"Beg, Borrow, and Steal": School Division Perspectives of Assessment Policy Creation in Saskatchewan

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This study focused on school division needs pertaining to classroom-based assessment policies in Saskatchewan. Using a critical policy analysis framework, this project narrowed in on the creation of assessment policies within school divisions in the province through the lens of superintendents (n = 16). Applying Verhoest et al.'s (2004) organizational autonomy framework, school divisions were interpreted as having both a minimum level of financial autonomy and a higher (though ultimately ambiguous) level of policy autonomy. Interviews revealed a tension between policy creation at the school-division level and within the Ministry, highlighted the impact of higher policy autonomy and lower financial autonomy on policy development and implementation at the division level, and called attention to a desire from school divisions for provincial guidance.

Cette étude a porté sur les besoins des divisions scolaires en matière de politiques d'évaluation en classe en Saskatchewan. À l'aide d'un cadre d'analyse critique des politiques, ce projet s'est concentré sur la création de politiques d'évaluation au sein des divisions scolaires de la province dans l'optique des directions générales (n = 16). En appliquant le cadre d'autonomie organisationnelle de Verhoest et al. (2004), on a perçu les divisions scolaires comme ayant à la fois un niveau minimum d'autonomie financière et un niveau plus élevé (bien qu'en fin de compte ambigu) d'autonomie en matière de politiques. Les entrevues ont révélé une tension entre la création de politiques au niveau de la division scolaire et au sein du ministère, ont mis en évidence l'impact d'une autonomie politique plus élevée et d'une autonomie financière plus faible sur l'élaboration et la mise en œuvre de politiques au niveau de la division et ont attiré l'attention sur le désir des divisions scolaires d'obtenir une orientation de la part de la province.

Classroom-based assessment has been conceptualized as a fundamental part of teaching and learning, and in many respects, is indivisible from classroom instruction (Schellekens et al., 2021). Contemporary approaches to assessment have characterized it as an ongoing process that involves formative, self and peer elements, and fosters the development of students' metacognitive skills (Coombs et al., 2020). In a Canadian context, classroom-based assessment specifically and education more generally fall under the jurisdiction of the provincial/territorial government, though school divisions have often been made responsible for establishing how policies will be taken up at the local level (Maclellan, 2009; Volante & Ben Jaafar, 2008).

This research aimed to shed light on school division perspectives on the development of classroom-based assessment polices in the province of Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan continues to

be one of only five provinces and territories that does not have a provincial reporting system[1] and one of three that, at the time this research was conducted, did not have an up-to-date assessment document—either an official provincial assessment policy or directive or more general assessment framework document, published within the last 15 years.[2] Consequently, school divisions (SDs) have been tasked with developing their own assessment policies. This particular project narrowed in on the creation of assessment policies within SDs, all interpreted as having both a minimum level of financial autonomy and a higher (though ultimately ambiguous) level of policy autonomy (Verhoest et al., 2004). Using a critical policy analysis framework, this exploratory research centered the voices of school superintendents, responsible for assessment within SDs, in order to respond to three research questions: 1) Are SDs reliant on the provincial assessment handbook and what other resources do they reference to create their assessment policies? 2) How does the size of the SD and their access to resources impact the development and implementation of assessment policies? 3) And moving forward, what do SDs require from the Ministry of Education in order to best support meaningful assessment in the classroom?

Assessment in Saskatchewan: A Brief Overview

Saskatchewan is a mid-sized province with a population of just under 1,100,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021c). Almost half of the population resides in the province's two major urban centers, Regina and Saskatoon (Statistics Canada, 2021a, 2021b), with remaining residents dispersed across smaller cities and in rural and remote areas. The provincial school system, comprised of public and separate schools, currently supports around 175,000 students and employs approximately 13,000 teachers (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2022). Presently, Saskatchewan has 27 publicly-funded school divisions, 18 public, eight separate, and one Francophone (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022a).[3] About half of the province's schools have been classified as rural (Hellsten et al., 2011).

As with other Canadian provinces, the provincial curriculum is officially the responsibility of the Minster of Education, who "develop[s], implement[s] and evaluate[s] elementary and secondary education policies" (Province of Saskatchewan, 1995, p. 17) and establishes educational goals (Scharf, 2006). With respect to assessment, renewed curricular documents include a short (typically one- to two-page) section on assessment titled *Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning*. In it, readers are informed that assessment and evaluation "require thoughtful planning and implementation to support the learning process and to inform teaching" and that "all assessment and evaluation of student achievement must be based on the outcomes in the provincial curriculum" (e.g. Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 35). The section also names and briefly describes the three "interrelated purposes of assessment"—assessment as, of, and for learning—and notes that assessment "involves the systematic collection of information about student learning with respect to achievement of provincial curricula outcomes, effectiveness of teaching strategies employed, [and] student self-reflection on learning" (p. 35).[4] Some curricular documents do include an extended discussion of how assessment might be taken up within a certain subject area. For example, the arts education curriculum for grades one through nine contains sections on a) assessing process and product, and b) recordkeeping, grading, and reporting, the former including an overview of portfolios and the latter, a section on rubrics. As another example, the health education curriculum for grades one through eight contains a sample assessment tool for one of the grade-specific outcomes (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010b, 2010c).

