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Facilitating individual growth and development

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FACILITATING INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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To Lyle, Tyson, Erica and Evan
for their ongoing support, encouragement,
trust and belief in me
and to Jeanne,
my mentor and my friend.

Abstract

Both regular and special educators are continually involved in the process of change to better meet the needs of a range of learners. Effective leadership to facilitate and support the process of growth and development is a necessary component of teacher growth. Through this project a small group of special and regular classroom teachers met to develop personal growth goals in the area of special education and to work together to assist each other in meeting their individual goals related to special education. This opportunity allowed participants to share their findings and frustrations and, in a collegial fashion, support each other in the process of change. The goal of the writer was to develop her own leadership skills and abilities in facilitating teachers' individual growth and development in the area of special education. Through ongoing reflection group members continually revisited their individual goals and grew through the process of shared reflection. Through the sharing of ideas each group member was able to incorporate their individual understandings into their own classroom experience. The overall goal was to cause teachers to reflect on and modify their teaching practises. Through this process each member shared their stories and reflections and grew as educators. The process of shared reflection encouraged each member to look deeper at what they were doing as educators of students with special needs and further develop the learning opportunities they offered their students. Through this qualitative research project the writer attempts to share some of the stories, experiences and understandings that demonstrate that growth and development occurred during the course of the project.

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significantly have been the influences of Julia Ellis, Richard Butt and my project supervisor, Nancy Grigg. Julia shared with me both the beauty and the strength of qualitative research and showed me how to persuade others by gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience. Richard challenged me to share my stories and to learn through my experiences and set a model for me by sharing his stories. Nancy continually guided and encouraged me to follow my own path, find meaning in my experiences and then to share these with others.

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Introduction

Teachers, both regular and special educators, need to develop a variety of attitudes, knowledge and skills to meet the needs of a range of learners. Effective leadership to facilitate and support the process of growth and development is a necessary component of teacher growth. In order to develop attitudes, knowledge and skills, we need to continually be involved in the process of change. The goal of this project was to bring together a small group of special and regular classroom teachers to develop personal growth goals in the area of special education and to work together to assist each other in meeting our individual goals related to special education. This would provide a formal opportunity for participants to share their findings and frustrations and, in a collegial fashion, support each other in the process of change.

My personal goal was to develop my own leadership skills and abilities in facilitating teachers' individual growth and development in the area of special education. Through ongoing reflection it was intended that group members would continually visit their individual goals and grow through the process of shared reflection. This would then create momentum for teachers in actively working towards their own professional development with an emphasis on special education. In turn this would assist teachers in developing their attitudes, knowledge and skills in meeting the needs of a range of learners.

Background Information

Growth and Development

In 1998, the minister of education, Gary Mar, released the province's new teacher evaluation policy. The *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* was designed

to help the overall goal of improved teaching. “The goal of all professional development is the improvement of teaching and learning” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 1998, p.3). Through improving ourselves as educators we are able to offer improved opportunities for our students to learn. As Hargreaves & Fullan (1992) explain, “providing equal and improved opportunities to learn is what is at the heart of our efforts to improve quality and equality in education” (p. 2). “The Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy aims to ensure that each teacher’s actions, judgements and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning” (Alberta Education, 1998, Policy 2.1.5, p. 1).

The growth component of the policy requires all teachers to develop a professional growth plan each year. A growth plan targets any area for professional growth. It may focus on an area a teacher would like to improve or it may build upon a strength. “‘Teacher professional growth’ means the career long learning process whereby a teacher annually develops and implements a plan to achieve professional learning objectives or goals that are consistent with the teaching quality standard.” (Alberta Education, 1998, p. 2). Under this policy, each school authority must implement a policy consistent with the Alberta Education Policy. Lethbridge School District #51 (1998) has instituted such a policy which states “that teachers have a professional responsibility to be involved in a continuous process designed to foster growth and to support optimum learning in the best educational interests of children” (p. 1).

The plan is the responsibility of each individual teacher as he/she sets goals for his/her own professional growth. “The policy is based on the premise that teachers are competent and that their professional growth is better addressed by a carefully devised

annual plan than by the top down approach of establishing professional development opportunities” (Council on School Administration and The Alberta Teachers’ Association, 1997, p. 1). The plan is to be submitted to the administration and reviewed with the administrator but it is the teacher who controls the plan. “The province requires that a teachers’ professional growth plan (1) reflects goals and objectives based on an assessment of the learning needs by the individual teacher, (2) shows a demonstrateable relationship to the teaching quality standard, (3) takes into consideration the education plans of the school, the school authority and the government” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 1998, p.2).

This provincial and the local policy on professional growth and development are consistent with research on professional development opportunities. Teacher development should be seen as a life long process whereby individual teachers develop throughout their careers. Development in this context refers to “increases in ability, skill, power, strength, wisdom, insight, virtue, happiness and so forth” (Jackson, 1992, p. 63). The ultimate goal of professional development is improved student learning.

There are many ways one may develop professionally. One of the most rewarding is to come to a “deeper, broader and richer understanding of what we do” (Jackson, 1992, p. 67). As shared by Glenda in Raymond, Butt, Townsend (1992): Any activity that causes “me to think and talk about education and kids, I consider to be professional development. I see professional development as a very personal process where I determine areas where I want to increase my understanding or abilities” (p. 153).

Self-initiated, peer assisted teacher development is a recently emerging method of increasing teacher competency and thus student learning. This may include such

processes as learning communities, peer coaching, reciprocal supervision, peer consultation, collaborative projects, study groups, teams, collaborative action research, teacher stories, mentorship and shared reflection. These processes suggest working together and reflecting on the processes, which will help the individuals involved in coming to a better understanding of their teaching. “Teachers learn most, perhaps, from other teachers, particularly from colleagues in their own work place” (Hargreaves, 1992, p. 16). No matter which process is used, reflection becomes an important part of the process. By reflecting on what we do and why we do it we can see where we want to go and take charge (Butt, 1995).

In order to set ones own goals, one must first identify their own beliefs about teaching and learning. Your beliefs and personal theories set boundaries around what you see and how you interpret your experiences (Butt, 1995). Identifying your beliefs helps you to identify topics or questions useful in designing personal professional development goals. As stated earlier these goals may be an area for growth or an area to further develop our expertise. Clark (1992) suggests that you “choose professional development activities that help you to celebrate, improve, and show off the things you love to do. Give yourself permission to lead with your strengths” (p. 77).

Once you have identified your beliefs and determined your own goals, it is necessary to develop a plan. “It is important to feel free to depart from the plan when reality does not match our predictions. A plan can give us direction, a way to begin a feeling of control and a basis for evaluating our choices. But a plan is not a script” (Clark, 1992, p. 81). Our plan is our guide but our guide can grow and change as our reality changes. The plan must outline goals and objectives that will ultimately lead to

improved student learning. Under these goals there must be strategies and steps for achieving the goals as well as a suggested timeline. It is also important to share what you are doing on your own behalf and how good you feel about yourself. “Learn how to teach about what you are learning. Teach about what excites you” (Clark, 1992, p. 83).

The plan must reflect a relationship to the *Teaching Quality Standard*. This standard states that “quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher’s decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students” (Alberta Education, 1997, p. 1). Through identifying their own knowledge, skills and attributes and developing their own plans, teachers will be individually identifying ways to further increase these knowledge, skills and attributes. The document states that teachers must “engage in ongoing professional development to enhance their: understanding of and ability to analyze the context of teaching; ability to make reasoned judgements and decisions; and pedagogical knowledge and abilities. They recognize their own professional needs and work with others to meet these needs. They share their professional expertise to the benefit of others in their schools, communities and profession” (Alberta Education, 1997, p. 6).

Growth and Development in Special Education

The field of special education is in a state of transition. Classroom teachers are expected to accommodate increasingly diverse populations of students (Bondy, Ross, Sindelar & Griffin, 1995; Ferguson & Ralph, 1996; Rademachen, Wilhelm, Hildreth, Bridges & Cowart, 1998). There has been a reduction in the number of special education teachers and their roles have changed significantly from specialist teachers to support

teachers and facilitators (Ferguson & Ralph, 1996). There continue to be significant differences between the roles of regular and special education teachers yet neither have received the necessary training to allow them to function adequately in their new roles (Bondy et al., 1995). Many special education teachers are leaving their positions due to stress, lack of support and lack of understanding of the expectations on them (Lane & Canosa, 1995; Shaughnessy & Siegel, 1997). Regular classroom teachers are also feeling the increased stress due to the demands, challenges and pressures of inclusion (Ferguson & Ralph, 1996).

University faculties and classes have begun to do research and change their teacher education programs to meet the needs of inclusive classrooms and changes to education (Bondy et al., 1995; Brownell, Yeager, Rennells & Riley, 1997; Munby & Hutchinson, 1998; Panyan, Hillman & Ligget, 1997; Paul, Marfo & Anderson, 1996; Rademachen et al., 1998; Voltz & Elliot, 1997). The focus has generally been to bring the fields of regular and special education together for improved learning opportunities for all students. Ideas from the topics and programs offered at universities can be adapted to improve inservice or professional development opportunities for special education.

Firstly, teachers must have the “ability to have ownership” (Panyan et al., 1997, p. 38) in their learning. This is being accommodated through the new policies. Through identification of one’s own needs, strengths and areas of interest teachers will buy into their own professional development opportunities. Secondly, these opportunities must tie into what is happening in teachers’ daily lives. Munby & Hutchinson (1998) state that “experience is powerful in the development of professional knowledge” (p. 82) and that “knowledge is acquired, modified and elaborated through experience” (p. 76). Thirdly,

ongoing inservice is required so that teachers can remain current in meeting the needs of all students (Ferguson & Ralph, 1996; Shaughnessy & Siegel, 1997). These three areas ongoing teacher development, that is self directed and uses the experiences of teachers, can be combined to build inservice delivery models or professional development opportunities for both regular and special education teachers in order to work collaboratively for the common interest of improved student learning. We need to rethink our current teaching practices to meet the needs of a range of learners” (Rademachen et al., 1998). “The future will be changed by imaginative local initiatives” (Paul et al., 1996, p.46).

