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Taking Control:
Self-directed Professional Development and Teacher Agency

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Although professional development is a common term used to describe teacher work-related learning, it is useful to consider some of the meanings of its constituent terms. The word 'professional' is derived from Latin via French, which referred to a public, solemn declaration of the kind made in religious orders. Ernest Greenwood (1957), in an oft-cited paper, attempted to define the idea of a 'profession' and theorized that professions fall into a continuum with medicine, law and scientific researchers at the elite level, teachers, nurses and social workers in the middle, and scrubwomen (sic), watchmen (sic), and farm laborers at the lower ends of the continuum. Greenwood judged professions as higher or lower on the continuum by whether or not they possessed the following attributes: systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and a culture. Parts of his definitions still ring true to many popular understandings of the idea of a profession: those careers most commonly considered to be 'true' professions are typically grounded in academic theory; moderated by research and support from the university; they grant and supervise accreditation of individuals in their ranks; they subscribe to codes of conduct and enforce them; and, they have both formal and informal values, norms and symbols (Brante, 2010).

In Canada, provinces have teacher's 'associations,' which are common in the professional world. Although these associations regulate the conduct of their members and control, at least partially, the entrance of new members in a similar way that the legal and medical professions do, they also negotiate contracts of employment in their roles as labour unions, which would signify to some that the occupation has less social status than law or medicine. This quasi-professional status might also be due to historical factors. The occupation has been and still is female-dominated, especially at the elementary school level (Carnevale, Smith, & Gulish, 2018), teachers in the past received less post-secondary training than other professions in most countries, and teachers were seen as 'public servants', not autonomous actors (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2008). Sociological studies have also found that public school teachers typically rank in the middle of the occupations in terms of professional prestige and also in terms of credentialing, authority over decision-making, and autonomy in professional development, which are considered hallmarks of the professional status of an occupation (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2008). Terming the space made for teacher on-the-job learning 'professional' may thus be an attempt to legitimize the activity – to lend it an important and essential quality it might otherwise not have. After all, most teachers in Canada are on the public payroll, and perhaps the education system feels the need to justify paying teachers to engage in activities that are not immediately productive in a capitalist state (Corcoran, 1995).

The term 'development' comes from the Old French for 'unfold'; by the mid-1700s, it was understood as "the internal process of expanding and growing" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020). How this might be applied to teachers has been discussed at length, but there has been little consensus

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about the conceptualization of this term in this context (Evans, 2002; Serin, 2017). The term professional 'growth' has been used to describe teacher development as "an inevitable and continuing process of learning" that is complex and interconnected (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). A biological metaphor for learning at work has also been used by Engeström (2006). Learning networks are compared to the formation of a mycorrhizal fungus growing in a forest, whose productive interconnectedness is due to the growth of an "invisible organic texture underneath" the more obvious fruiting bodies. The fruiting bodies (or mushrooms) are analogous to institutional organizations, which are easy to see, but the "real work" of both the forest and institutions of learning could be seen as going on underground, as interconnected networks communicate and distribute resources. Both the fungus and learning networks are difficult to study, subject to insults, but resistant to destruction (Engeström, 2007, pp. 10-11).

Professional development (PD) as a conjugated term has been broadly defined as "teachers' learning, how they learn to learn (and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support pupil learning)" (Avalos, 2011, p. 10). But this definition does not consider questions of direction or measurement, nor does it define what qualifies as PD and what does not. The definition also belies the potential power of the professional development process and its complexity. It may be wise, in this context, to err on the side of inclusiveness – for there is little agreement in the literature about these issues, and a more inclusive definition of what to include as teacher professional development may be needed for educational systems to respond to new challenges within ever-changing environments.

Recently, there has been a move to replace the term 'development' and describe on-the-job teacher learning as teacher 'professional learning' or 'PL' (EdSource, 2013). The name change is not problematic in itself, except that, as with many educational constructs, the change in terminology may lead to some confusion as to whether or not 'PD' and 'PL' are the same thing, and possibly make it more difficult for literature or web searches to find important contributions to this field. A recent hybrid model to attempt to incorporate these terms has been proposed by Fullan and Hargreaves (2016), in which the fields overlap but the terms are not interchangeable. Fullan and Hargreaves see professional learning as what and how teachers learn, whereas professional development would include 'mindfulness' and 'team building' as more holistic aspects of the teacher learning process. Professional Learning and Development (PLD) is a hybrid of these two.

Changes in labels are often attempts to escape historical problems (Stewart, 2014); it is important to understand and know the history and culture of this process and to use this awareness in the process of change. Changing the language does not necessarily lead to change in the activity. Also, much of the academic literature still uses the term 'professional development' or 'PD'. For simplicity, the term 'PD' or 'professional development' will be used here to consider all learning that teachers do that concerns their work.

Researching Teacher Professional Development: What should be measured?