Outside of the curriculum, specific educational policies, including those pertaining to assessment, are the responsibility of individual SDs. These policies are to be outlined in an administrative manual, which is to include a "statement of the policies adopted, approved or authorized by the board of education" regarding "educational objectives, program development and provision of educational services in the school division" and the "general supervision and efficient management of the educational affairs of the school division" (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017b, p. 20). Saskatchewan does not have a provincial reporting system, having produced neither standard report cards nor proficiency scales, tasking SDs with this work. In effort to generate reporting systems that reflect the outcomes outlined in the renewed curriculum, a number of SDs have created four-point scales at the elementary level that target a student's progress toward meeting curricular outcomes. That said, the specific grades that use these scales and the labeling of levels vary by division. For example, Regina Catholic Schools' scale of *not yet meeting grade-level outcomes*, *beginning to meet grade-level outcomes*, *meeting grade level outcomes*, and *enriched understanding of the grade level outcomes* is in effect for students in grades one through eight; Good Spirit uses *beginning*, *approaching*, *meeting*, and *exemplary* for students from kindergarten to grade nine; and Christ the Teacher labels its levels *little evidence*, *partial evidence*, *sufficient evidence*, and *extensive evidence*, and has adopted the scale for students from grades one through nine (Christ the Teacher Catholic Schools, 2022; Good Spirit School Division, 2021; Regina Catholic School Division, 2016). At the secondary level, percentage and letter grades are more commonly used, though some divisions rely on hybrid models of outcomes and percentage grades (e.g. Saskatoon Public Schools, 2021) or use a four-point numeric scale from pre-kindergarten to grade 12 (e.g. Saskatchewan Rivers School Division, n.d.). Further complicating reporting, the Ministry has not completed curriculum renewal for all courses; for some grades and subject areas, SDs report achievement according to active but out-of-date curriculum documents that do not contain outcomes (e.g. Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1964, 1969, 1978, 1994, 1997, 1998).

To support assessment in the province, the Ministry of Education did produce an assessment handbook titled *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook* (1991).[5] The handbook was intended to serve as a "workshop manual," "self-learning unit" and *"guideline for developing a school policy on student evaluation* [emphasis added]" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1991, p. 3). At the time this research was conducted, the document was rather dated and aligned with an older version of the provincial curriculum. In May of 2022, the Ministry released *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan* (2022b), a "renewal" of the 1991 document (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022c) which aims to "provide research-based effective practices for classroom assessment," and "outline philosophical ideas and guiding principles for assessment in Saskatchewan classrooms" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b, p. 7). The Ministry is clear that the new assessment handbook is a "resource (not a policy)" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022c, p. 5).

Finally, it is important to note that Saskatchewan does not have standardized provincial exams, with the exception of departmental exams; in formal school contexts, departmental exams are only administered to grade 12 students who are completing one of eight subjects (English Language Arts A30, English Language Arts B30, Biology 30, Chemistry 30, Physics 30, Workplace and Apprenticeship Mathematics 30, Foundations of Mathematics 30, and Pre-Calculus) under the instruction of a non-accredited teacher (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022b). Departmental exams are more likely to be written by students in remote and rural schools where hiring and retaining certified teachers is a challenge (Stelmach, 2011).

Organizational Autonomy and the School Division

Leaving SDs responsible for creating educational policy might be suggestive of SD autonomy. In the context of K–12 education policy, *autonomy* is often used to refer to school-based regulatory autonomy, enhanced by moving decision-making powers from central administration to school administrators or in having schools opt out of central administrative regulatory structures altogether, typically in efforts to improve school performance at the local level (Clark, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Maslowski et al., 2007; Steinberg, 2014). Verhoest et al.'s (2004) six dimensions of autonomy framework can be helpful for understanding how autonomy operates within public organizations such as SDs. The framework could be classified as a "bottom-up" lens to apply to understanding the powers an organization has, focusing on the actual extent of its power in contrast with a top-down approach that can be used to ascertain the formal autonomy organizations possess (Bach, 2018). Verhoest et al. (2004) distinguished between autonomy as "decision-making competencies," and "the exemption of constraints on the actual use of decision-making competencies" (p. 108), with managerial and policy autonomy falling under the first umbrella, and structural, financial, legal, and interventional autonomy under the second. Decision-making competencies refer to the "scope" and "extent" of an organization's ability to make decisions about pertinent issues, where higher levels of autonomy translate into locating these decision-making capabilities within the organization itself, limiting the need to move outside of the organization (e.g. to the government) for prior approval. For the exemption of constraints on decision-making competencies, the focus is on the level of independence organizations have from external agencies, such as the government, to carry out their capacity to make decisions. The framework has been used to explore autonomy within international government organizations (Chikoto, 2009) and at the level of higher education (Enders et al., 2013). We extend its application here to SDs within a K–12 context.