Beliefs and Attitudes

One of the primary goals of professional development is to change teacher attitudes and beliefs. (Rademachen et al., 1998). Beliefs of teachers are well established even by the time they begin their preservice programs (Munby & Hutchinson, 1998). As existing attitudes can be barriers to change, professional development allows an opportunity to reexamine beliefs and values (Panyan et al., 1997, Paul et al., 1996, Rademachen et al., 1998).

One method of assisting in this process of change is reflection. Professional development activities need to be structured to allow teachers to examine and reflect orally and in writing on their own beliefs and attitudes. Reflection can help to change beliefs (Munby & Hutchinson, 1998; Rademachen et al., 1998).

In dealing with a wide range of learners, both a commitment to diversity and the ethic of care are essential (Brownell et al., 1997; Paul et al., 1996; Rademachen et al.,

1998). These must be combined together to develop a shared vision for student learning (Bondy et al., 1995, Brownell et al., 1997; Munby & Hutchinson, 1998; Rademachen et al., 1998). Once a shared vision has been established staff can work together and individually to identify the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to provide effective learning opportunities for a wide range of learners.

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

There are a multitude of knowledge, skills and abilities that both regular and special classroom teachers must possess in order to construct effective learning experiences for a wide range of learners. Regular classroom teachers must know curriculum and be able to modify it, deliver instruction using a variety of strategies and use regular and alternative assessment and reporting strategies. They must also have an understanding of Individualized Education Plans and be able to work with special education teachers to implement and evaluate individual progress in relation to the plans (Munby & Hutchinson, 1998; Voltz & Elliot, 1997). Special education teachers must be able to share diagnostic information, observe students with disabilities in regular classrooms, direct small group instruction, supply specialized materials, share student progress information and work with general educators (Voltz & Elliot, 1997). These are but a few of the knowledge, skills and abilities that both regular and special education teachers must have in order to teach in inclusive school settings.

In order to have effective programming for all students, some researchers have proposed that teachers must possess skills in communication and collaboration (Paul et al., 1996; Voltz & Elliot, 1997). “Collaboration between general and special educators has

been viewed as an essential element in the success of learners with disabilities” (Voltz & Elliot, 1997, p. 44). All teachers need to be able to share information, expertise, questions and concerns. No single regular or special education teacher can know and do everything that needs to be done alone (Munby & Hutchinson, 1998). There simply is too much to know (Shaughnessy & Siegel, 1997). Collaboration fosters skill and knowledge development. Skills in collaboration can be developed and then maintained (Brownell et al., 1997).

The first step to collaboration is communication. Communication must be open allowing everyone an opportunity to share. The dialogue must be continuous with regular opportunities to express ideas and concerns and solve problems (Bondy et al. 1995; Voltz & Elliot, 1997). Through this ongoing communication, relationships must be developed. In developing relationships it is necessary to establish trust and a sense of caring, to build a learning community, to establish shared meaning, focus and vision and a process for working together (Bondy et al., 1995; Panyan et al. 1997; Paul et al., 1996; Shaughnessy & Siegel, 1997). The dynamics of the group interaction will allow the team to continue to work together when there are problems or difficulties. “The quality of relationships is a vital part of our agenda to create a caring and learning community with an academic mission” (Paul et al., 1996, p. 146).

Once relationships have been established teachers can work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, create projects, do research, evaluate and create improved opportunities for personal as well as student growth. General and special education teachers can work, plan, teach and problem solve together in a collaborative environment (Bondy et al., 1995; Panyan et al., 1997; Voltz & Elliot, 1997). The purpose of

collaborative partnerships is improving teaching and learning for all students (Rademachen et al., 1998).

Collaboration is a necessary component of change (Bondy et al., 1995). This is a goal of both professional development and collaboration, “people working together as co-researchers in exploring and changing their world” (Paul et al., 1996, p. 142).

Through collaboration individuals learn to work together and learn together so that they can solve problems, generate ideas, ask questions and decide how to proceed.

Facilitating Growth and Development

The general characteristics of good leadership apply to leaders facilitating collaborative professional development. Leaders must work to establish a trusting and respectful atmosphere. Good leaders have a sense of humor. They provide resources and time to plan. They model qualities of openness, flexibility, sensitivity and tolerance. Effective leaders help others to see things from different perspectives and use their personal influence to promote change.

There are specific roles that leaders play in order to facilitate collaborative professional development. Leaders must initiate, develop and sustain a vision of working together and taking risks (Brownell, et al., 1997). This includes establishing strong communication networks and a caring community. In their leadership role they must continually support collaborative efforts, be aware of the needs and difficulties of the group, and provide feedback, inservice and moral support. Leaders must be available to listen and act as role models (Shauhnessy & Siegel, 1997). They lead by example through their own use of the collaborative model. In this process they practice shared leadership. As roles change during the process they share the role of leader with their

colleagues. Throughout the process they must continually recognize the efforts of all involved in collaborative projects.

Teacher development is a necessary component in assisting leaders to work effectively in the areas of developing shared beliefs, knowledge, skills and reflection. Ongoing development has been identified as an area of focus for leaders of special education throughout the literature (Gearhart, 1967; Goor, 1997 Odden & Wohtsleter, 1995; Russell et al, 1995; Shepard, 1995). Provision of resources, inservices, opportunities to attend meetings and participate in curriculum writing, Gearhart (1967) has also sited mentoring, encouragement, support and research. Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) identify the need for peer collaboration in order to serve students better. Gearhart (1967) discusses improvement plans both personal and on a district basis. Dialogue, questioning, coaching, mentoring and inviting others to become engaged in a new idea are seen by Lambert (1998) as processes in building leadership. It is believed that if leaders are motivated in these areas and set the example, this will spread to teachers which results in better teaching and increased student learning.

We cannot make teachers change and grow. It is the responsibility of the leader to set the example and create an atmosphere that promotes continued growth and development. In order to establish this atmosphere leaders must also make teachers feel empowered, respected and trusted (Lashway, 1997). Qualities such as these are briefly mentioned in early literature. Gearhart (1967) discusses the fact that leaders must relate well with others, be fair, patient and understanding and know how to be quite positive and yet hard-nosed. Leaders must be listeners and have a true open door policy. Through listening we learn to understand others (Geneen, 1998; Covey, 1989). Hopkins,

Lambrecht, Moss & Finch (1998) discuss that you must like people and, along with being fair and consistent, you have to respect people in order for them to develop. You have to respect their beliefs and their input.” In their view these people skills can best be developed continually through on the job experience. Geneen (1998, p.3) says, “leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitudes and actions.” Leaders must help fulfill the needs of those they work with. .

Trust is spoken of in much of the literature (Covey, 1989; Lambert, 1998). Covey discusses trust, fairness, integrity and honesty as a foundation for success (1989, 195-197). Staff members must also know that they are appreciated. What makes a difference to each individual staff members is to know that his or her successes are perceived, recognized and celebrated.

Personal qualities, background and experiences help to determine leadership style. Style as defined by Lashway (1997, p.5) is a “more or less inherent quality that leads people to prefer one way of behaving over another.” Lashway goes on to discuss three basic strategies of leadership style: hierarchical, transformational and facilitative.

Within each style the leader must be encouraging. Adults as well as children should be encouraged and expected to take responsibility and show independence (Goldman, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996). Each style entails the use of varied strategies and each has advantages and limitations depending on the particular situation. It is important for leaders to develop each style of leadership and to know which one to use in a particular situation. Schools require leaders who are multidimensional (Lashway, 1997). The same can be said for special education.

The idea of “caring” within special education is a relatively new concept in literature. Within general leadership literature Goleman (1995) discusses “emotional intelligence” as a necessity in his article *Managing with Heart*. Leaders must “create a climate of growth and opportunity, a climate in which each fellow would want to carry his own share and would be driven to excel” (Geneen, 1998, p.4). Glasser (1990) describes the process of building a friendly workplace. In order to facilitate this process we must focus both on results and on people. In creating this climate a sense of “we” must be developed. Covey (1989, p. 48-52) defines the “highest state of maturity” as “we”. “We can do it; we can cooperate; we can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together. As an interdependent person, I have the opportunity to share myself deeply, meaningfully with others and I have access to vast resources and potential of other human being” (Covey, 1989, p. 51).

Leaders create a sense of family in which members care about each other and their growth and development. This could be referred to as building community. Sergiovanni (1994) discusses at length both the necessities for “Understanding our Need for Community” as well as “Understanding and Building Community in Schools.”

Within a community the members care about each other. Pazez (1995) brings “The Ethic of Care” to special education in her papers. Within this ethic of care she suggests that it is necessary to look at the service delivery, collaboration, teambuilding, inclusion and diversity within the administration of special education rather than focusing on traditional administrative structures. Caring, community and personal qualities have become a big part of general leadership literature. These components of leadership are beginning to make their way into the literature on special education.

Summary

Shared concern and purpose is the foundation for change (Bondy et al., 1995). We must begin with questions and encourage growth in our understandings in order to proceed in the process of change. Through collaboration we can work together and support each other in the change process. Collaboration is a “source of creative work, personal growth, learning and synergy” (Paul et al., 1996, p. 146). We need to continually be involved in the process of change (Ferguson and Ralph, 1996). “Teachers must be learners and school should become centers of learning where substantive change is to occur in schools” (Brownell et al., 1997, p. 359). Growth and change empowers us to make recommendations for further change. Collaboration and ongoing professional development go hand in hand to promote change and enhance learning opportunities for all students.

Teachers must work together over time to develop professionally. Professional development can take place naturally if it ties into the daily lives of teachers. In order for teachers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities both special education and regular education teachers must work collaboratively to solve problems and make decisions. Teachers must take ownership for their own growth and development by setting individual and collaborative goals and objectives. Leadership must provide opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. It is through these opportunities that teachers will change attitudes and develop knowledge, skills and abilities to provide inclusive educational opportunities. Ongoing communication and cooperation between teachers is the key to change and change is essential for the growth and development of individual as well as collaborative teams.

Leadership continues to be an important component in the collaborative process. True leadership includes many qualities and behaviors of both the individual and the group that allow the group to arrive at shared goals or visions. Within special education leadership has traditionally been hierarchical and administrative in nature defining the roles and responsibilities of leaders in meeting the individual learning needs of students.