In the early 2000s, a flurry of quantitative studies investigated the aspects of PD that Wilson and Berne (1999) had identified and that came to be called 'consensus' features of high-quality or 'reform' type PD programs. Content focus, active learning, coherence (defined in various ways, usually as congruence between district and teacher goals), collectivity, and longer duration were factors usually tested, often in very large, usually American systems. The results were inconsistent. For example, a study done in 2001 with over 1000 math and science teachers found that 'traditional' forms of PD (i.e.

those lacking the consensus features listed above) and reform type PD initiatives both had similar effects on teachers' self-reports of increased knowledge and skills and change in teaching practice. Here, the duration of the activity had a greater effect than the other consensus factors (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001). This finding that duration was important was confirmed by a large-scale study in the United Kingdom in 2005 (Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, 2005). However, the same initial researchers performed another (smaller) quantitative study (n=207) which found that active learning, coherence, and collectivity were all positively correlated with teachers using new practices in their classrooms, but that duration of activity had little effect (Desimone, Garet, Birman, Porter, & Yoon, 2003). Such findings seem to suggest that although these factors may be important components of teacher learning, reliance on these consensus factors to ensure PD 'effectiveness' is less than assured.

By 2005, studies of teacher PD often included comments about how control and accountability concerns can confine what PD supports are allowed for teachers, and how teacher beliefs and investment in the process were crucial. A large (n = 39 000) American study that measured the correlation between teacher control and amount of PD taken by teachers showed that "a one standard-deviation increase in individual teacher influence over school policy is associated with a 2.9 hour increase in PD taken" (Smith & Rowley, 2005, p. 145). In a research review of teacher PD in Hong Kong, the authors described how accountability measures and productivity goals were overloading teachers to the point where they were quitting the profession, and found that "quasi-market strategies often strengthen control over human autonomy and result in de-humanization and alienation on the part of educational practitioners" (Tang & Choi, 2009, p.16). Tang and Choi characterized teachers as: "driven by a commitment to the moral purposes of teaching … [which includes] teachers' active agency in professional knowledge construction" (2009, p. 15), and found that PD activities which took this into account were considered meaningful for teachers, similar to the findings that Louis and Marks (1998) had reported over a decade earlier. What had changed though, was the explicit reference to teacher control of PD. More than just allowing for 'community' or 'collaboration', the studies now were investigating teacher autonomy and active agency as aspects worthy of study.

Hargreaves (2007) bemoaned that new threats to meaningful PD were becoming more prominent than in the 1980s – these include presentism (concentrating on exam scores and not long-term goals), authoritarianism (delivery of 'training,' not construction of knowledge), commercialism (advent of private PD providers), evangelism (rise of the educational 'guru' who encourages a cult-like dependency from teachers), and narcissism (staff developers who 'love themselves' and are focused on their style at the expense of substance). Hargreaves (2009) saw these forces at work in Canada and elsewhere. In Ontario, "continuing commitment to test-based educational accountability was supplemented by a range of system-wide initiatives [which] … alongside the idea borrowed from England of making tested literacy and numeracy linked to political targets for improved performance the centerpiece of this reform strategy" (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 92). He pointed out that, during these reforms, "the more that control and intervention are orchestrated from the top, the tighter the focus must become in terms of what has to be controlled" (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 92). Thus, the growing emphasis in PD design had been to concentrate on raising test scores, but this neglected the real work of preparing students for life outside of school. Hargreaves pointed out that:

> The ironic effect of international interest in large-scale reform is that it has exposed how the countries and systems that have actually been most successful educationally and economically

> are ones that provide greater flexibility and innovation in teaching and learning, that invest greater trust in their highly qualified teachers, [and] that … do not try to orchestrate everything from the top. (2009, p. 92)

Measuring PD via student test scores, or other indicators of PD 'effectiveness' then, has proven to be a difficult, if not impossible task due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of teacher learning. Instead of 'measuring' teacher PD, it might be useful to consider if and how PD allows (or disallows) teachers to work in and with their systems to imagine and even enact responsive change.

Teacher Professional Development and Autonomy

Several research reviews have confirmed that more inclusive, less restrictive, more social, less passive considerations for teacher PD are emerging (Kennedy, 2016; Mockler, 2005; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Postholm, 2012). But, in a pan-Canadian study, Campbell, Osmond-Johnson, Faubert, Zeichner, and Hobbs-Johnson (2017) found that many teachers reported that their autonomy in decision-making surrounding their professional learning has been recently decreasing. Another recent research report focused on the province of Alberta from some of these same researchers (Osmond-Johnson, Zeichner, & Campbell, 2018) again found that teachers reported a lack of autonomy in PD decision-making, and that "system-led and mandated forms of professional learning in many instances dominated teacher learning opportunities [; participants argued] for a more balanced approach that allowed for additional teacher-led learning" (p. 20). As part of recommended reforms, Campbell et al (2017) describe how "teacher leaders themselves have called for an approach to 'flip the system' from top-down governance to a system where teachers have opportunities to exercise collective autonomy, professional judgement, and leadership of educational change" (Elmers & Kneyber, 2015 as cited in Campbell et al, 2017, p. 33).