For the purposes of this particular project, we focused on policy and financial autonomy, given our interest in classroom-based assessment policy in the province, and the relationship between funding and policy work. For policy autonomy, organizations can be classified as having a maximum, high, low, or minimum level. At one end of the spectrum, organizations with maximum autonomy are able to make their own decisions about "all aspects of policy, like objectives, policy instruments to use and processes" (Verhoest et al., 2004, p. 108). With a high level of autonomy, the organization might make its own decisions about policy instruments and output, but operate within the confines of the "objectives and effect norms set by the government" (p. 108). Organizations with low autonomy put policy established by the government, including "the structure and content of the production processes within the lines of the policy instruments, output norms, objectives and effect norms" into practice, whereas at the minimum level, decisions about policy are made by the government without any consultation from organizations (p. 108).

We initially interpreted SDs in Saskatchewan as having a high level of autonomy of agency with respect to assessment policy, insofar as the government sets objectives by way of the curriculum (the policy instrument), and the SD determines the particular policies that will be put in place regarding how assessment will be conducted. Given the decision-making powers granted to SDs, were it not for the curriculum, which puts constraints on SDs, we would classify SDs as maximumly autonomous, with the SD "decid[ing] itself upon all aspects of policy" (p. 108). Yet, the Ministry-produced handbook is a complicating factor, given that how it is conceptualized by SDs may impact their sense of autonomy. Though not a policy itself, as the framing suggests, the

handbook is intended to serve as a guide for SDs in the creation of their own assessment policies. In this respect, the handbook represents the Ministry's sanctioned approach to assessment, offering a set of guiding principles and practices for how assessment ought to be conducted throughout the province (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1991, 2022b). In fact, the 1991 handbook stipulates that it was designed to be used as "a guideline for developing a school policy on student evaluation" including "division student evaluation policies" (p. 3).[6] Under this interpretation, it is possible that SDs could conceive of their level of autonomy as low, as they construct assessment policy "within the lines of the policy instruments, output norms, objectives and effect norms set by the central government" (p. 108). Required to detail their own approaches to assessment within their administrative policies (APs), SDs could view the construction of the AP as simply putting directives outlined by the handbook into effect. Though this latter interpretation seems unlikely given the age of the document at the time this research was conducted, having a clear sense of whether the document is referenced by SDs, and what other materials are utilized in the construction of assessment policy could shed light on SDs' perceptions of their level of policy autonomy.

Regarding financial autonomy, according to Verhoest et al. (2004) organizations with maximum and high levels of autonomy are financed solely (maximum) or primarily (high) through their own funding sources, and are responsible for all (maximum) or most (high) of their deficits. With low- and minimum-level autonomy, organizations are funded mostly (low) or exclusively (minimum) by the central government, responsible for a minor amount (low) or none (minimum) of their deficit respectively. Organizations with minimal autonomy also have no ability to engage in fundraising.

In Saskatchewan, the provincial government introduced uniform mill rates in 2009, restructuring the collection and distribution of property taxes in efforts to address inequities in local tax wealth (Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Government of Saskatchewan, 2022a). This modification to the funding structure was widely viewed as a move to curtail SD autonomy in that divisions were no longer able adjust the percentage of property taxes allocated to education (Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Government of Saskatchewan, 2022a; Perrins, 2017).[7] Concerns about SD autonomy were raised again in 2017 with a controversial amendment to the Education Act which, among other things, granted the Minister of Education oversight of SDs' financial decisions in the name of provincial consistency (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017a; Martin, 2017). In recent years, funding has once again been in the limelight as the provincial government has been accused of "chronically underfunding education," with SDs forced to make cuts to personnel and services (MacPherson, 2022; Vescera, 2022). Currently, the Ministry of Education funds schools using a rather complex distribution model that takes into consideration costs associated with instruction, plant operation and maintenance, prekindergarten programming (when available), transportation, tuition fee expenses, tuition fee revenues, associate schools (if applicable), and debt repayment (Perrins, 2017; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2018). SDs are responsible for their own finances, insofar as boards of education, who manage schools within their geographically determined divisions, "mak[e] budget decisions for the funding they receive" (Perrins, 2016, p. 5). Yet, as this funding is provided exclusively by the government and SDs have no ability to extend funding beyond what they have been granted, we would classify SDs as minimally financially autonomous organizations.