This view of leadership in special education has begun to change and expand and it must continue to do so. Leaders must be forward looking and know what they can change. The present perceptions and structures in special education may not be the best for continued growth and development of either students or staff. Leaders in special education must examine their beliefs and values and view them from a variety of perspectives. Then they can begin to see how they may be able to be changed in order to better meet the individual needs of both students and staff.

Knowledge in the area of special education and continued professional development has always been a part of special education literature and must continue to be so. Vision, collaboration, shared decision making, team work, reflection, interpersonal qualities, leadership style, community and caring are areas of leadership that are making their way into the literature on special education. Each of these areas and the ways in which they work hand in hand must continue to be explored, as it is through our relationships with people that true leadership is developed.

“Proactive people focus their efforts in the circle of influence. They work on the things they can do something about. The nature of their energy is positive, enlarging and magnifying, causing their circle of influence to increase.” (Covey, 1989, p. 83).

Educators need to realize the power they have to affect the lives of students as well as

adults (Pool & Hawkins, 1997). Good leadership in special education is the same as good teaching in special education. In both we must acknowledge that each person has different gifts, strengths, and concerns and then find a way to utilize them. It is about giving teachers and students a sense of understanding, empathy, partnership and belonging (Goldman, 1998). Through these we must develop new paradigms of professional development in special education in order to reach shared vision. The project methodology and findings that follow are a new paradigm for professional development in special education for they focus on sharing of ideas and reflections in an informal collaborative fashion and the growth and development that occur from such sharing.

Project Methodology and Procedure

This study was conducted through a work place learning environment. Through the school district Special Education Professional Development Committee the opportunity for involvement in ongoing small group sessions related to meeting personal growth plan objectives in the area of special education was presented (see Appendix A). A group of eight teachers originally signed up for the opportunity. Of these eight, seven participated for the whole year. One individual left the program and another joined so the program ended with eight participants.

The purpose of the initial meeting in September was to set the tone and instill enthusiasm for personal professional development. It was designed to explain the process and the expected involvement of teachers as well as my own personal goals in regards to the project. It was also designed to have participants define professional development and

to identify their own beliefs regarding the teaching of students with special needs (see Appendix B for outline of session). Within this context I wanted teachers to understand that this was a personal process over which they had control. I wanted them not only to know, but also to believe that no one could force them to change that they had to choose to grow and develop for themselves. Within special education the ability to have ownership in one's learning and to link it to classroom realities is essential (Panyan et al., 1997). From this process it was expected that individuals would then be able to identify their own learning needs and set a personal goal for development in the area of special education (see Appendix C for belief and goal sheet).

The project proposal was submitted to the University of Lethbridge for ethics review. All who attended the sessions signed letters of consent for their reflections, thoughts and ideas to be used within the context of the project with the use of in place of their names.

At our second meeting participants brought their individual growth plans and shared their personal goals and their plan or strategies for achieving these goals. During this process we discussed the individual goals, provided feedback and identified ways in which to support each other in the achievement of our goals.

It was my role, as the leader, to organize and facilitate future sessions. It was decided that the entire group would meet formally on a bimonthly basis. The direction of these meetings followed arose out of the individual growth objectives (see Appendix D for tentative outline of session topics). The link that held the group together was the process of ongoing journaling and reflection on growth towards individual objectives. At each session we explored our beliefs about our roles as special educators and how these

tied into our personal goals. We became learners and collaborators in each other's growth plans. We discussed where we were in regards to the achievement of our goals. We shared ways we could assist each other in achieving our goals.

Through the initial process several sub groups arose. These groups met on an ad hoc basis depending on both their direction and their need. Some participants met in pairs to discuss certain aspects of integration. Other individuals were asked to provide workshops or inservices in relation to their specific areas of expertise or attended workshops related to their particular goal. Some met in groups to develop specific areas of action research. There were also individuals who did peer supervision in others' classrooms in order to share what they were seeing and to assist teachers in identifying strengths and weaknesses in meeting the needs of a range of learners.

Throughout the process everyone was encouraged to keep a journal of their involvement, their activities, their stories and their reflections relating both to their individual goals and the process we were engaged in. To encourage participants along in this journaling process I communicated with them on a weekly basis via email. Through email, questions for reflection, motivational quotes, articles or insights were passed along. At the same time participants were encouraged to share their journals and personal reflections with the facilitator on an ongoing basis. As they shared with me I responded and shared my thoughts, questions and concerns with them. "It is through sharing the knowledge from each of our locations through dialogue, that we develop a better more shared understanding of the places we inhabit together" (Ellis, 1997, Chap. 3, p. 2). Reflection allows us to learn from our experiences and support or change our beliefs.

Journaling and sharing of ideas and concerns was designed to assist participants in the process of reflective teaching. It is through reflection that individuals work towards understanding and solving problems or concerns. Through this reflection we are able to examine our practice and determine if what we are doing is in the best interest of students. This reflection on knowledge, experience and feelings provides a framework for each of us to focus our learning. As a reflective teacher individuals are then taking control of their own professional development

Although reflection was an ongoing process, our March meeting was designed to be a more formal review of where each of us was in relation to our personal goal. The purpose here was to empower group members in the review process and assist them in linking their professional development to improved practice (see Appendix E for review questions). The next step was to begin to plan for future professional development goals in the area of special education.

The purpose of our May meeting was to share our thoughts and reflections and analyze the process in which we were all engaged. Participants were given a list of six questions prior to our meeting in order to reflect on and focus their attention (see Appendix F for review questions). At the meeting we engaged in a reflective discussion regarding our involvement in the project. The use of a focus group approach allows the leader to capture the feelings and attitudes of the group, to hear ideas that may not be expressed in written form and to allow participants the opportunity to suggest program change (Panyan et al., 1997).

At our final meeting we shared both our individual and group achievements and accomplishments and celebrated our professional growth. Participants were encouraged

to share their growth experiences with others outside the formal group. They were also presented with a certificate and were treated to supper in recognition of both their participation as well as the successful achievement of their individual growth goals in the area of special education.

At this time the formal group involvement ended but the process of analysis continued. At this point it was my role as the researcher to take a closer look at both the journal entries and stories of both others and myself. It was my intent “to build a richer understanding of self and situation, later theorizing the deep structure of one’s own experience” (Oberg & Underwood, 1992, p. 175). The purpose of this process was to identify themes related to personal professional development, to acknowledge areas that facilitated change as well as limitations of the program, and to set future directions for facilitating personal professional development in the area of special education. In this process I hoped to be able to share with others what we learnt through our experiences and have them see the way that we used the personal professional development process in our ongoing growth and development in the area of special education. “From what we learn we come to see, we can imagine how to be more practically helpful in the future (Ellis, 1997, Chap. 2, p. 3).

The Lived Experience - Treasures

Uniqueness and individuality are so important and we must all be treasured for who we are. As we search for a greater understanding of who we are we must also look for the treasures held within others and allow their full worth to be discovered and shared. Through our shared experience of growth and development in special education

we came to understand both ourselves and each other better and we grew as educators, better prepared to help those with whom we work each and every day, to develop their potential.

Sitting down to organize and find themes in my research I came to realize that there were three main components to my project. First was completing the research or literature review on the topic of facilitating professional development in special education. The second component was actually engaging in the process of facilitating the professional development of others. The third aspect was sitting down to analyze the data I had collected and draw it all together. There was an overwhelming amount of data collected over the course of the year in the form of research notes, articles and reflections. The toughest question was where to even start.

One place to start was to look further at my goal. My goal was to create a group in which we could share our personal findings and frustrations related to our individual goals. It was to provide the opportunity and context in which we could take the time to rethink, re-examine and relive the learning that we had acquired through our own ongoing development. It was to provide a safe and supportive environment in which we could each ask questions and look for ways to continue to change and to grow. It was to develop a team of colleagues who could help and support each other in the achievement of their individual goals. I thought that the best place to start was where we started as a group, the initial inservice.

The Initial Inservice

Although a needs assessment was not conducted for this session I believed that the needs naturally arose out of the new focus on individual growth plans. As teachers become more involved in designing their own professional development there is a need to provide them ongoing support and encouragement in achieving their goals. There is a need for collaborative planning among administrators and teachers. There is a need to provide follow-up and continuity over time. There is a need for ongoing feedback, the opportunity for flexibility and the opportunity to respond to changing needs. In order for all of this to occur there is the necessity to be able to plan, to share and to celebrate individual growth and development in a collective way. The need appeared to be there naturally. Offering the opportunity for such a process therefore seemed to be a natural step. Whether others would identify this need and seize the opportunity was a chance that I must be willing to take.

At the onset this was a concern that did cause some anxiety. Would there be enough interest? Would there be too much interest and would I need to limit the group or have more than one group? What would the makeup of the group be? In the initial planning I left these questions unanswered waiting to see what would arise. The invitation for participation went out to the total teaching staff of the school district. As “luck” would have it, eleven individuals attended the first meeting and seven continued to participate for the duration of the school year. The group was energetic and committed to their own development as well as the success of the group.

Introducing personal professional development in the context of special education was a rewarding experience for me. I felt totally relaxed and at ease. I knew my

objectives and exactly what I wanted to get across to the group. My materials were well prepared and the activities involved reading, writing and reflecting. I wanted to share my enthusiasm for self-directed professional development. I wanted the group to know that their plans were truly theirs and that as long as they were motivated they could design and direct their own learning as they chose. I wanted them to understand and truly believe that I, and the rest of the group, were there to work along side them, in the achievement of their goals. This was not a process where anyone would be critical but rather where we would all be peers, there to help each other guide and direct our own professional development.

The initial activity was designed to get everyone reflecting on, communicating about and together defining professional development. Unexpectedly this ended up being one of my favorite activities. Each individual read the article by Jackson (1992) *Helping Teachers Develop*. Some were hesitant. Some wanted me to highlight the main points. Some wanted me just to give them a definition. I encouraged them to read the article. I asked them questions about their beliefs about professional development. I got them questioning themselves. Eventually everyone settled in, read the article and began to talk. The discussion that followed was the most rewarding part of the session. As everyone shared their ideas, their perspectives, their beliefs, their realities about 'What professional development is', their definitions changed and developed to become a definition that was real and applicable to each of them as individuals.