Teacher Agency

Agency' is a term that has been defined variously depending upon the discipline, and its application. Some see it as an individual trait: "having a sense of self encompassing particular values and a cultural identity, and being able to pursue self-determined purposes and goals through self-conscious strategic action" (Frost, 2006, p. 20). Most agree that agency involves an ability to act in a self-determined way, after considering the options available. Many see it as an exercise of social power (Bandura, 2001; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Lasky, 2005; Leask, 2012; Pignatelli, 1993; Priestly, Edwards, Miller & Priestly, 2012).

The social sciences often juxtapose 'agency' with 'structure' (as in the structural constraints in a society) in debates about the forces that are most salient in social systems. Agential theories came about primarily as a reaction against behaviourism in the 1950's; environmental constraints put boundaries on our social behaviour, but any action that was not determined by these constraints was agential (Giddens, 1984). Giddens postulated that an actor who has agency is confined (and enabled) by a range of circumstances both within and around them, but that they do have the capacity to act upon their worlds and "make a difference" (p. 14). This type of action involves an exercise of power that has "transformative capacity" (p. 15), albeit in ways that work with rules and resources that already exist in the institution or social situation that the person inhabits. In this way there is a "constant interplay between choice and constraint in the process of learning" (Zeichner & Gore, 1990, p. 26).

This dualism seemed insufficient to describe this concept, and it was not long before many researchers studying social systems began to understand that the relationship between agency and structure cannot be captured by such a simple description. A view of agency that considers the effect of past experiences on perceptions and the ability to predict certain outcomes (but not others) as part of what we consider to be human agency has evolved over time (O'Connor & Franklin, 2020). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) proposed a definition of human agency that considers many, but not unlimited possibilities for humans: "[agency is] a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963).

There are several characteristic 'components' of human agency that have been described in the literature and these may be used to help the researcher to recognize when it is emerging or present in a particular context under study. Human agency is often conceptualized as an individual trait (Bandura, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Frost, 2006; Leask, 2012; Pignatelli, 1993; Priestly, Biesta & Robinson, 2012). Central to this idea of agency is the individual's sense of control over his or her work environment. As such, the concept of *self-efficacy* is central: "Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

In addition to self-efficacy, the capacity to see that a particular situation needs change is also a crucial component of individual agency. This capacity to evaluate past situations or actions and to predict future outcomes is a uniquely human dimension that some have termed 'forethought' (Code, 2010), but to fully conceptualize this concept as looking both forward and backward in time, it could be more adequately called '*self-reflection'* (Abrams, 1998). Thus, an agential teacher "considers how power, identity, subjectivity, and freedom intersect and inform each other" (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 412). These two essential components of individual (or personal) agency are often not sufficient to describe human agency at work in social systems. In many situations, people do not have direct control over their environments, and thus "do not live their lives in individual autonomy" (Bandura, 2001, p. 75). Bandura (2001) describes that when there is "interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions", collective agency emerges. Bandura sees collective agency as an "extension" (p. 75) of individual agency, not a separate phenomenon. It is "not a group mind that is doing the cognizing, aspiring, motivating and regulating. There is no emergent entity that operates independently of the beliefs and actions of the individuals" (p. 76) in the social system.

Human agency has been explored from a collective perspective by some researchers, especially in highly social environments (Archer, 2003; Bandura, 2001; Lasky, 2005). Individuals who are able to find common ground by sharing their values and beliefs in a situation of trust can become very powerful. Archer (2003) posits that individual agency, although necessary, is not enough: "we need to extend the community of communication and adopt the universalist point of view of the generalized other so that we can criticize existing societies from the point of an alternative, more inclusive and more democratic society" (p. 6). This type of synergistic analysis of structural leeway and constraint allows individuals to have a closer understanding of both the perspectives of others and the potential for collective action.

Human agency then can be seen to be interdependently individual and collective; part of an "integrated causal structure" (Bandura, 2000, p.77) that can effect social change. Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi (2013), term this type of integration of individual and collective

agency "subject-centered life course agency" from a sociocultural perspective and consider that "intention and reflexivity" (p. 53) are two important components. As with individual agency, the first step is being able to comprehend environmental constraints and opportunities. A *reflexive* group adapts to the needs of the individual members, while using the multiple perspectives available to allow for an emergent view of the social environment that may be more than the sum of its parts. Once a situation is re-imagined *intentionality* can occur, which is when the actions of the group are deemed to be possible and desirable and are operationalized – plans made to put these actions into place (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Figure 2 summarizes these components of agency.

