers for implementation of the new Social Studies curriculums this fall. The teachers attending these sessions participated in collegial planning, and engaged in reflective dialogue about the nature of the new curriculum and how it would impact on their classrooms and their practice.

In this study, both parents and students felt it was essential for their schools to keep up with curricular change. Tables 34 and 35 show that Parents A1, A4, B2, B3 and B5 all felt helping teachers and schools keep up with curricular change was the critical job of PD. Tables 48 and 49 indicate that students felt PD was about teachers improving their skill sets, and their knowledge of course content. Students expected their teachers would want to maintain and improve their abilities in the classes they teach, and several indicated they wanted their teachers to get the most effective PD possible, with as little wastage of time and money as possible.

Motivation of members is another challenge facing the PLC. Ryan and Deci (2000), Vansteenkiste, Simons, et al. (2004), Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2001) papers all discuss motivation. One general conclusion is that teachers who feel empowered, who feel that they are affirmed in their jobs, will be more productive, and will approach PD with energy and a sense that it is worthwhile. It is clear from teacher responses in this study that they felt motivated and, apparently, motivation was a concern for parents and students, too.

One parent, B3, observed in Table 35 that, after PD, teachers should be returning to their classrooms "affirmed in their profession" and "refreshed". Most parents felt teachers should do the PD they were motivated to do, and one parent felt that motivation

could also arise from effective PD. This is a critical point, because it seems that if PD is to be effective, it will be so because the people who are there will be intrinsically motivated to be there. In turn, those people will then be motivated further to go back to their classrooms and try to improve their practice.

Parents, as seen in Tables 32 and 33, felt teachers in the two schools had had effective PD because they saw it translating into better learning conditions for their children. Tables 50 and 51 show that students, also, felt PD had improved their learning conditions. Both groups felt that the PD their teachers had attended had improved the classroom situation of the students in part because teachers were returning to their classrooms motivated to try out new strategies. I have learned through this study that teachers, being reflective, will attend PD in areas they feel (are motivated) they need to work on, and they will (be motivated to) try new things in those areas, which in turn, will encourage them to engage in more PD in those areas.

One of the keys to stimulating this spiral of PD is to keep people motivated. Teachers must feel they have choice, and that they are supported in their PD choices. As well, they must perceive that the PD is leading to tangible results in their classrooms. As a school administrator, teacher and parent I am always concerned about the best use of scarce PD resources. As a result of this study, I am much more willing to advocate for PD that is linked directly to school goals and teachers' needs, with clearly articulated plans focused on student learning and changes in teaching practice.

It is a continuing challenge to define the role of School Boards in PD. While the minutes of the board involved with this study do not record it, board members have told me that there is always discussion of PD at board meetings, but these discussions are "off

the record". A growing body of literature has attempted to take a look at School Board actions and ask whether or not they are obstacles to change, and defenders of the status quo. Hord (1994) asked this question because quite often, it appears, School Boards are "forgotten players" in school reform efforts. She cites a study suggesting only 4% of school board minutes are concerned with school reform (p. 2). My analysis of my school board would confirm that only a very small amount of time during meetings is spent on discussions of professional development.

Does this mean the School Board is uninterested in PD? I do not think so. The School Board is made up of people who have the best interests of students at heart, so the political dimension of school improvement cannot be ignored because School Board members are elected politicians. Bjork and Lindle (2001) make the point that this element of democracy leads to political implications for most activities undertaken in and around schools. In this study the role of the School Board was seen by teachers and parents as one of support. However, there was no clear consensus on the nature of that support, which is a potential problem if any stakeholders feel that the PD activities have been a waste of time and resources. Perhaps as long as the parents are satisfied that the school is effective then their perception of the role of the School Board will be that of a supporter of teachers. If that perception changed, the public would probably expect a more interventionist response by the School Board in many different areas, including that of PD.

Successes

On a number of levels this project has been a success. Arnold (1995), Buchler (2003), Couture (2003), and DuFour (1991) all have written about areas in which

successes have been experienced in PLCs. One key to any success is the people that are involved. Buchler (2003) discusses the challenge pedagogical philosophy makes to any PD model, suggesting that people who are constructivists in their teaching philosophy will do well in a PLC model because it places responsibility on the participants to achieve some benefit. Throughout the staff responses in Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8, the staff members consistently use constructivist language to describe their PD experiences in this model.

Could we have been as effective without this group of teachers involved in the study? I do not think so. The PLC model is one where a teacher who is an active participant will get the most out of the experience. PLC theory is based on a simple formula, which is that people, especially adults, seem to learn best by doing and discussing their experiences, instead of being told. Time and again we teach curricula in our classrooms where we insist the kids get actively involved, or else they will not get the point of the course content. In fact, quite often the noisiest classrooms, in my school, are the classrooms where the most learning is going on because kids are engaged in the social process of creating understanding and knowledge. The groups of teachers in this study are, by and large, constructivists in their pedagogical philosophy, and this helped make the project work.