The group came up with several definitions of teacher development. "Teacher development is the ongoing process of continuous reflection from a variety of perspectives in order to assess one's teaching styles and knowledge. Teacher

development is the development of specific skills, which will enhance student learning and teacher's excitement about their own abilities and knowledge in specific areas. It is the development of a specific area that will excite you and then the students as a result of your special interest or desire to improve. Teacher development is a continuous and conscious process that encourages and enhances the personal qualities and professional skills of the teacher. Teacher development is an individual process. We each see it in a different light. We need to look at where we are as individuals and build on our own strengths and share our strengths with others. By looking within ourselves we can see how we can improve and share this process with other" (Professional Development Group).

It was both motivating and rewarding that through the reading of one article, some personal reflection and intense sharing of ideas, we as a group could come up with such truly meaningful definitions of professional development. Each individual was able to articulate their understanding of the process of teacher development and develop their individual definitions.

Once we had committed to participation in the group and defined and set a context for professional development related to special education we were able to identify our own beliefs as teachers of students with special needs. Knowing what we believe is important to the process of setting further goals for ourselves. It is through our beliefs that we understand our experiences and set directions for further growth and development. The process of developing belief statements is a very personal one. Once we had each engaged in the activity we discussed our beliefs and noted areas we shared and areas that were unique to each individual. Of the eight individuals involved in the

program five chose to share their written belief statements with me. Three members chose to keep these more private as they continued to develop their beliefs and reflect on them in relation to the teaching of students with special needs.

There were similarities across the belief statements. All participants believed that with encouragement all children could learn and grow. All believed that it was the teacher's responsibility to recognize the unique learning needs as well as the strengths of each student and to facilitate learning in a variety of styles to meet these unique learning needs and styles. They saw the social emotional development including the development of self-esteem as an important entity in the learning environment. They identified the belief that teachers were learners along with their students and that it was important for them to share their success and failures with their students. They all identified the need for an integrated, coordinated approach in meeting the needs of all children. All believed that learning opportunities need to be provided in a safe and secure environment that encourages growth and learning. They all supported the concept that children need to be both challenged and successful in order to learn. They, like me, recognized the individual treasures of each student.

Once we had written and shared our beliefs, it was time to work on our individual goals and growth plans. At this point in the process we decided to break and meet again at a later date. We had taken in and shared a lot of information and it was necessary to have time for personal thought and reflection prior to the writing of our own goals and developing a plan. We had, by this point, developed a shared understanding of the process, individual yet shared understandings of professional development and a shared

commitment to supporting each other in our individual attempts to achieve our professional development goals.

Each individual went away with a commitment to developing individual goals and to meeting again to share our goals. Through self-directed professional development we are each responsible for understanding our own needs and setting reasonable goals to achieve them. The process of personal professional development would include defining our goals, prioritizing them and making them specific and meaningful. Once this had occurred the process was to identify strategies for achieving the goals and set a plan for their achievement. The role of the group would then come in to play as we could provide the ongoing support in the achievement of the goals and provide a format for the discussion of concerns and celebration of success. We all knew that we were not going to change overnight but the process we were involved in would help our commitment to our own growth to become a part of our day to day routines and rituals. As Jessica stated “I am looking forward to the support of the group in terms of bouncing off ideas, reflecting on professional development activities and discussing where they should take us in the future.”

Growth Plans

When we met again we each brought our individual growth plans. Everyone had a unique style and very individual goals. Even though the goals themselves were important, the process of meeting, sharing and assisting was to become even more important. Jessica’s goal was to facilitate professional development for teachers and support staff. Martha’s was to develop a more coordinated approach to delivering

services to students with special needs. Elaine was going to look at developing knowledge and skills in the area of early literacy and also to support and assist students and teachers in improving student behavior. Sandra was looking at investigating reading programs and strategies that would increase the development of literacy for all students within her classroom. Joan wanted to be aware, on a daily basis, of the individual differences of the students in her classroom and to use this knowledge to plan activities to maximize opportunities for learning for each individual child. Toby intended to look at increasing her repertoire of strategies to deal effectively with students with behavior difficulties within her classroom. Gwen's goal was to develop her knowledge, skills and attributes in the area of special education programming. My goal was to develop my leadership skills through an increased understanding of my role in the process of facilitating teacher growth and development particularly in the area of special education.

As I read through my own personal responses I am made aware of the fact that each individual led with their strengths in defining and pursuing their goals. Gwen is a very effective administrator and yet her goal was to develop in the area of administration of special education. There is an overlap as it is just an application of the skills and attributes that she already has to a different area of knowledge. Toby demonstrates excellent classroom management through having consistent expectations and rewards, yet her goal is to further develop her repertoire of dealing with inappropriate behaviors. Joan is so aware of individual differences yet she wants to increase her ability to meet these unique needs in her classroom. These are but three of examples of individuals leading with their strengths to further develop themselves as educators. We must

remember this when teaching our students. It is intriguing how people naturally lead with their strengths and tend to want to continue to develop in these areas.

Although teachers were given the option, all chose to give me a copy of their growth plans so that I could revisit them in the process of helping to guide their ongoing professional development. This demonstrated to me a sense of trust in both myself and the process and a commitment to our shared experience.

Group Dynamics

The issue of group dynamics is one that must always be addressed. Our first group session was much more formal than those that followed. My goal was to make these sessions as informal and relaxed as possible so that everyone would feel comfortable in the sharing and learn and grow both through their own reflections and the reflections of others. At the initial meeting it started out much more formal as I shared my goals and the purpose of the group. However, once I turned the conversation over to those present and joined them in dialogue around the table the setting became much more relaxed. Everyone contributed and participated in sharing their thoughts and ideas and demonstrated a commitment to this ongoing sharing.

Each of the following meetings was set up in a relaxed fashion. We sat around a table together sharing where we were on our goals, our questions and concerns, our frustrations and our successes. Each time we met the sharing followed in a more relaxed fashion. However, one individual expressed an ongoing concern. The varied years of experience that the members brought to the table was a concern for her. As she was a second year teacher and some of the members were administrators with a few more years

of experience she felt intimidated. She felt as though there was little she could offer others in the group in the way of support. Although we as administrators did not question her involvement and participation in the group and the experiences she had to share, she continually questioned her ability to contribute and her involvement.

Although it is important to have a mix of ability levels and backgrounds there must also be a comfort level within the group. The level of commitment and participation of each group member will be based on their previous experiences. In the future, in such a small group setting, I would change the dynamics of the group by having a separate group for administrators. Although I felt that everyone contributed and grew it is possible that some of the initial members withdrew from the group due to their insecurities within the group.

Another individual also expressed a concern about the group dynamics. The group size was appropriate, however many of the people in the group were well on their way in developing and facilitating their own professional development. They were self-starters and were regularly engaged in ongoing reflection, continuous goal setting and working towards the achievement of these goals. In some ways I would have liked a group that required a little more guidance and direction. This group definitely did not require guidance in goal setting but appreciated the opportunity to share their questions, concerns and achievements.

Relationships are important to the process of shared reflection. There must be a sense of trust and shared commitment. Each member must be sensitive to the priorities and feelings of others. Everyone must participate and show interest in each other's professional development. This process of mutual support allows each individual to

explore issues of a personal professional nature in a safe environment. These characteristics did occur within our group and although the one member continued to feel somewhat overwhelmed within the group she demonstrated a significant amount of growth and confidence, some of which she attributes to her involvement within the group and the process in which we were engaged.

The Process

The process of keeping a reflective journal helps us to think through the day-to-day learning that takes place in our lives as teachers. As Gwen was writing in her log one day, she thought of an idea on how to provide some extra support for a child who was experiencing reading difficulties. In her journal she noted, “That thought came out just now during this reflection!” Through reflection we often ask many questions and we work towards the answers to these questions. Later Gwen stated that “Reflecting on my special education goals has been important. I have been able to monitor my progress and growth in the administrative responsibilities and have been able to think about several of my students more deeply.” She also noted that her involvement in this ongoing reflection and sharing has allowed her to set new goals and have specific targets for achieving them in the coming year.

As Joan stated “this process is making me more aware of what I do and the reflections are making me question more the approaches I take. Am I changing . . . I hope so as change is necessary for growth. Thanks for pushing me, stretching me and above all believing in me.”

Not everyone in the group put in or received the same amount of support and growth through the group. Some were involved out of a perceived need to help me with the completion of the project. There were times when we discussed this and the fact that the process would only be what each of us made it. The initial intention was to have a group that would provide support to each other in the achievement of our individual goals as many of us tend to work towards the achievement of our goals in isolation. Having a group to share ideas, concerns and successes with was identified as an important component in ongoing growth and development.

Another intent was to keep the achievement of professional growth goals constantly in people's attention. It is very easy to put everything else as a higher priority and leave our growth at the bottom of the priority list. By encouraging others to share and reflect I hoped to keep bringing people back to their own growth rather than always being caught up in the day to day activities and without looking for their deeper meaning. I hoped to encourage each and every group member to take the time to stop and focus on her own growth when every other component of her work life was demanding attention. However, this was an individual journey and we each could only get back out of it based on what we put in to it. Some put in more than others, both in their written and shared reflection, and therefore, it appeared to me, that they got more out of the experience than others as well.

Reflection

Reflection is a form of problem solving in which you try to better understand and solve problems of personal importance. A reflective practitioner researches a lived

experience and becomes more able to take control of his or her own professional development. Through reflection we can examine our own practice and determine if what we are doing is in the best interests of children. Through reflection on knowledge, experience and feelings we provide a framework in which to focus our own learning. Shared reflection allows input from others. It allows us to share our thoughts, feelings and understandings to have them either affirmed or questioned or both. It gives us an opportunity to get more than one opinion on a given topic, concern or question.

Individual participants were encouraged to use journals for ongoing reflection both on their involvement in ongoing professional development and its application to their classroom situation. As well, through their writing they could continually question and search for answers to their questions. When we met we shared our reflections, our stories, our questions and our concerns. This sharing caused us to reflect more intensely than we did in private. When reading the reflections of others or listening in our shared session it was easy to identify themes related to process but much more difficult to identify themes related to individual goals as individuals goals were so unique.