In Finland, recent research has become intensified around the concept of agency in educational learning and development. Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini (2015) for example, attempt to define a teacher with agency as "an active learner who is able to act intentionally, make decisions, and thoroughly reflect on the impact of one's actions… [including] the capacity of teachers to construct the context of their learning" (p. 814). These researchers also realize that agency in educational systems must involve adaptation to situations but also "well-justified opposition" (p. 814), taking initiative, and "transforming dominant power relations" (p. 814) within the school community.

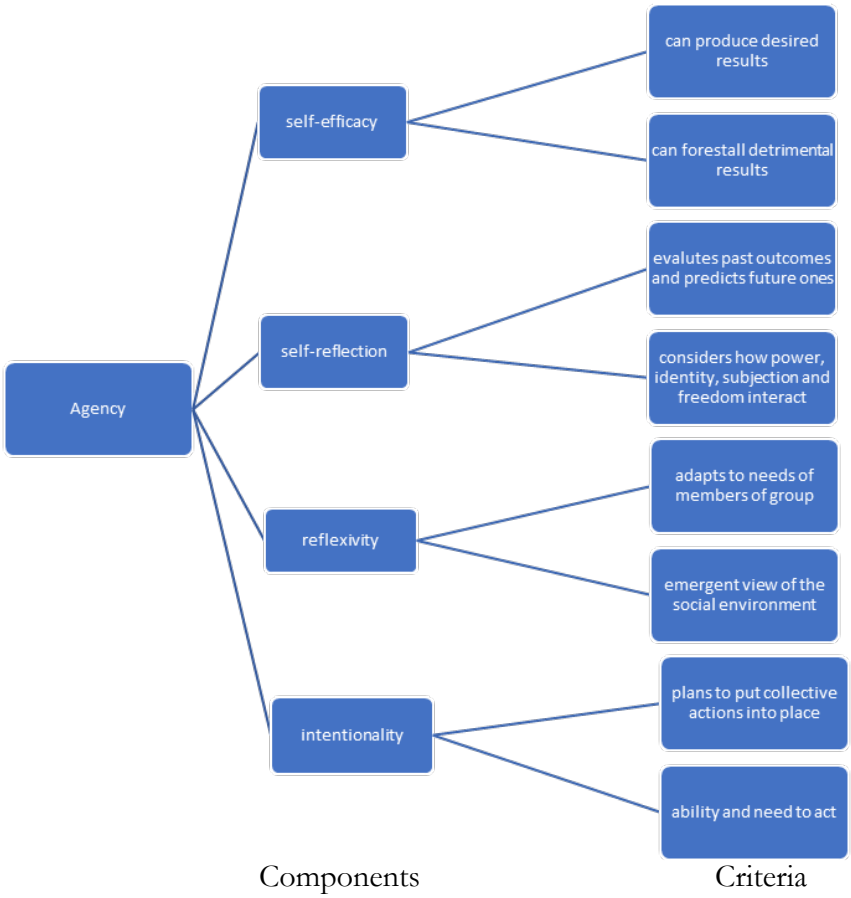

Figure 2: Agency Components and Criteria

Constraints to teacher agency are part of the working environment, and may be 'structural'. Timetables, school calendars, designated PD times and days, distances between schools and school

districts, and the availability of technology and other tools put limits on what and how teachers learn. Budgetary constraints also limit teachers' abilities to move out of their classrooms and work with others, as this time may not be considered 'productive' as it is time away from students. Vongalis-Mackrow (2007) describes these constraints as teacher "obligations" to their school and to their students, often consisting of "accountability and regulatory tasks, coupled with tighter controls of teaching work" (p. 431). Considering these constraints, it may be that teachers have had little opportunity to develop the type of "robust professional discourse" that allows them to "locate their work within deep consideration of the purpose of education" (Biesta, Preistley & Robinson, 2015, p. 638).

In environments where this type of consideration is discouraged, teachers show few signs of advocating for educational change and their discourse is 'instrumental'. Teachers in this type of restrictive environment have reported viewing the process of advocating for change as a form of resistance that would be negatively received by their educational system (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). However, in situations where educators were supported and encouraged to "[d]well in the object, connect and reciprocate across boundaries" and develop "reflexivity" in their professional discourse, "distributed agency emerged expansively" – in other words, the participants became involved with the problem and each other in order to find creative solutions and eventually expanded their successful program to new situations and environments, finding ways to overcome at least some of the structural constraints that limited action (Yamazumi, 2009, pp. 213-227).

Self-Directed Professional Development and Teacher Agency: Data and Analysis

At the core of this research is a desire to understand the ways in which self-directed professional development might affect teacher agency. This study used an intervention, a change in the 'rules' for PD that allowed teachers more freedom to self-direct their PD experiences, to explore teacher agency and how and if it changed with more learning autonomy. Prior to the study, most PD experiences for teachers in the study school district were more or less administratively directed. Teachers sometimes had some choice of sessions (and sometimes did not), but PD activities had to be approved in advance by the central administration. Teachers could propose sessions and if they met the district's criteria (often including district or provincial goals), these might be approved as activities for PD days, but most sessions were offered by PD 'providers' (i.e. not organized by the teachers themselves) on PD days. The intervention allowed teachers freedom to self-direct their learning experiences on PD Days without any formal restrictions (SDPD: Self-directed Professional Development). Teachers were allowed to plan or participate in any activity that they considered to be appropriate, or participate in the system's organized PD sessions.