Framework: Critical Policy Analysis

Critical policy analysis (CPA) was used as an overarching framework for this study. CPA emerged from a more critical approach to policy analysis that employs qualitative methods to call attention to the power structures at play in the creation and implementation of policy at a local level (Apple, 2019; Levinson et al., 2009; Lochmiller & Hedges, 2017). Scholars who have used CPA typically have an interest in questioning the nature, creation, and impact of policy (Diem et al., 2019; Diem et al., 2014), with a particular focus on one or more of these five areas of concern:

1. the "difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality;"

2. "the policy, its roots, and its development;"

3. "the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy 'winners' and 'losers';"

4. "social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege;" and

5. "the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of nondominant groups." (Young & Diem, 2017, p. 4)

At the heart of this project are questions about the impact of varying levels of policy and financial autonomy, and the interconnected nature of financing and policy creation. Centering the voices of those involved in the production and administration of assessment policy is important as a means of shedding light on how SDs understand their level of policy autonomy, highlighting the "practiced reality" of policy development. This approach also has the potential to spotlight practical challenges with creating policy amidst minimal financial autonomy. As Allen et al. (2021) have noted, producing policy is a rather complex process that requires time, training, and resources. Consequently, "the processes of writing and maintaining policy can be a significant burden on school leaders and their staff" who "are not always resourced or qualified to meet the demands required to effectively write or update school policy. … [U]sing research and evidence to improve practice is complex and skilled work that requires thoughtful engagement and appropriate evidence" (p. 2). Research has also demonstrated that rural schools, in particular, often lack resources, struggle to retain experienced administrators, and, more generally, have fewer professional development opportunities, owing to barriers of access, funding, and travel time (Cristall et al., 2020; Starr & White, 2008; Wallin, 2007). Given the number of rural schools in the province and vast differences between SDs regarding needs and populations served, we conceptualized the province's approach to assessment policy production and implementation as fundamentally tied to the availability of resources, with the potential to create a system of policy "winners and losers."

Methods

Data collection for this study was done in accordance with the university's policy on conducting research with human subjects. Participants consisted of school division superintendents who had assessment as part of their portfolios. All potential participants were recruited directly via email; superintendents at all twenty-six English-speaking school divisions in the province were contacted, with sixteen agreeing to an interview. Questions were provided prior to the interview. To maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this document.

Semi-structured interviews, conducted over Zoom, ranged in length from thirteen to forty-five minutes. As interviews were intended to be more conversational than structured, a strict interview protocol was not uniformly followed; instead, questions were offered in the spirit of the general flow of the conversation, with follow up questions and prompting used when appropriate. The data reported on here was extracted from a larger interview focusing on school divisions and their approaches to assessment. Ten questions were included in the interview protocol centering on three themes: approaches to assessment, teacher training and assessment, and the development of assessment policy. The third theme is the focus of this article. Specifically, superintendents were asked: a) whether they continue to use *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook* in their school division and what other assessment documents they reference; b) whether the size of their division and available resources impacts research around and the development of assessment policies and practices, and; c) their needs from the Ministry around assessment (see Appendix).

Responses to the three questions outlined above were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), using the six stages of thematic analysis: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) creating an initial coding scheme, 3) identifying themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining/naming themes, and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This particular approach was selected because it not only provides a flexible framework for conducting qualitative thematic analysis but also because it remains critical of themes being constructed from the data, providing an approach that is "diverse, complex and nuanced" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Initial coding and identification was conducted individually. During initial coding, both authors attempted to quantify responses to the first and second questions, determining for a) that twelve SDs did not continue to reference the handbook, two did, and that two superintendents did not respond to the question, and for b) that eight responded in the affirmative (that size and resources do impact policy-making), two in the negative, and five offered answers that were neutral (respondents either did not respond directly to the question or were ambiguous with their response). Coding was consistent between both authors at this stage. However, when authors came together to collaboratively review themes, they determined that this approach resulted in a rather shallow presentation of the data that undermined the very intent of thematic analysis, insofar as clear themes were not identified; moreover, although participants did not always reply directly to the question asked, their responses were rich and nuanced, offering a broader account of assessment in Saskatchewan schools. For this reason, the authors returned to the data, individually, to re-create a coding scheme and identify themes for all three questions. The following themes were identified in the second round of coding for the three questions that serve as the focus of this paper: a) age of the handbook, resources used, a new Ministry-produced document, Ministry-approved resource, autonomy, and merits (first author) and age of the document, need more research, and SD-produced assessment document (second author); b) time and cost of travel, available personnel, and will and motivation (first author), and equity issue, mitigation through technology, manpower, costs, and non-factor (second author); and c) updated policy, support for outcome-based reporting, departmental exams, data gathering, and other (first author), and updated policy and support documents, outcome-based reporting, provincial achievement rubric, tension between Ministry-specific direction and SD autonomy (second author). For the second round of collaborative review, the co-authors discussed the themes in detail, and arrived at the following themes, as a result of the defining/naming process: a) age of the handbook as a barrier, additional resources that guide assessment in SDs, a new Ministry-produced assessment document in development, SD autonomy and a Ministry-produced assessment document, and merits of the 1991 document; b) time and cost of travel, and mitigation through technology,