The process of getting together to share caused each of us to reflect and continually think about our own teaching even if our goals were totally different. When Joan was sharing a success story regarding a beginning writer writing his very first story with a beginning, middle and end and the process they engaged in together, it caused the rest of us to think of situations in which we had similar successes or failures and to share these stories as well. Through this shared story and reflection we are each able to learn and grow from the experiences of others.

Although all individuals engaged in some form of written reflection, those that wrote on a weekly basis were much more prepared and willing to share their experiences with the group when we came together. It was also much easier for me to provide them with guidance, direction, articles to read and supportive feedback when they had written more. In these instances I felt that I became an important component of their ongoing professional development. Although I am sure that all individuals grew through the course of our experience, two individuals who shared their reflections on a regular basis, through writing and informal discussion and for whom I was able to give the most support, demonstrated to me the most growth.

Gwen's Story – "Administrative Challenges of Special Education"

Gwen was one of the more experienced members that joined our group. Although she has a wealth of background in special education as well as many other areas she had a new job assignment this year, in a new school, and was now responsible for the overall administration of special education. In her role she was besieged with the administrative paperwork. "Although I felt I had a fair amount of experience with Special Education I have been overwhelmed by the administration responsibilities" (Gwen). The amount of documentation, the monitoring forms and Individual Education Plans (IEP) were not new to her but were now her responsibility to oversee.

In the area of Individual Education Plans Gwen was concerned with the fact that these were done by the special education teacher rather than the regular classroom teacher. The principal with whom she worked, and she both believed that the classroom teachers "should prepare their own Individual Education Plans because they know the

students best and are the ones responsible for the majority of program delivery” (Gwen). However, she was “also aware that this meant more work for the classroom teacher” (Gwen). She was also aware that the teachers believed they lacked expertise in the development of their own Individual Education Plans. Along with this was the concern that she was new to the school and was bringing “change” to what some believed already worked.

Gwen shared her questions and concerns both in her writing and with our group. Then she spoke to her co-administrator. The school principal questioned whether it was the right time to initiate such a change since there was considerable tension on staff. Gwen felt that it was essential and later approached me individually to further discuss the topic. She came up with the plan that I, as an outside person with background in IEP development, would do an IEP session for the regular classroom teachers at her school. This would give the classroom teachers some of the knowledge that they needed to develop Individual Education Plans. The fact that I was an outside person who did not know the dynamics of the staff was seen to be a positive in this situation.

I must share my own feelings and reflections at this point. At the time of being asked to do this inservice for another staff I must say I was overwhelmed. There was so much to be done. I had done the inservice before but I would need to rework it for this particular staff. As a commitment to facilitating the growth and development of a colleague who was a member of our group I said yes. My role in this process was to support and facilitate the professional development of others, especially those in my group.

“It was presented to the staff that they would do the Individual Education Plans for their mild-moderate students and then they were given several options of how it could be done and what support would be available to them” (Gwen). They chose to have me present the information to them on a professional development day and then facilitate the process of IEP development on that day. In Gwen’s perception, “As the teachers worked through the process of writing the IEPs they realized that they did understand what the children needed for programming. Several expressed concerns that the previous Individual Education Plans did not reflect their student(s). “The majority of teachers took the task quite seriously and felt a sense of satisfaction – even empowerment!” (Gwen) Her goal to facilitate teacher development of the Individual Education Plans was achieved.

Another concern that Gwen faced was the assignment of assistant time. “For the most part, assistant assignments were scattered around the timetable lacking continuity. After observing some assistants standing around marking and photocopying and after receiving some additional assistant hours she decided to make some changes. Again, the concept of change was threatening to her staff. The perception of the administrative team was that these changes were necessary in order to better meet the needs of the students and provide support for the staff. However, the perception of some staff was that changes were dictated and top down rather than coming from within.

Over time the support staff adjusted well to the changes in their assignments. After a few months they commented that working more directly with students under the direction of the classroom teachers is so much better for the students. Although not all staff was supportive of the change, many had come to see the benefits of a more cohesive

schedule for each of the assistants. As well as a change in assignment they developed a regular meeting time where Gwen and the assistants could meet to discuss concerns, make recommendations or engage in group professional development. This process has helped them all get to know each other and work better as a team.

Change is often difficult for staffs, even when it is in the best interest of student learning, and especially when a new administrative team is put into place. As Gwen states, “The few changes that have taken place have been to better meet the needs of the students and to provide support for staff.” From my experience there is an adjustment time that is necessary before change can happen from within. It is essential that the staff get to know the administration and the administration the staff. There needs to be the development of a sense of trust. This involves talking, sharing and understanding the others points of view. Once this process has begun to take place then it is possible to make changes more easily from within, rather than directed from administration. Whether or not changes that are made are in the best interest of students’ learning, they often are not effective if they do not have the support of the staff. However, in Gwen’s experience, change was needed and the time to develop these relationships did not outweigh the need for immediate change. In order to develop the best possible learning opportunities for students the need for change was immediate.

Although there are times when administrators or leaders need to make decisions that may be regarded as unpopular, there is also a process that needs to take place. During those first few months of being on a new staff there is a growth and adjustment period that is necessary. Even though different aspects of the school may be viewed by the leaders as “not working” or “not in the best interests of children”, leaders need to

carefully choose which aspects they can and should change now and which they should work on changing from within.

The professional development that Gwen has been involved in at her school is part of an ongoing process. The goals that she has set and achieved this year have led her to develop new goals. For the coming school year she is looking at the development of an alternative delivery model for special education “to better meet the needs of our students and to balance the dollars” (Gwen). An ongoing battle in special education is finding the program delivery model that best meets the needs of a particular group of students. No matter what model is in place there are always questions. Are we best meeting the needs of our students? How could we change to better meet the needs? There also is never enough money. No matter what type of model is put in place there is always something more that you wish you could do. Every child is special, a treasure, and short of one-on-one programming for all, which would not meet the social development needs of children; it is a constant search for the best practice.

Joan’s Story – “I don’t want children to sink, I want them to soar.”

Joan is a second year teacher. She has a wonderful rapport with her students. She understands them and relates well to them. She is musical and creative and has a great sense of humor. All of her students respond to her in a positive manner. Joan knew what her goal was right from the beginning of the year but had difficulty putting it in written words. In the long term she wants to be both flexible and creative in her approach to teaching so that she can best meet the needs of all her students. In order to achieve her goal she planned to be aware, on a daily basis, of individual differences and plan

activities to maximize learning opportunities for all students. She would also attend sessions and workshops related to meeting the needs of a range of learners and reflect on experiences and opportunities related to this topic as they occurred.

Joan's school professes to have a multi-age philosophy. Over the 1998/1999 school year Joan spent a lot of time questioning whether this philosophy actually was being implemented. She questioned whether the regrouping of students into skill levels for particular subjects fit with this philosophy. With good intentions she had shuffled some of her students around for parts of the day hoping to increase their measurable growth. Joan wanted to try something different with her students. She wanted to keep them all in her classroom. She wanted "them to be stretched and encouraged to overcome fear and insecurity and to face learning with an open heart" (Joan).

She chose to integrate all of her students with learning disabilities into all the regular subject areas except French. Last year the students with learning disabilities participated in special programs for language arts and mathematics. Joan chose to keep these students in her regular program for the coming year. She wanted to grow in her ability to provide learning opportunities for all of her students within the regular program of her classroom. We met several times to discuss her goal and articulate it in a way that was meaningful to her. In the end we determined that her goal would be to develop a variety of teaching strategies and techniques to meet the needs of a range of learners within her classroom while at the same time meeting the objectives set out in the curriculum.

Joan still had reservations. She was worried that with such a diverse group of skill levels she wouldn't be able to effectively reach the students who struggle with very basic

skills. She wondered what activities she could implement to ensure motivation, challenges, participation and success for all. In my perception Joan was already very effective in these areas. However, she wanted to be more consciously aware of what she was doing to ensure that all students in her class were learning. As she focused on this she chose to keep a journal in which to reflect on what was happening in her classroom, in regard to students with special needs. Through her journal she would continually look at whether she was meeting their needs and what she could do differently.

Within the first month of working with Joan on her professional development goal I was impressed by her perceptiveness about her students. She was able to identify their individual differences, their unique talents and their needs. While doing this she began to articulate specific goals for each one and share how she had already begun to work on the achievement of these goals within her program. "IEPs are daunting for me, as the isolation of goals and aspirations sometimes is difficult" (Joan). Although the IEP process that lay ahead intimidated her she had already completed the major portion of the work by getting to know her students. She had already completed the process in her head. It was process of writing it down, in words for others to see, that was problematic for her.

The ongoing reflection, sharing and thinking about each student and her lessons were an important component assisting her in her process of continuous growth. The continuous reflection that she was engaging in on the unique needs of each student was helping her in meeting these unique needs. The process of reflection not only allowed her to get to know her students better but also to identify her strengths and weaknesses as a classroom teacher and to identify ways she wanted to change to better meet the needs of

her students. Meeting her goal would directly impact her growth as well as the growth of her students.

Joan has learned a lot from her students, just as they have learned from her. As she states, “sometimes I think we (as educators) become so focused on the inability that some children apparently possess, that we forget about the little steady accomplishments that we should all rejoice in. I think when I measure growth in any child I must first realize we don’t all start from the same point.” Joan shares this perception with her students. She has often reminded them that we don’t all learn to do things at the same time nor do we learn in the same way. She also recognizes that we don’t all see things in the same way. Because of this learning and understanding she continually works to present material to her class in a variety of ways in order to meet a variety of needs.

Another area in which Joan has demonstrated growth is in her empathy for students with special needs. In reflecting on how she approaches each student and their responses to her she states that, “each time children feel singled out as different the more they may feel overwhelmed and inadequate. All human beings need praise and encouragement in order to grow” (Joan). Joan shared a message with us from a drummer from Zambia that she heard at the Fine Arts Conference she attended. When asked about students with special needs he replied, “Ah, yes, the little birds with broken wings – they too can be taught to fly – maybe not so strong, maybe not to fly so far ... but they too will fly!” She applies this daily in her classroom.