The three schools that participated in the study (one small rural elementary school and two larger suburban high schools) were selected via convenience sampling (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) in what would be considered to be a medium-sized school district in Alberta, Canada. The principals at these schools were both supportive of the premise of this study and willing to have their teachers participate. The study was conducted over one school year (September – June, 2014/15) and proceeded through a pre-intervention data gathering phase (September – early October), followed by the intervention phase (October – June), and then a post-intervention phase of data acquisition (late June). This school district had 5 designated PD days during the study period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of teachers (n=20) both pre-and post-intervention, and naturalistic observation of PD projects *in situ* occurred throughout the intervention

period. Choice of participants was made to include all possible grade and subject areas, and a representative sample of gender and experience levels of teachers.

The interviews with the participants asked them about their experiences with PD in the past (pre-intervention) and during the study year (post-intervention). The interview questions were general and encouraged a broad range of responses about PD experiences (participants are numbered with -1 representing pre-intervention interview data, and -2 representing post-intervention data). One participant was not available for the post-intervention interview and two participants requested to be interviewed for the post-intervention phase and this data was included. All three principals, one assistant principal, and one guidance counsellor were included in the interviews.

Interview data was transcribed, reviewed by the participants, and used with observation field notes for context. Quotes that represented teacher perceptions of agency were classified into the categories and criteria previously established from the literature (Figure 2) separately for pre and post-intervention data. These quotes were then compiled into a data table, and inductive thematic coding was used to assign themes within each criterion of agency.

Before the Intervention

In the pre-intervention phase participants described their views of themselves and their experiences with PD prior to the intervention. (Table 1).

Table 1: Analysis of Themes as Participants Began the Study

Themes (Pre-intervention)	**Agency Components**
Insufficient time for PD	Self-reflection: evaluates past outcomes and predicts future ones
Frustration – lack of control, little input	Self-reflection: considers how power, subjection and freedom interact
Fear of Sanction – not competent, intimidated	Self-reflection: considers how power, subjection and freedom interact and Reflexivity: emergent view of the social environment
Lonely, isolated	Reflexivity: emergent view of social environment
Practical	Self-reflection: evaluates past and predicts future outcomes
Not trusted	Reflexivity: emergent view of social environment
Sometimes resistant	Self-efficacy: can forestall detrimental results

How teacher agency manifested as the study began established a baseline for this group of teachers (as represented by those teachers sampled for this study); how teachers viewed their agency to be restricted or allowed in the system as the study began. The following paragraphs summarize this data and provide exemplars.

In most cases, participants were able to describe their ability to evaluate the social environment and their understandings about how power, subjection and freedom interact with respect to their PD experiences:

> Typical professional development activity… show up early, the session starts late, the coffee is bitter, I'm impatient and bored because the person in front can't articulate, has little

> confidence in what is being spoken to and typically speaking, despite what was promised in the description, has very little to do with my professional practice. (1-1)

Many teachers expressed disappointment with mostly directed PD experiences. Prior to the intervention, the teachers collectively expressed some agency in the form of intentionality as they applied for and were able to participate in longer-term or more immersive PD experiences (like conferences), but expressions of self-efficacy with respect to organizing PD were expressed only as aspirations in expectation of the intervention in the pre-intervention data. Themes of frustration and fear of sanction were more prominent than any expressions of satisfaction with respect to PD activities in this data: "I can only enhance my teaching by trying new things and if I am fearful of getting slapped down, reprimanded, for every failed risk, then I don't want to take risks … I become stagnant" (11 - 1).

Although collective action in the form of collegiality was valued, there were few reports of this practice in prior PD experiences. Other components of agency, including reflexivity (or the adaptive consideration of multiple perspectives), and intentionality (making plans for future activities) emerged as negative expressions of agency in the pre-intervention data.

Although individually expressed, the sum of the voices of the teachers here shows that a contradiction is occurring within this construct of this activity system. This school system's annual report for example stated that for this time frame (2014/15 school year): "Teachers continue to report strong satisfaction (over 80%) for division professional learning opportunities" ([Study School District] Board Meeting Minutes December 4, 2014), but the data in the pre-intervention teacher interviews in this study contradicts that claim. The following quote is representative of what many teachers in the pre-intervention phase of the study expressed with respect to PD:

> Good things will happen in the classroom if you [the administration] treat us with respect… give us some time and trust us. This mistrust that you will do this because we said so, you didn't ask me what my opinion was, you just told me what to do … are we professionals or not? (18-1)

These teachers expressed motivation to move forward in their students' and their own learning and described themselves as deeply involved in their practice, which they described as complex work. They described contradictions that they were encountering including lack of trust from administrators and lack of control over PD activities. Expressions of agency involved their classroom practice but typically not their professional development activities. Collegial interaction helped to keep teachers engaged, but the teachers sometimes expressed resistance to ideas or learning when they did not understand why they were learning something, or were not given some autonomy to learn in their own ways.