available personnel: development and implementation, and will and motivation; and c) updated policy and support documents, support for outcome-based reporting, eliminate departmental exams, data gathering and grades, and other. Finally, merits of the 1991 document, data gathering and grades, and other were omitted due to their lack of direct relevance to policy and financial autonomy.

Findings

Policy Autonomy and the Provincially-Produced Assessment Handbook

Age of the Handbook as a Barrier

For some superintendents, the age of the handbook did serve as a barrier to its use. Neil stressed that teachers required more guidance around contemporary best practices than the handbook offered, saying, "From a practical standpoint, we need to provide better clarity to our teachers by using some of the [current] research out there. … That document does go back to 1991." Oscar indicated that his SD references the handbook "rarely" as it is "a little outdated." Conversely, William and Addison noted that they do reference the document in their SDs, but suggested that its age was an issue, insofar as the document "hasn't changed in 30 years" (Addison). For William, having a Ministry-produced document on assessment could serve as a benchmark for schools and school divisions, but the age of this particular handbook presented a challenge in this regard:

> I do think it's important to … have something from the Ministry that [says], "here's the expected standard for the province. This is kind of what we're looking at and if your school or your school division isn't at this point, then maybe it might be an idea to do some research or some professional development around that to get to this point." But it's hard to go and do that [work] when you have a document that's older than some of our teaching staff.

Other superintendents did not explicitly critique the age of the document, but hinted at its datedness with reference to life events. Tiffany said that 1991 was "the year [she] graduated high school" and Patricia, that the handbook was "in place when [she] started [her] teaching career," acknowledging that "definitely things have changed [with respect to assessment] since then."

Additional Resources That Guide Assessment in SDs

Beyond the handbook, respondents called attention to the resources that do guide assessment practices in their divisions: the updated curriculum and documents produced by Saskatchewan-based organizations, division-led research on assessment, collaboration with other SDs, and resources from other provinces. With respect to the curriculum, Violet explained that her SD used "the first few pages of the [renewed] curriculum because we feel that that just does a better job of … outlining promising practice or best practice [around] assessment [than the handbook]." Eleanor mentioned Saskatchewan Reads' "full assessment section that is pertinent to any subject [and] any grade]" and resources produced by both the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and the Saskatchewan Federation of Teachers[8] as material utilized in her SD. Uma also confirmed that her SD referenced the "Sask[atchewan] Reads document … that talks about assessment."

Regarding research, Eleanor indicated that her SD has "done [their] own extensive research,"

and Tiffany, that her SD has engaged in "more current research … what we think is better practice for students," explaining that her SD's AP extends beyond the handbook: "we have all updated our admin[istrative] procedures around what we think is better practice for students and [we] move forward in that regard" (Tiffany). For Uma, research has involved consultation with assessment experts Damian Cooper and Ken O'Connor, as well as working "collaboratively with other school divisions." Curtis confirmed that "there's a lot of sharing going on amongst divisions."

Beyond work conducted in Saskatchewan, Uma admitted to turning to "Ontario for some ideas as well" and Oscar echoed this reliance on work out of Ontario: "They have an exceptional assessment document, and so we piggyback[ed] off that." Curtis expressed envy with regard to Ministry-produced assessment materials that other provinces have available to them:

> I have to admit, there's some jealousy when we are looking for assessment documents or guidelines, … when you do look at some other provinces, like your Albertas, Ontarios, even your Manitobas, that do have a provincial Ministry or Department of Education document, and in some cases a common report card, that is provided to school divisions.

A New Ministry-Produced Assessment Document in Development

Some superintendents made mention of a new Ministry-produced assessment handbook that was, at the time the research was being conducted, in production. Yet interestingly, responses demonstrated an overarching lack of clarity with regard to both the content of this new document and its phase of development, despite some divisions having been involved with its production.[9] Larry seemed to suggest that the document was new, not "a handbook per se or a guiding document like the past … [but] more like an assessment framework document." Conversely, Marissa, Patricia, and William believed that the handbook was a modified version of the 1991 document, referring to it as "a revision of the old one," a "renewal of the [1991] document," and a "redoing [of] this [earlier document]," respectively. Larry believed that the document had been constructed by way of Ministry consultation "with a few divisions … [with] seven or eight different members on that committee panel." Curtis was aware of initial conversations about a revised handbook at the Ministry-level, including a consultative process where "writers from each division … were asked to be part of [its development]," but said that he "ha[d not] heard anything since." Similarly, Tiffany heard, "there is a committee that has been working on updating that assessment document and apparently it's written, it just hasn't been published and shared with everybody;" William was under the impression that the handbook was in a draft stage, "currently stuck in purgatory somewhere where it's being field tested or something; … it hasn't been promoted or published or polished or anything like that" and Patricia, that the document was "[n]ever finished."