Through an orff workshop Joan further strengthened her beliefs on inclusion. “When the instructor announced her belief that all children have music inside of them, that all children can be taught to sing and experience music in a variety of ways, I knew I

would enjoy this program”(Joan). Joan and the instructor share the belief that through music all children should have the opportunity to experience success. Joan expands this belief into a variety of subject areas. However, her love for music also transcends subject areas.

The process of educating students involves a constant search for balance. How much time do we spend developing strengths and how much time do we spend on developing areas of weakness? How much of a focus should be on academics and how much on effort and work ethic? There are differing views on each of these questions. Each teacher needs to develop their own philosophy, based on research as well as personal action, and find what works best for them in meeting the needs of all students.

Along with these understandings, Joan is aware that it is the job of the teacher to ensure that each child continues to grow academically and that all children are challenged in a positive manner no matter what their strengths, their limitations or their developmental time lines. “Presenting challenges that children will accept and experience success in, is for me, the greatest challenge. Having students realize that how they approach a problem will often determine their success or failure is something else I constantly work on” (Joan).

In Joan’s journal she shares several anecdotes involving two particular students “D” and “J”. Both students have extreme difficulty with reading and writing. From her observations it is obvious that she is always watching these two carefully, during each lesson, to ensure that they do not reach the point of frustration. When she notes that an activity is not working for them she is quick to change it, making it more interactive, more hands on, more individualized, better suited to their unique needs. She attempts to

plan for this but it doesn't always work this way so she keeps a careful eye, ready to modify the activity as necessary, not forcing them to fit the activity but rather the activity to fit their needs. This flexibility and willingness to change and modify has helped both D and J to be successful members of the classroom.

Joan does not only modify for students with special needs. She sees the strengths and weaknesses in every child and knows that even the students with the greatest knowledge often struggle in expressing themselves creatively or in solving problems. In an attempt to help all students, to spread their wings, she makes sure each lesson includes the need for children to think independently and to share their thoughts creatively. Joan includes a variety of hands on and visual learning activities. All students learn in different ways and require a variety of options and techniques in order to build on their strengths.

Joan has noted that her best problem solvers are often her weaker academic students and those with the "knowledge" are sometimes afraid to fly. In Joan's classroom it is okay to be wrong, to make mistakes and to fall as students are valued and feel safe. They know that Joan believes that we all need to fall many times before we walk and that we practice many unconnected sounds before we talk so we also need to learn new knowledge, skills and attitudes through our mistakes.

Through her participation in this group Joan has also demonstrated growth in her empathy and understanding of parents and their feelings associated with having children with identified learning needs while at the same time knowing that it is important to help parents understand that their children need the same support and encouragement as other children. "It's hard to acknowledge as a mother, a parent or a teacher that we can't fix

everything. In fact perhaps the hardest thing as a parent is acknowledging that something is wrong at all. Sometimes it is easier to warp our perception so that our children don't get labeled. But is understanding, labeling or is it not diagnosis so that an appropriate course of action can be planned to illuminate ignorance and illuminate strategies" (Joan). Through assessment we are better able to understand, and hopefully meet, the learning needs of each child. The process is not labeling just for the sake of labelling but rather to help us learn more about the student so that we can help him/her to fly.

In order to build on her understandings in the classroom Joan attended several workshops and sessions related to her goal. At the Southwest Regional Teachers' Convention Joan attended sessions that she hoped would benefit her in meeting the diverse needs of students. In the first session she was reminded that all students could participate and benefit from short, high intensity activities that include everyone in a cooperative and fun movement activity. The activities were considered to be all-inclusive. In another session the speaker discussed strategies to help high-needs students succeed in the classroom. This included such things as organization, consistency in expectation and delivery. The strategies shared would especially benefit all students including those with special needs. A third session dealt with dealing with inappropriate behavior. The speaker shared how we need to look beyond the behavior and see what has affected the child's world. We need to walk in the shoes of the child and understand where it is that they are coming from.

Joan also attended a school based reading workshop, a district writing workshop and a Special Education Conference to help her expand her understandings and skills in the area of integrating students with special needs. She demonstrated a constant

commitment towards the attainment of her goal, meeting the needs of all students.

Although she would have attended these workshops whether or not she was part of this group, her focus on meeting the needs of all students was kept at the forefront throughout her participation and allowed her to reflect on and use the information she received in a more specific way.

To this end she states “Sometimes the task of meeting the diverse range of needs in one little classroom setting seems ominous. And yet as I write this I realize that the real challenge for me is presenting learning as an exciting challenge no matter where my students are. In meeting this challenge we must always celebrate. We need to celebrate all accomplishments from the completed sentence to the completed story. With regular and consistent celebrations hopefully we will convince these children that they can learn and be successful in their daily effort . . . I believe in miracles, my students” (Joan).

This reflection and the self-analysis of what is being achieved, away from the immediacy of the day to day teaching pressures, are in themselves important for professional development. The case studies above demonstrate the depth of learning and understanding that can occur through continuous self and shared reflection. In both instances I felt an integral part of the process as each of these individuals continually shared with me, confided in me, asked for my guidance and direction and responded to my feedback. I also was able to grow as a facilitator as I reflected on my involvement in their growth, responded to their feedback and made decisions on how to proceed as a facilitator of individual growth and development. Group participation also allowed us to share our ideas, suggestions and strategies to each other in a non-threatening and supportive environment and to gain insights through the experiences of others.

Facilitation

Staff development is one of the most significant aspects of leadership since it is through the staff that children's development and growth occur. The process of facilitation involves the key components of listening, sharing and building relationships. Through these processes the leader is able to assist others to stimulate ideas, press awkward questions, and help individuals to consider educational issues. This in turn creates a setting in which individuals develop themselves. Within this role we need to create an environment wherein individuals are responsible for their ongoing professional learning and development. It is the role of the facilitator to recognize good practice, encourage better practice and expect best practice in order for this growth to take place.

As outlined in the Policy on Professional Growth and Development (1997) the role of any administrator in another's growth plan is that of support. The plan belongs to the teacher. The administrator's role is to review the plan and provide feedback. In the initial stage the administration is to review the teacher's growth plan, offer suggestions and provide constructive feedback while entering into a dialogue about the teacher's priorities for professional growth. As the year progresses, the principal should support and assist teachers in implementing their growth plans. The facilitator's, whether it is the administrator or a group of teachers, task is to create a climate where colleagues can share and receive support for their efforts towards their own goals. The facilitator must acknowledge the work of those involved and provide supportive feedback.

It has been my experience, over the last few years, that teachers' growth plans are written and then placed in a drawer. Although it would be nice to revisit them on an

ongoing basis and at the end of the year, this often does not happen. Therefore, my intent as an administrator facilitating ongoing professional development was to have the participants revisit their plans on a monthly basis. Through this process they would not lose site of their goal; they would continually reflect on where they were at and where they were going in the achievement of their goals. This would also provide them with the opportunity to modify or change their plans should the need arise. If we, as professionals, are not continually aware of what it is that we are working on, we tend to get caught up in the day to day routines. Our own growth and development, although occurring naturally in some areas, is not a conscious priority.

The facilitator's role in this process is that of a colleague, with some experiences and expertise, who not only offers support but is invited by staff to support them in their ongoing development. By offering different perspectives, support, encouragement and suggesting alternative approaches the facilitator becomes an active member of the individual growth plan. This shared experience provides material for further discussion and shared analysis of growth towards goals. The facilitator works to move the teachers toward new ideas through a process of guiding them in critical awareness of their own growth and development.

I feel that this goal was achieved. By reminding teachers to reflect and providing them with articles or quotes to help motivate their ongoing reflection I was continually drawing their attention to the fact that they had a goal. Over the course of the year I continually heard the complaint, "I do reflect, however, I never have time to write these reflections down." They did make time, but many did not allow the amount of time that either they or I thought would occur. The fact that I was there as a constant reminder to

them did cause them to refocus on a weekly or sometimes biweekly basis and ask themselves what they were doing towards the achievement of their own goal. The reflection did occur and they were always brought back to what it was that they were working towards.

In my role as facilitator I had many one-on-one meetings with individual participants. We met to discuss goals and concerns in a more private manner. We met so that they could receive insight and feedback. As the facilitator I found that teachers often have their own answers. They just need someone to listen to what they have to say as they talk through a situation. Once they have had time to verbalize a situation they come up with the solution or idea or something to try. The role of the facilitator is to be a good listener, to ask questions for clarification and questions that cause individuals to look more deeply within themselves for what they truly believe.

The facilitator also guides others through their own modeling. By sharing their individual goals, and their reflections on growth toward these goals, the facilitator demonstrates a commitment to the process of ongoing learning. This modeling also occurs through the actions and strategies that the facilitator uses in accomplishing their goals. In this process I was a co-learner alongside my colleagues. I wrote and shared a growth plan with them and shared my thoughts and reflections at our monthly meetings. I also asked them for support and feedback in regards to the attainment of my goals. At the same time I engaged in a constant search through reading and the participation in workshops related to the role of the administrator or facilitator both in the areas of professional development and special education. I also encouraged others to participate in sessions related to their specific goal.

Of the eight participants in the program four of us attended the Special Education Conference in the Kananaskis. “Celebrating the Challenges” was the title of the workshop and exactly what we set out to do. At the same time as we celebrated our challenges we also engaged in an ongoing sharing of what we were learning at each session and how it impacted on our classroom practise. Throughout this process I reminded teachers to look for sessions that related to their goals. Through attending formal sessions related to their individual goals participants were challenged to continue in the reflective process by relating their learning to their classroom environment.

One strategy for using conferences more effectively is to send at least two persons. If more than one person receives the information they can share their ideas and support each other in the implementation. If this information can then be shared with others at another time, such as through a sharing session, it is even more likely to be useful to those who attended. By articulating what we have learned we have a deeper understanding and are more likely to transfer our learning into practice.

This process of shared reflection on the sessions we attended occurred throughout the weekend and continued when our group met again after the conference. One session that we attended together was that on team building both in our classrooms and our school. As there were three of us who now shared the same knowledge we could work together to get our students and staff further involved in the process of team building.