Changing Themes During the Intervention

As the study progressed, some of the themes that were observed in the pre-intervention data changed or were replaced by new themes as summarised in Table 2:

Table 2: Agency Themes that Changed During the Intervention

Themes (Pre-intervention)	**Themes (Post-intervention)**	**Agency Components**

Need more choice	Have more control	Intentionality: ability and need to act
Want more freedom	Responsibility/Accountability	Self-reflection: considers how power, subjectivity and freedom interact
Not all PD should be SDPD	Scope – how much should be SDPD?	Reflexivity: emergent view of the social environment
Insufficient opportunity to collaborate	PD Meeting needs – more collegial interaction and collaboration	Reflexivity: emergent view of the social environment
Difficult to find community members, isolated	Less isolated, but problems with contacting teachers for collaboration remain	Intentionality: plans to put collective action into place
Prescribed	Freedom	Self-reflection: considers how power, identity, subjection and freedom interact
Not clear boundaries	More clarity needed	Reflexivity: emergent view of the social environment
Professional obligation	Professional responsibility	Self-reflection: considers how power, identity, subjection and freedom interact
Teacher initiated ideas not allowed	Trust important	Self-reflection: considers how power, identity, subjection and freedom interact
Lack of ability to address emergent problems	Scheduling conflicts	Reflexivity: emergent view of the social environment

In the pre-intervention phase, the expressions of agency from participants were mostly aspirational:

> The way that professional development is done right now is not working … in order to make it work that teachers have to be the ones that come up with what they need to do, what they want to do, and we will be doing and that I don't think that professional development can be *en masse*, everybody in the school working on the same thing. I think it needs to be specialized, unless you're dealing with a school initiative; I understand that. (13-1)

In the post-intervention phase the tone changed as teachers described their experiences:

> Just having that time. Knowing that time was there. Not being forced/coerced into going to sessions that were not in my subject area or that I thought were just irrelevant or a waste of time… you know, being reflective and trying to look at the holistic nature of your whole career. (18-2)

In post-intervention interviews the teachers began to question their roles and responsibilities with respect to their learning. Those who took responsibility and ownership of their learning moved beyond the structural constraints that they encountered (e.g. being able to contact others and scheduling time

to work together) and usually stated that they had used the time provided fruitfully, but those whose goals were less clear had more difficulty achieving their stated objectives within the timeframe of this study. Logistical concerns, which can become structural constraints, were also emerging from the data. Teachers found that they might have several initiatives that they wanted to participate in at the same time, or that meetings or other administrative tasks had been assigned to their less structured PD times. These issues of control and accountability were emerging as tensions (and thus potential contradictions) for both teachers and administrators in this system.

Self-reflection also showed thematic shifts. Requests for more choice decreased as expressions of more control increased, and requests for more freedom decreased as questions about responsibility and accountability emerged. Although teachers who participated in SDPD were appreciative of the opportunity to control their learning, some asked about monitoring and administrative responsibility as the former accountability measures (e.g. attendance at sanctioned events) were no longer applicable:

> There should be some sort of checks on [SDPD] because I could see people taking advantage of it or not using it in the best way possible. Like even for myself this year all the PD I did was, you know, I worked with the teachers here and we got so much done it was wonderful, but then at the same time I always question myself, well maybe I should have gone to some other PD sessions too. … That was my only concern, because like I said it was so wonderful and I think I got more out of this year than a lot of other years, but at the same time I started to question myself, like should I have done different things? (9-2)

It was clear from the pre-intervention responses that teachers valued working in community:

> There's a want to give back, a want to share. You know you can only hold on to good information for so long until it's meaningless. To share what you know, that's what makes it worthwhile. I guess that's a profession. Without that, what do you have? Nothing. Why do we do this? (12-1)

In the post-intervention phase, teachers expressed their appreciation of this opportunity and an emerging sense of the power of the collective:

> It was nice I think for us to get together and to realize that the struggle was real and that it's shared. It was nice too to have that chance to present yourself as a united front to our administration, who in turn can say with confidence that, you know, regardless of your perception, we are enabling our staff to do something about it and our staff is sincere in trying to do something about it. (1-2)

For this system's community of educators then, collaboration and collegial interaction are important aspects of teacher PD. Trust was important, both between teachers and between teachers and administrators in group collaborative situations. The importance of collaboration was supported as being an important component of teacher practice and PD by this school district at least in theory. In their 2014 Annual Report, the district stated that teachers indicated "very strong support (92%) regarding the positive impact that collaboration has on their professional growth and teaching practices. Based on survey results (less than 75%), providing additional opportunities for staff collaboration is a future goal" ([Study School District] Board Meeting Minutes, December 4, 2014).