However, having a common philosophical outlook is only one component of an effective PLC. Couture (2003) and DuFour (1991) make the critical point that the members of the PLC have to agree where they are going, and one of the ways they do this is through developing a shared vision. The first thing we did as this project coalesced was to develop a common statement of shared values for our PLC. This shared statement follows:

1. ***Both*** teachers and students need to be challenged throughout the school year.
2. Education has to be child – centered, focusing on the individual student as a whole person with strengths, weaknesses and interests that may not be always worked on through the formal school system.
3. Parents play an exceptionally important role in the school system. They are members of the educational team for their child, and communication with them is important.
4. Teamwork and dialogue among teachers is important in order to develop deeper understandings and learnings about our schools, our students and the changing nature of the educational system.
5. It is the personal responsibility of each teacher to be engaged in meaningful professional development.
6. Change is both inevitable and positive, and must be met with a positive attitude.

This set the foundation for the collaborative relationship that grew between the two schools. It embodied the best of constructivist and community building philosophy, and it is the written pedagogical commitment that guides our PLC. In other words, it is our roadmap to success, and it was our first success as a PLC.

Although the project enjoyed several successes, and was perceived as a success by the participants, students and parents, there were limits to that success. We may have succeeded in networking two distant schools, but we are still struggling with the twin challenges of distance and cost. We collaborate as much as we can, but there are only so many of us, and opportunities for collaboration are relatively few. The foundations of

our PLC are there – the shared vision and values, the shared philosophy, and the fact that we have been effective when we have had the opportunity to work together. However, this is a long - term labour of love, and it may be that a reasonable judgment of success may not be possible for several years.

Conclusion

When I started this study, some 36 months ago, I did not realize what I was getting myself into. I thought that I was merely studying whether or not two small schools in rural Alberta could develop a distributed learning community. Political events, personal and professional challenges, and the ever-present reality of my work life have, at times, overtaken my attention to this study. It has evolved from asking what I thought was a simple, yet challenging question which was not an add-on to my professional life, into an almost all-consuming passion for exploring the various sub-topics that arose as I studied the question. What I thought was a fairly standard, two-dimensional box has become a prism that grows and changes the more I read, think, and discuss.

In the end I keep coming back to the question posed by Postman (1996) and Littky and Grabelle (2004), which *is what is the purpose of the education offered by these two schools*? Or, put another way, what is our story? It really goes beyond the technical aspects of what is going on in our classrooms, those visual things that stakeholders love to measure and discuss critically. This question is really about the legacy that two schools are leaving their students and parents. It is also about a legacy that is being left with staff members, changing their approaches to their professional lives.

One overriding message comes out of this project: communities are organizations that can get things done effectively. Despite the twin challenges of distance and the shortage of resources that can lead to isolation and quiet despair in classrooms for

teachers in small, rural schools, our communities worked. They came together to address challenges, and to come up with their own unique solutions to their particular problems.

This is not to say that our communities are all nice, bright places filled with gentle, cooperative people. To address challenges effectively, community members must take on a tremendous amount of hard work and, because it is done in a dynamic social context, it can get rather messy. People are challenged to talk out their differences and, to work effectively together, they have to form a common philosophical foundation. To be successful, everybody needs to know in which direction everyone should be rowing.

Not only teachers need to understand this. Parents and students also need to understand because, in many respects, schools have to be the guardians of the community spirit. When teachers and administrators become obvious role models in lifelong learning and networking in order to build a community, they encourage parents to participate more meaningfully in the school, and the larger school community can be enhanced. If this is one of the legacies to come out of this project, then I have studied a great thing, and it is an honour to have participated in it.

However, that cannot be the only story to come out of this project. There is a sadness, too, as I complete this study. It is not because the written study is completed. We will continue with the task of building a distributed learning community. The sadness, or rather, worry, comes from the knowledge that the PLC model is in danger of becoming a hijacked victim of the political gamesmanship between teachers, government and the school boards.