The Handbook as the Current Ministry-Approved Resource

Despite the age of the document, that it was the most current Ministry-approved resource on assessment meant, for some, that they were required to reference it. Addison explained:

> We have to reference it because it's a Ministry document. … do we go back and read it all the time? Absolutely not. But we won't put anything in [the AP] that would contradict or go against an ongoing

understanding [of] that [document]. … You continue to follow something until something different is written.

William noted that the document was cited in their administrative procedure, but not actively consulted in the SD:

Our admin[istrative] procedure [around assessment] actually references the … handbook because it's the last document. … So yeah the '91 document is referenced. There is a copy of it in my office. I looked at it once only because I was on that writing team. … We've kind of taken what we've needed out of it, and it lives within our admin[istrative] procedures.

SD Autonomy and a Ministry-Produced Assessment Document

Autonomy was noted as a concern for some with respect to a Ministry-produced assessment document. Though Curtis said he was envious of other provinces' assessment documents and reporting systems, or "the concept of one voice and one set of rules that everybody follows throughout a pre-K to 12 [system]" he also stressed the importance of "personal autonomy." Comparably, Danielle was interested in an updated "policy document" that would help reduce the burden on SDs to engage in their own research, but wanted it to be flexible, "not so strict that we wouldn't have that autonomy."

Financial Autonomy and the Creation and Implementation of Assessment Policy

Time and Cost of Travel and Mitigation Through Technology

The large geographical reach of school divisions was commonly cited as a barrier both to gathering groups of educators together and sending consultants to schools, specifically when considering travel time and associated costs. Patricia identified the cost of flights for consultants, in particular, as a "geographical concern" for her "massive school division," and Eleanor explained that size and in particular, distance, has a "huge impact" on a SD's ability to "bring together a cross-sampling of teachers" to engage in work such as creating "white papers on assessment and revamping the report card." Yasmin had similar concerns, noting, "our mileage and our hotels and our food budget alone kills us when we bring people together." Larry indicated that the government used to offset some of these costs through dispersion factor funding that "recognized the distances in certain divisions," but now, "it's … our [own responsibility to cover, as a division,] costs to deliver services to schools." In many respects, these differences between SDs regarding funding these services becomes an "equity issue" (Larry), especially when considered in conjunction with the work required of SDs to create their own assessment policies. Without the ability to "bring teachers together" (Yasmin), uptake of assessment policies is at risk, especially for remote and rural areas. As Yasmin indicated, cost "impacts a fair amount. … The transference for rural Saskatchewan is just not there."

Technology has been used by numerous SDs to mitigate cost and distance, and in many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic made reliance on technology necessary as people were not able to gather together in person. Larry explained, "that's maybe one of the positives with COVID; it forced us to use … Zoom or Google Meet." For Patricia, COVID pushed staff to enhance their competencies with technology, allowing for more virtual consultations:

> With COVID, one of the blessings … has been technology. … Now we have meetings with our social workers virtually, [and] live meetings with our EAs [and] TAs. All staff are quite competent [at using technology now], so the geography piece is less of a barrier when we can connect like this.

Similarly, for William, though the division decreased the number of staff, consultations increased "just because everybody's doing everything virtually now," and Danielle noted that rural school divisions are also "able to meet now virtually."

Available Personnel: Development and Implementation

At the development level, workload can increase for individuals responsible for conducting research and putting assessment material together, especially in smaller school divisions. Violet framed the production of school-division assessment handbooks as a "luxury" her SD is afforded because they are "quite fortunate to still have centralized staff, despite budget cuts." She acknowledged, however, that this was likely not the case for all SDs, that some "are probably at a disadvantage" when it comes to developing and implementing assessment policy, stressing that her centralized team is able to "look at the research out there and the resources, … [using this work] to guide [what is included in] our handbooks, rather than referenc[ing] an actual assessment handbook from the Ministry." Uma echoed these sentiments, focusing on the burden placed on smaller-sized SDs with little provincial support in the production of material, compared, in particular, to other provinces:

> In Ontario, for instance, and Alberta, when they rolled out the curriculum, the government spent a lot of money on making provincial rubrics, provincial report cards, provincial assessment policy, and all of that. In our province, they didn't do that. … So we had to spend many, many hours trying to [do this work ourselves]. … If you're a big school division or small school division you're expected to do the same amount of work. So, unfortunately we don't have the manpower that some divisions do.