The wording of this statement does not make it clear what the "less than 75%" indicator means (less than 75% report opportunities for staff collaboration is one interpretation), but it is clear that the district has identified this as a future goal. This school district expressed an awareness of the need to support their teacher collaborative work, but at this time had not stated strategies to increase or implement this goal.

For some teachers in the pre-intervention phase, the lack of clarity as to what was 'permitted' was a barrier:

> I didn't know I could do something. You know, if you don't know you can go take, apply for funding and take a session, you would never know… I guess then it depends upon the dynamic of your school… just knowing what's available and what are the things that you have to do to get there. (8-1)

But for others, who had previously tried to do SDPD under the former rules, barriers were more explicit:

> Oh well you know, "you can't". What do you mean "I can't"? Well it's district PD and the district needs us to be at [name of a school] for the day. But what about the problem? Oh, you just have to wait until February! That doesn't work. That doesn't work for anybody. (1-1)

When the pre- and post-intervention themes regarding the 'rules' surrounding PD in this school system are considered together, it becomes apparent how the concept of agency becomes important when it is restricted by systemic structures and regulations (or assumptions about these) that prevent agential individuals from doing the learning that they think they need.

In the pre-intervention results, teachers saw time and lack of choice as restrictions to their control over PD, and saw the responsibility for scheduling these activities as the responsibility of the administration (either principals or central administration). As teachers became more self-directed, they appreciated having the time to do work that they felt was relevant, but also became aware of how this time was still not sufficient for them to meet their own goals. In the pre-intervention stage teachers were asking for more clarity as to what was acceptable as a PD activity, and in the post-intervention phase this became even more pronounced as teachers no longer had as many barriers to what and how they learned. Understanding learning needs as an individual (self-reflection), understanding how the social structure of the organization helps or prevents this learning (reflexivity) and understanding how the rules and customs that surround PD act as barriers or affordances for learning (also self-reflective) are components of agency that were present both pre- and post-intervention. But, as teachers adapted to the new set of PD customs, they were seeking more guidance on where the limits to these rules and affordances were, and became stronger advocates for their own learning needs.

Considering Leadership and PD

This study required that rules and customs surrounding PD be changed for teachers, and it was clear that higher level actors in the hierarchy of this system had control over teacher activity, and that these

higher authorities, namely central administrators and principals, expressed support for the concept of teacher self-directed PD, but had to be assured that their own needs and priorities with respect to teachers learning in this system would be considered before the study was allowed to proceed.

Principals acted as important brokers between higher administrative levels and the teachers. Principals expressed in interviews that teachers had positive experiences with self-directed professional development, reporting that they were observing some aspects of agency (e.g. intentionality, self-efficacy), but that they also expressed concerns about meeting their own school-based needs and the needs that the school district expected them to support with limited PD time and money and the 'new' time demands of SDPD.

All three principals expressed that they had found ways to allow their staff the "freedom" (7) to pursue their own learning goals during the study school year, and all three wondered about how, after this initial study year, SDPD might become part of the district's plan for the next school year and beyond. They all suggested a mix of SDPD and more directed activities, one principal described this as "a little bit school, a little bit you, but the you part shouldn't be that different from the school" (7) and one principal explained that this may lead to tension: "That's a little bit tricky. As the school leader … if you have a school initiative that we all agree to that this is important, you wouldn't have the choice maybe … there's definitely that control piece by the school leader" (17). The other two principals also talked about some PD being "non-negotiable" (7 and 19) if teachers need to learn specific technologies or other system or school-wide practices. One principal even wondered, out loud: "What is the trump card?" (17) in terms of what initiatives take precedence when and if they are competing for the same limited time. All three principals were not sure, because there were "so many requirements of our limited PD time" (17), how the priorities were going be determined if SDPD became a more system-wide initiative.

Discussion and Future Directions

In this study, teachers' perceptions of their agency shifted as the study progressed. Teachers moved from asking for more choice to acknowledging their control, from wanting more freedom to taking more responsibility, and from asking for relevance to taking more ownership for PD that is relevant to their practice. The participants were also evaluating their participation in SDPD and advocating for this to continue, albeit with opportunities for PD that were organized by others to remain in the mix of offerings. Indicators of positive agency increased as the study progressed and these increases were linked by the teachers to their participation in SDPD projects. This increase in perceptions of agency led some to advocate for a continuance of this interventional rule change in future years ("I cannot see me going backwards now" (12-2)). Principals and administrators in this study supported teacher autonomy in learning but were wary of how this might restrict *their* agency in being able to implement school goals and initiatives.