At the special education conference I looked for a session related to leadership in special education. There was one session that tied directly to my goal. The topic was *Leadership Skills for Special Education: Mission Possible*. This presentation looked at the challenging role of providing effective leadership in today’s educational environment

and the fact that administering special education programs further highlights this challenge. The purpose of the session was to review the dimensions of leadership and highlight the knowledge, skills and attributes, which would help educators successfully, answer the challenge. Although well intended I found the focus was mainly on the knowledge portion of leading special education. Knowledge is very important when it comes to special education policies and procedures. However, knowledge can be learned. My area of interest had been more with the skills and attributes necessary for effective leadership in special education. The science of teaching or of leading can be learned, but much of the art of teaching or leading comes from within. Drawing attention to this art form allows one to build on and enhance their artistic qualities. The 'how to' rather than 'the what' is much harder to learn and is often part of who you are as a leader rather than what you can learn.

Another session that I did attend that is helpful to all forms of leadership is that of energizing and teambuilding. Activities that allow you to learn about yourself and others and to work co-operatively are important for leaders of classrooms, staff and professional development opportunities.

Another way to model is through involvement in local professional development opportunities. There were many occasions throughout the school year where I was called on to provide input, to offer inservices, to mentor informally and to give support. I cannot think of one time when I said no. As part of my goal I had decided to support every individual in our group in every way that I could in achieving their personal professional development goal related to special education. Being able to say no is a good thing. Within the context of facilitating professional development I chose not to say no.

I developed and delivered sessions on developing Individual Education Plans, Meeting the Needs of a Range of Learners in Reading and Meeting the Needs of a Range of Learners in Writing. Although I originally was not that excited about offering a session on Individual Education Plans for another staff the session went amazingly well. I changed the format of a similar session that I have offered previously, from one of mainly presenting, to one of doing. We spent some time talking about the IEP format but then we broke into groups and actually got very involved in the writing of Individual Education Plans. We looked through students' files, and identified their strengths and weaknesses and then we brainstormed goals and objectives. It was a learning group, working together, to achieve our goals.

Although I do not necessarily consider myself an expert in reading and writing I do believe that good teaching strategies for children in the “regular” classroom are the same strategies that we use for students with special needs. Therefore, sharing strategies that are proven to be good teaching strategies for all children will help teachers to more effectively meet the needs of a range of learners in their classroom. These experiences provided me the opportunity to develop my skills in managing and presenting material to colleagues and to take responsibility on a different level for learning in the classroom

Another opportunity to be a model and to learn from my experience arose when I was asked to do an interview for the Lethbridge Herald for a series on special education that was going to be printed during the week of the local teachers' convention. My first response was “what will they misquote or take out of context?” For that reason alone I did not want to do the interview. However, in order to set an example for my colleagues and most importantly to support students with special needs I said yes. The article itself

did not end up being a great concern. The range of learners in the classroom is ever increasing, the size of classes is increasing and the lack of parental support appears to be increasing. However, the fact that the article focused on the lack of budgetary support in special education concerned me. Within my discussion I had said that there would never be enough money to totally fund special education because no matter what programs you offer or how you support there is always someone else that you identify as in need of special services. It is not necessarily a problem of insufficient funding for special education. The more money received the more that is required. It is how programs and programming are set up and established that is of greater concern. How do we take what we have and design the best possible programming for the students who are presently in our school? In each school we need to look at the range of learners and then design operational models that best meet the individual needs of that range of learners.

The other area that caught my attention throughout the article was that I tended to use the term kids, instead of students in my oral sharing of our programs. This gave me a new area of growth. In my written work I always refer to my students as students with special needs. Why did I not use these terms in my interview? They are kids but in the context of this article they are students. Setting an example for others is often difficult for what we perceive our example to be is not always what the other person is receiving. Taking this article for example, depending on the context the individual brings to the reading of the article, my comments could be understood much differently than I, the interviewee, had intended. It is therefore a responsibility of leaders or facilitators to take into account not only what it is that they are trying to express, but also how others may

interpret what they are saying and how to help them put the information into the correct context.

Being a facilitator also involves such areas as problem solving on specific students, discussing curriculum modifications, and sharing stories and experiences, engaging in informal discussions and participating in meetings on individual students. All of these experiences allowed me to grow and develop as a leader and facilitator. Within these opportunities there were internal rewards and satisfaction. However, there was also the praise and encouragement of my colleagues. Just as teachers should continually look for ways to praise and reinforce their students so too must we as *leaders* do this for our colleagues and our staffs.

By acknowledging the ways that teachers are working on their own professional development and providing them with ongoing encouragement we become a part of their plan. I know that this process was important for Toby, Joan and Gwen. Through phone discussions, emails, and personal meetings we maintained an ongoing dialogue on growth towards our goals. Through this ongoing communication I was able to provide them with ongoing support and encouragement. This encouraged them to continue and to likely go further in the growth towards their goal than they would have without the support and encouragement. Through this process one nurtures development so that the individuals can identify their own strengths and share their successes with others thus continuing to move along the path to improved student learning.

Program Evaluation

Early on in this process I came across a professional development newsletter that had been created by our local teachers association. The content of the newsletter affirmed my own goals and what I was aiming to achieve within the group. First it described an

Oath for Growth

- Just as a tree produces fruit, the fruit produced from teacher growth and development is increased student learning.
- Just as trees need ongoing care, sunshine and nutrients, teacher growth is also an ongoing process.
- Just as we wouldn't water a tree once or twice a year and then expect it to thrive, the same is true of professional growth and development.
- One-shot professional growth at any one time does not provide for continuous effective development.
- Each teacher is responsible for initiating, maintaining and evaluating his or her ongoing professional growth. This will be increasingly evident in the writing and implementation of Individual Growth Plans and will continue to be carried out in collaboration with colleagues and administration (ATA Professional Development Newsletter, 1998).

This oath is so true. The metaphor seems such a natural one. We are looking for teachers to demonstrate a commitment to their own professional growth. In doing so they must have the necessary caring and supportive environment for that growth to occur. If the environment changes or the supports are withdrawn growth will not occur and just like a tree the fruit will not be produced.

This professional development opportunity put into place some of the necessary elements for growth to occur. Did I achieve my goals? Did teachers achieve their goals? Learning is ongoing. In many of our goals the learning is part of a process. As Joan stated, "I am a work in progress. I have a long way to go to get everything in place but I have come a long way." Within the process they all noted the need to be reflective in order to challenge their own ways of thinking and acting and to change them. They also noted that if this process of change was expected of their students it was necessary for them to engage in and model this process. Through the expectation of continuous reflection they shared that they are more aware of what they are doing and constantly asking questions of themselves. "This has been a wonderful opportunity and experience of personal growth. Often the good intentions towards personal evaluation and reflection are pushed aside in the daily press for time. This group and most of all the leadership has provided me with a focus and the impetus to carry it out (Gwen)."

Many of the strengths of the program have been outlined throughout this final project. Through this program teachers have been able to identify and develop their individual goals related to special education. The process was then designed to facilitate the achievement of these goals in a supportive, collegial fashion. The end result, as can most clearly be identified in Joan's story, is improved learning opportunities for students with special needs. Growth towards the achievement of their goals has been achieved. All involved have demonstrated changes in attitudes, beliefs or actions related to the teaching of students with special needs.

Joan has gained a greater understanding of the process of integration and continues to look for the best practices for teaching all students within her classroom.

Toby has further developed her repertoire of behavior intervention techniques and continues to modify and apply new strategies based on the individual needs of her students. Gwen has developed an increased awareness of the magnitude of responsibilities in the administration of special education and has made significant changes to program implementation in her school. Jessica developed and delivered several professional development workshops for teachers, support staff and parents. Martha was able to acquire more involvement from outside agencies in co-ordination services for children with special needs. Sandra has increased her knowledge and use of effective reading strategies for all students and Elaine is much more confident in the strategies she is using in Early Literacy programming. I have become an integral part of the process as the facilitator of professional development.

Within the focus on achievement of our goals we have all grown as colleagues in the process of shared reflection during ongoing professional development. It is hard to measure the impact of the process on the achievement of goals for we may have achieved them without the process. However, throughout the year I received informal feedback that the process that we were engaged in was helping individuals to remain focused on their goal and, therefore, to feel more successful in working towards the achievement of their goal.

At our final meeting we focused specifically on the process we had engaged in and not on our goals. Prior to the session I identified five key questions and sent them out for participant response (see Appendix F for questions). They brought their written responses to our session and we engaged in a reflective discussion on the process of

written and shared reflection as a way to facilitate ongoing professional development in special education.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants felt that they had learned from the experiences and stories that were shared by others, especially the stories about children. They appreciated the opportunity to hear from a group with a range of backgrounds and experiences and the mix of administrators and teachers. They appreciated the support of those in the group and the chance to share their ideas, stories, successes and struggles in a supportive and caring environment. As Jessica wrote, “I found that the discussions we had as a group were informative and supportive. We passed along a great deal of programming information and ideas to each other, were able to talk out many problems and to ‘let off steam.’ In addition, we talked about success and the positive aspects of working in Special Education.”

The group members identified that my role in continually bringing their goals forward had helped them to remain focused and re-evaluate where they were, what they had to do and where they were going on an ongoing basis. Within the process they were unable to put their goals on a shelf for where they were on the achievement of their goals was constantly being revisited. With this continuous revisiting they felt they were more successful in achieving their goals than they would have been without the process.

There were two areas the group suggested that could improve the process. All felt that it would have been helpful to have a copy of every individual’s goal. Although I as a facilitator had copies and we reviewed individual goals each meeting the group felt that they could be more supportive of each other if they each had a copy of each other’s goals. Some individuals felt that they would have liked more direction with regard to

their reflections. We did not come to consensus on this issue, as focusing direction in regards to very different goals would be difficult to achieve.

As the overall focus of our goals was specifically in the area of special education it was noted that it was helpful “to have a group who understands the barriers, the frustrations and the elation in small accomplishments that those who work with children with special needs face each day” (Jessica). This was very true even though the group included both regular and special educators. All group members felt that the group met their expectations by allowing them to hear and share their personal experiences and stories related to growth and development in special education with others.