At the level of implementation, staffing challenges can impact "reach for trying to get information out" as some divisions are "highly depend[ent] on people [being in] certain roles" (William). Having individuals who can move between schools is important for "build[ing] commonality across the system" (Marissa). Danielle's smaller rural SD, for example, lacks the "manpower," both the "in between level of consultants," who provide direct support in school contexts and in terms of her own ability to assist as a central administrator given that she wears multiple hats. This means that responsibility to implement assessment policy "lies heavily on … principals as instructional leaders" (Danielle). Addison also stressed the "importance of collaborative work in classrooms" adding that smaller school divisions are at an advantage in their ability to engage in the on the ground work to "make things happen." For Neil, training principals to do this work is vital, as "if your administrator truly understands good assessment practices and truly understands the impact that those good assessment practices have on student learning, then you're going to have a school that moves forward." Zoe argued that, ultimately, there were "pros and cons" to being a SD of either size with respect to funding and personnel:

> We all have limited resources, whether you have a big pot or small pot. The big pot just has to go to more people [and] the small pot goes to … fewer people. So, in "theory" (I use [this] word loosely), it's equal. In a larger school division, you have to rely on middle management, for lack of a better word,

being the voice of the message. [In smaller school divisions] [central administrators] are actually in the schools and working directly with the principal because they have no middle management. So they have an opportunity to be closer to ground level than in a larger school division.

Will and Motivation

For some, the will and motivation to research and develop assessment policies was also an important factor. For Tiffany, it overrode concerns about size and available resources, as "if it's something that's important you make it happen. … I just think it's about how much you value being current and ensuring that your assessment practices … align with what's best for students and what we think works well." For Beatrice, despite the fact that the "moral imperative of doing good things with kids is what [it] should be about," the availability of human resources does play a role in what is feasible within a SD. "When you're starting [with assessment policy development], to have a team that can actually focus on exactly this and put the time and energy into this is really, really important" (Beatrice).

Needs From the Province to Support Classroom-Based Assessment

Updated Policy and Support Documents

For a number of superintendents, an updated policy document around assessment was identified as a need, from the province, for best supporting meaningful assessment in the classroom. Oscar wanted "a refined document that is reflective of 2021 and where we are in the educational landscape, … extolling some fundamental assessment principles that all school divisions should be [following]." Danielle expressed desire for "a guide document … with some updated research and procedures in it." Violet was keen to have "a more up-to-date handbook" alongside "some new policies [and] some new support documents around assessment." Specifically, she suggested that the holistic rubrics offered for mathematics and writing were "on the right track" as they were "integrated right into the curriculum. I think that could be something that we could use as kind of a springboard to develop a handbook or some support for teachers around assessment and evaluation" (Violet).

An updated handbook was cited as particularly important for reducing SD workload. Marissa indicated that the new assessment document, allegedly in production, ought "to be finished" in order to support SDs in the creation of their own handbooks. She explained that the Ministry handbook frames the conceptual underpinning of how assessment is approached in SDs: "the first 20 or so pages of our handbook need to align with the Ministry one because it's more philosophical, the 'big idea' pieces. And then I think every school division figures out the 'how'" (Marissa). Similarly, for Danielle, a provincially-produced document would allow SDs to "update our policies, update our handbook, have that sort of guiding expert document to rely on rather than us going fishing. [It would help us] mak[e] sure our research is up to date." Curtis called for a "framework that would be consistent province-wide from which school divisions could build off and know what the expectations are." He also suggested that the Ministry continues to rely too heavily on SDs to engage in this work:

> [The Ministry] do[es] lean hard on school divisions to … create these [assessment materials] that maybe they adopt later on or they themselves put the seal of approval on. But it would be nice to have that

framework there that [offers] some kind of consistent practice … [so] we aren't necessarily having to do our own research, or beg, borrow, and steal from some of the other "have-provinces" in regards to some of these documents. (Curtis)

Finally, Patricia argued both that a province-wide policy around assessment is necessary to ensure that the Ministry and individual SDs are "on the same page," and that it ought to have already been created:

There's plenty of research out there, pointing us to what quality instruction and assessment looks like. But I think we're being very reactive right now. … Really you, the province, should be telling us, "this is what we are doing and it's based on research and best practice." I think they need to do their homework and come up with provincial documents that will guide the work of all of the school divisions.

Support for Outcome-Based Reporting

Outcome-based reporting was another area of support identified by respondents. William hinted at the need for one province-wide approach to reporting, explaining:

I'd like to have some kind of standardized expectation province-wide, because [right now] it's all division-specific. … There [have] been discussions for 10 years about outcome-based assessment versus strand-based assessment, and so, the government [should] … sa[y] "okay, we think that the best practice is for everyone to be doing this. This is going to be our expectation."