Suggestions for Contradictions

In the post-intervention interviews, the participants were reflective about SDPD as an alternative to the more directed PD choices that had previously been available. As described in the previous section, some contradictions, or tensions, emerged for them during the intervention. Recommendations from participants to ameliorate these problems included:

- Allocating clear time scheduling for district, school and self-directed PD system-wide, so that teachers have time to plan, contact and advertise to peers sessions they organize

themselves, and leadership groups know that they have designated times for their needs. This would also allow for teachers to work with others from different schools.

- On designated SDPD days or times, use electronic documents (e.g. Google docs) to post SDPD projects titles (and possibly descriptions) to increase communication among participants.
- Use professional growth plans to help teachers to plan and evaluate their progress. PGP's are required for all teachers in this school system every year. This would also help to ameliorate accountability concerns as principals would see these documents at the beginning and end of each school year.
- Support teacher-led initiatives financially. Monies previously used for keynote speakers, etc. could be redistributed to SDPD projects. Few SDPD projects in this study required significant funding, but participants expressed great appreciation for even small contributions toward their projects (e.g. for materials or supplies).
- Principal support is essential. Even with district-level support, if principals were not expressing very clearly that they trusted their staff to do good work on SDPD projects, some teachers were wary of sanction.

Building Capacity by Building Agency

Participants in this study often realized that being self-directed in their own learning mirrors the learning experiences they promoted for their students:

> I really feel that the most important thing about professional development – it has to be something that you are passionate about … It's just like trying to make a kid like school, you can't make them like school, but you can encourage them, by giving them choices and helping them feel like they have a say. (20-2)

Before this study began, teachers often expressed frustration with a lack of control over their learning experiences. As educational designers and leaders themselves, they recognized that directed PD with little collaborative time was often not productive for them. They also recognized that too little regulation and structure was also not conducive to efficient time use for some. Without some ability to control their learning experiences, those teachers that expressed the most insight into the barriers to their agency were frustrated and sometimes resentful. Once given control, these teachers began to take more responsibility for their learning and began to consider some solutions and ideas that they considered to be more relevant to their practice.

This study was conducted with a self-selecting sample of motivated volunteers. To fully explore the feasibility of SDPD in larger contexts, it would be important to consider those who were less willing to participate in a study like this one, and to increase the sample to schools where principals and other administrators are also not the first to volunteer for such a programme. Wholesale adoption of self-directed professional development may be difficult in systems where PD was previously mostly prescribed for teachers, as it was in this one. Changes in teacher and administrator attitudes may take time (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). But if and when teachers are able to choose SDPD among other options, and these SDPD projects gain acceptance as a result, autonomous teacher learning may eventually become more widespread in school systems.

Agency as Social Power

School systems have been discussed as models of social organizations where power structures are both obvious and hidden. Foucault described educational institutions as particularly interesting for their "coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the 'value' of each person and of the levels of knowledge and by the means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy)" (1982, p. 787). But Foucault also saw that wherever there are systems of power, there are necessarily the possibility of "free subjects" as power disappears when freedom does. "Institutionalization", for Foucault, is a form of power that appears as an "apparatus closed in upon itself, with its specific *loci*, its own regulations, its hierarchical structures which are carefully defined … bringing into being of general surveillance, the principle of regulation" (1982, p. 792). According to Foucault, when power relations become under more state control, more "elaborated, rationalized, and centralized" (p. 793), they become difficult to see from within and thus more difficult to change. He called for a "relationship of confrontation" where the "obstinacy" of freedom and its accompanying "insubordination" allow for the "free play of antagonistic reactions" (p. 794).

Maxine Greene (1986) has suggested that a freely collaborative exchange of ideas between teachers might: "awaken us [as educators] to reflectiveness, to a recovery of lost landscapes and lost spontaneities. Against such a background, educators might now and then be moved to go in search of a critical pedagogy of significance for themselves", for without this type of critical reflection, "there is little sense of agency, even among the brightly successful, there is little capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 438). Greene termed this "an unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (p. 439) but her plea has been, at least in school systems that subscribe to these types of historically durable hierarchical codes, mostly ignored. This inertia may lie at the heart of difficulties that schools and school systems might have in considering their own problems and ways to address them. This study aimed to carve out some small space for these types of critical conversations.

When and if teacher on-the-job learning experiences become more self-directed, it may become more legitimate to use the term 'professional development' to describe these activities. Teacher professional development has the potential to become an ever-changing network by which teachers can and do advocate for what they need to learn, and possibly begin to advocate for systemic change that leads to more responsive education systems. Teacher agency is the force that can drive this type of educational change, and when positively expressed, it could be considered an important indicator of systemic adaptability. Encouraging the formation of autonomous networks of teachers by releasing administrative control of PD has likewise not typically been considered important for healthy education systems. But if and when professional development programmes consider and accept teachers as autonomous agents of change, they may enable schools to become more adaptable and more responsive to the challenges they face.

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