Much of my concern has to do with the psychology of teachers – they may enjoy operating as a PLC, but they cannot be told that they should operate in this way and still

commit to the model with full enthusiasm and passion. If they feel they are being compelled to do so, there will be significant resistance to the whole idea. The best PLCs operate effectively because they have evolved in a spirit of cooperation and unity amongst the people involved. These people are committed to working together freely, they enjoy a sense of empowerment, and they are intrinsically motivated to be in the model. Such people resent being told how they are going to work together.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) in their *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future*, talk about the synergistic aspects of human relationships. Too often, they argue, teachers languish in their insulated/isolated professional roles that, for one reason or another, put roadblocks up to the formation of relationships that would provide powerful professional development opportunities. Another way of putting this is that we need to be networking – either because or in spite of what is going on around us. The building of networks is an inherently personal activity, dependent on the personalities of the people involved, and the social contexts those personalities find themselves in on a daily basis. The successful growth of the PLC is largely dependent on the effectiveness of the networking done by community members. That is why teachers, government and school boards have to take the politics out of professional development. Teachers must be allowed to develop their models, in time, so the continuing story of education in Alberta can be one of sustained growth and dynamic learning.

Through this study, we have not totally accomplished what we set out to do. The groundwork of the PLC has been established, and the staffs are committed to the process for quite a number of important factors. Both schools are determined to create their own "Living Theory of Education", in the tradition of Whitehead. Yet, the distributed PLC is

not embedded to the point where it is second nature to the teachers involved. It needs to be worked on, encouraged and nurtured constantly. I do not believe it will develop according to any set plan that I can write. Nor would I want to take away the ability of staff members to have essential input into how the PLC will grow and develop. My role is to maintain community focus on the PLC concept and to work on ensuring the development of a critical level of organizational maturity. I also need to ward off some of those outside threats to the PLC, from both the division in my role as an administrator, and from the government in my political role as a local president of the A.T.A. If all of these things can be done, the emerging distributed PLC will take firm root and flourish, making all of the teachers and the schools involved much more effective.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

School Staff Survey

1. How long have you been a staff member at your school?

   _____

2. How long have you been employed within the school division?

   _____

3. What words and phrases would you describe the model of Professional Development within your school over the past year?

4. How has Professional Development delivery changed in your school and district since you have been a staff member?

5. How would you describe the impact professional development has on student learning and achievement in your classroom?

Appendix B:

Parent Survey

1. How long have you had children in this school?

   _____

2. How many children have you had in this school?

   _____

3. As a parent, what is do you know about Staff Professional Development?

4. Do you think that the Professional Development of the staff has improved the learning conditions for your child(ren)?

5. What do you think that teachers should be doing on their Professional Development days?

Appendix C:

Student Survey

1. How long have you been a student in this school?

   _____

2. What do you know about Staff Professional Development?

3. Do you think that staff Professional Development has helped improve your learning conditions in the school?

4. What do you think that teachers should be doing on their Professional Development days?

Appendix D:

Survey Schedule

The following basic schedule will be used for the surveying of the staff, parents and students:

School 1	***School 2***
Staff Survey Schedule: October 5, 2004	Staff Survey Schedule: October 7, 2004
Parent Survey Schedule: October 12, 2004	Parent Survey Schedule: October 14, 2004
Student Survey Schedule: October 19, 2004	Student Survey Schedule: October 21, 2004

Appendix E:

School A – School B PD Plan

The following plan is intended to focus the Professional Development (PD) efforts of the staffs of School A and School B during the 2004 – 2005 school year. Within the upcoming school year there will be 5 scheduled PD Days, during which at least 2 will be staff based (August 30th and 31st). Friday, April 15th will be the date of the Small Schools Conference.

I am proposing that we continue on with the focus on Instructional Strategies and Assessment. The proposed schedule for the first school – based PD Day looks something like this:

Nov. 26th	***Location: TBA***
Morning Sessions:	Elementary/Primary Math (Math to the Max) Junior High Science Instructional Strategies Lab Equipment
Afternoon Sessions:	PWIM & Primary Language Arts New Junior High Social Studies Curriculum

By the end of the day we will also group ourselves into subject specific team groupings that (may) look like this, and meet on the following days:

Special Ed. & Primary LA	Jr. High Science & Math	Grades 5 – 9 LA	Primary Math/Science	Grades 5 – 9 Social Studies
Sept. 16	Sept. 23	Sept. 30	Oct. 7	Oct. 14
Nov. 18	Nov. 25	Dec. 2	Dec. 9	Dec. 16 (?)
Feb. 3	Feb. 10	Feb. 17	Feb. 24	March 3
April 14	April 21	April 28	May 5	May 12
Dec. 16 may not be a team - meeting day because of Christmas Concerts.				

These sessions are intended for collaborative planning, in servicing, and so on. The AISI funds from each school will pay for the half - day subs in each case.

The second day may look at the same topics as the first staff PD day (Nov. 26t^{h}). However, topics such as Special Education and technological integration in the classroom may also be considered. The 2nd PD Day will be Monday, January 31st, 2005. Staff PD Day #3, April 15th, will be the Small Schools Conference put on by CARC.