Conclusion

Within the process of ongoing professional development we must develop a climate of trust and respect to nurture the professional commitment of teachers. The investment of time in an ongoing process of collegial dialogue can assist in the process of ongoing, self-directed professional development. It allows for the processes of both independence and interdependence through personal and shared reflection. In order for professional development to be successful there must be built in opportunities for sharing. Regularity of meetings and discussions is important. Through this sharing of ideas we each go away and reflect on the points made, each absorbing them in different ways into our own teaching. The goal is to cause teachers to reflect on and slightly modify their practices. The sharing of information, ideas and practices causes one to focus their thinking.

Through this process we all grew. I grew as a facilitator. We all grew as co-learners in the process. Each teacher grew as leaders in their individual classroom or schools. The growth was through the sharing in and expanding of our individual knowledge, attitudes and beliefs related to a mutual area of interest, special education. As professional development should encourage educators to be more critical, self-analytical and reflective the process was successful in achieving its outcomes. The outcome of all professional development opportunities is increased student learning. The process of shared reflection encourages us to look more deeply at what we are doing and determine if it is the best possible learning opportunity for our students. It encourages us to find the treasures within others and ourselves.

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Appendix A

**FACILITATING TEACHERS' INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND
DEVELOPMENT IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Small Group Sessions to be held regularly throughout the year to support teachers in meeting their individual goals related to special education

Introductory meeting to be held at the Board Office on September 15th at 4:00

Ongoing professional growth and development is an integral part of the learning process. Through ongoing professional development we grow and are able to provide enhanced opportunities for our students to grow. Improved student learning is the ultimate goal of all professional development. The Teaching Quality Standard states that "Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students." (Alberta Education, 1997)

Professional growth plans have become a part of teachers' lives. Through planning for continued growth we set ourselves on our individual learning journeys. There are so many competing priorities for professional development within the field of education. The purpose of these ongoing sessions is to assist teachers in setting their individual goals related to special education and then to work together as a team in supporting and facilitating the achievement of these goals.

Teachers who are interested are invited to an introductory meeting at 4:00 p.m. on September 15th. At this meeting we will begin to discuss our individual goals, to explore ways to support each other and to decide on the dates, times and locations for future meetings. All those interested in finding out more or in attending these sessions please contact Cynthia Parr at 327-4169 (W) or 381-0868 (H) by Friday September 10th.

"The interweaving of the personal and the professional in collaborative cultures, and the qualities of trust and sharing within those cultures, provide the most collegially supportive environment for change."

Andy Hargreaves

Appendix B

Special Education Professional Growth Planning Session

A Professional Development Experience

1. **Introduction of New Provincial Teacher Growth, Supervision and**

Evaluation Policy.

- Alberta Education Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy
 - New Provincial Teacher Evaluation Policy: Advice from the Alberta Teachers' Association
 - School District Policy
 - all teachers must submit a growth plan
 - the principal/designate must supervise all teachers
 - Overhead 1 Quality Teaching Standard
- “Quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s analysis of the context and the pedagogical knowledge and abilities the teacher decides to apply result in the students having the best possible opportunity to learn.” (Thomas, G. R., 1997)

2. **What is teacher development?**

Have teachers individually read Helping Teachers Develop by Philip W. Jackson (1992).

After reading join teachers in your teaching teams.

Come up with a definition and four categories of teacher development.

Have groups share and then create a whole group definition of teacher development and discuss the four identified categories on chart paper.

Possible Definition:

- how teachers’ develop within their careers
- a process that ultimately will improve student learning
- Overhead 2

(“Any activity that causes me to think and talk about education and kids, I consider to be professional development. I see professional development as a very personal process where I determine areas where I want to increase my understanding and abilities.” (Glenda from Raymond, D., Butt, R. and Townsend, D. (1992)

3. **Personal Professional Growth and Development**

Think of a time, an opportunity or an experience that allowed you to grow professionally. Give some thinking time. Now you have ten minutes to free write about your experience. Describe the events, conditions, context, people, their characteristics, relationships, etc. (Butt, 1995). You will not have to share the

specific details of your writing so feel free to write as much detail as you would like.

4. **Variables that Impact Growth and Development**

In your groups share as much as you would like to about your positive PD experience. Ensure that everyone has equal time to share. Create a chart outlining positive variables that support PD and variables, which do not support PD.

Have groups share variables and/or make a whole group chart and identify themes. Discuss Possible themes include: personal, social active, experiential, concrete, emotional as well as cognitive and reflective, intrinsic and shared motivation for learning

5. **Personal Beliefs**

Identify beliefs about teaching and learning.

- Our beliefs and personal theories set boundaries or frames around what we see and how we interpret experience. (Butt, 1995) On the paper handed to you I would like you individually to write down what you know and believe about teaching special education
- Seeing your own statement of belief will alert you to topics and questions helpful in designing your own course of professional development.
- Share overhead on my beliefs about the impact of administration on teaching. (Overhead 3)
- Overhead 4 “Choose professional development activities that help you celebrate, improve, and show off the things that you love to do. Give yourself permission to lead with your strengths.” (Clark, 1992)

6. **Types of Teacher Development**

- Traditional Mostly Failed Models of Improving Teaching
- Some Emerging Means for Successful Teacher Development
- Reflection/journals
- Write and talk about your own professional lives. Have a peer to share reflections with and learn from.
- Collaborative autobiography
- Through reflection on what you do and why you do it you can see where you want to go and take charge
- research
- curriculum projects
- discussion groups
- observing
- mentoring
- specific teaching skills
- collaboration towards a common goal build achievement

- Overhead 5 “ Teachers learn most, perhaps, from other teachers, particularly from colleagues in their own work place, their own school.” (Hargreaves, 1992)
7. **Developing a Plan**
- Overhead 6 - “It is important to have a plan. It is important to feel free to depart from the plan when reality does not match our predictions. A plan can give us direction, a way to begin a feeling of control and a basis for evaluation our choices. But a plan is not a script.”
 - Planning Worksheet
 - Outline ways that you hope to be different as a special educator three years from now and some possible ways to achieve those changes
 - Brainstorm a list of goals and objectives based on your own identified learning needs that would help your students learn more successfully.
 - Discuss your goals with a colleague and select one or two that could be reasonably achieved in the coming year.
 - Brainstorm with your team what you can do to achieve your desired learning outcomes. (Alberta Education, 1997)
 - Identify strategies or steps for achieving your goals.
 - Include a timeline for implementation
 - Teachers benefit from each other’s knowledge and skills. Include in your plan an identified way to share with your colleagues.
 - Overhead 7 “Let others know what you are doing on your own behalf and how good you feel about yourself. Learn how to teach about what you are learning. Teach about what excites You!” (Clark, 1992)
 - share progress at a staff meeting
 - meet regularly with colleagues/individual/team
 - meetings with administration – feel free to include Dieter or myself in any way that will be beneficial to you. We would love to be a part. Our goal is to work along side you to assist us all in reaching our goals
 - This is my personal professional goal for the year, to assist you in meeting your goals and to reflect on the process. We are co-learners in this process.
 - Is there a relationship between my plan, the Teaching Quality Ministerial Order, my school’s goals and the jurisdiction’s goals.

8. **Meeting on A Regular Basis**

The purpose of this group is to meet on a regular basis to help each other reach our personal growth objectives related to special education. We will meet, talk and share how our growth towards these goals is going. We will engage in formal discussion, sharing and writing to assist each other and to keep on track.. I will describe the process and write my thoughts, feelings and involvement up in my master’s project.

Appendix C

Special Education Growth Plan
Planning Sheet1. *Beliefs*

Our beliefs and personal theories set boundaries around what we see and how we interpret experience. Write down what you know and believe about teaching special education. These beliefs would be those that guide your teaching in a significant way. (Butt, 1995)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

2. *Ways that I hope to be different as a special education teacher a year from now.*

3. *Write down as many goals as you can think of, based on your own identified learning needs.*

4. *Discuss your goals with a colleague and select one or two that could reasonably be achieved in the upcoming school year.*

1.

2.

5. *Following are the strategies, steps or professional development opportunities that would allow me to achieve my goals.*

Appendix D

Tentative Outline

September – Review Process

Identify Beliefs

Assessment of Learning Needs

October – Write and share goals

- Prepare Plan
- Provide Feedback
- Begin Journal

November -Review Goals

- Reflection on where we are at
- Continue to Journal
- Identify ways that we can further support each other
- Identify commonalties that may cause members of the group to work more closely together

December - Share insights and reflections

- Share questions and concerns
- Continue to Journal

January - Share learnings in the form of stories

- Share reflections and concerns
- Continue to write in journal

February -Review Goals

- Where are we, where are we going, what should be changed or adjusted
- Do we need to add or change our personal plans or strategies
- Continue to write in journal

March - Share insights, reflections and concerns

- Continue to Journal

April Share insights, reflections and concerns

- Continue to Journal

May - Share achievements

- Did we reach our goals?
- How did we implement our plans?
- How did this address our professional needs?
- What are the implications for the future?

June - Evaluate the process through focus group discussion

- Review Achievements and Accomplishments
- Celebrate

Appendix E

Reviewing Your Professional Development Goal

If you always do what you've always done You'll always get what you've always got

1. What was your Professional Development goal related to special education?
2. How did you implement your plan? What steps or strategies did you employ?
3. Where are you in terms of achieving your goal?
4. Did you alter your plan? If so how?
5. What challenges did you face in meeting your goal?
6. How did your plan address your professional needs?

7. What difference has been made to your teaching practise?

 8. What are you presently doing as a result of your learning?

 9. What is one thing you are going to do differently in your classroom (leadership position) as a result of your learning?

 10. Where is this leading for next year?

 11. Any other comments, questions or suggestions.
- Appendix F

**Teacher Growth and Development in Special Education
Focus Group Questions**

Please write a written response to these questions. As well please come prepared to discuss your responses at our May meeting.

1. What did you find most useful about our sessions?
2. What did you learn from this process?
3. What did you expect to get out of the sessions that we did not achieve?
4. Did you get the support you required to achieve your personal professional development objectives related to special education?