Neil indicated that Ministry support might aid teachers who have had difficulty both understanding outcome-based reporting themselves, and justifying their practices to parents:

I saw teachers struggling with trying to report on outcome-based reporting, not completely understanding it and having to try to defend it to parents who hate[] it; and them just falling back to old practices … because they didn't truly understand and there was no support there to say "here's what it really means."

Beatrice had a similar request to the Ministry to clarify expectations to parents, explaining:

It would be very helpful to have a provincial document that just says, "here's the structure and the format [of outcome-based reporting]." And I say that for lots of reasons, but one would be [for] when a parent says, I want [to see a grade of] 74% in grade two, because I know then how my kid measures up against other kids. We say in our division "we don't compare to other kids; everybody's compared to the outcomes." … But at the end of the day, if they don't like our answer, they go somewhere else to complain. But there's no document anywhere that says … "in Saskatchewan this is what assessment is."

Tiffany advocated for more direction around where students should be with respect to an outcome at any given time in the year:

What would be helpful to teachers, particularly in the primary [elementary] schools is, when you have those outcomes that do take that full year to achieve, it would be great to have a continuum that actually says, "this is what the learners should be able to do with this outcome at this point in time, and this is what it looks like at this point in time and here's some samples of the work that can support it." [The continuum would] take the mystery out of it.

At a more fine-grained level, Uma expressed a need for a standardized provincial achievement rubric to ensure consistency both across divisions and locally. Referencing a numeric grading scale, she explained:

> Unless you have a sure target, it is very hard [to establish] fairness in the province. We need some real defined targets to support teachers, especially new teachers that don't know what [achieving] a [level] three looks like in grade four [for example].

Finally, Zoe was interested in the Ministry funding a provincial group on assessment that could meet regularly for professional development, and possibly create a "best practice document." She said:

> Provide opportunities … two or three … a year where teachers can come together and do this, and have some professional development around assessment. But [it needs to be] the right kind of professional development where it aligns with some sort of best practice foundational document and a working document, a "how to" document as opposed to another curriculum companion document. (Zoe)

Eliminate Departmental Exams

The elimination of departmental exams was, for some superintendents, a way to best support meaningful assessment in the classroom. Larry used departmental exams as an example of a "traditional kind of polic[y] and structure[] [that has] really handcuffed [school divisions in] be[ing] able to provide that flexibility needed for students." Given that remote and rural schools have more difficulty than urban schools staffing classrooms with accredited teachers, Larry stressed that departmental exams "really discriminate[] against kids just because of where they live." Marissa called for the Ministry to "axe departmental exams" seeing "no purpose in them." She further emphasized that departmental exams were on hold for a few years due to COVID, without any recourse. Uma did not explicitly call for their elimination, but did point out that departmental exams, and final exams generally, "go[] against best practice" insofar as they "put [too] much weight on [demonstrating] student learning [through] one exam."

Discussion

This study calls attention to challenges faced by SDs regarding the creation of assessment policy in a province that, at the time this work was conducted, lacked an up-to-date Ministry-produced assessment document. We focus our discussion on three overarching themes that emerged from the interviews: a tension between policy creation at the SD level and within the Ministry, the impact of higher policy autonomy and lower financial autonomy on policy development and implementation, and a desire for provincial guidance.

Tension: Policy Autonomy and Ministry-Based Assessment Work

A tension was evident between policy creation at the SD level and the within the Ministry around classroom-based assessment. It is clear that SDs feel responsible for creating their own assessment policies to include within their administrative procedures, as is evidenced by their reliance on their own research and collaborative work with other SDs; applying the organizational

autonomy framework, this finding suggests that superintendents do believe that SDs possess high levels of policy autonomy (Verhoest et al., 2004). Yet, at the same time, the role of Ministry with respect to their influence on classroom-based policy production remains unclear. Many superintendents indicated that the 1991 handbook was defunct in their SDs, with the exception of two who felt that the handbook needed to be referenced within administrative policies as it served as the most current Ministry-produced document. The latter signals that for some superintendents, their perception of their SD's capacity for policy autonomy may be less than others. Additionally, with respect to policy autonomy, the exact extent of consultation from SDs in the production of a new Ministry-based assessment handbook was nebulous, with superintendents offering inconsistent accounts regarding its content and when it might be released. These two factors, the perceived weight of the handbook as a policy-influencing document and more minimal levels of consultation from SDs in policy production, may indicate that some superintendents conceptualize their SD's level of policy autonomy as rather low.

Clarity from the Ministry regarding the exact level of policy autonomy SDs possess in Saskatchewan is crucial given the fundamental role SDs play in supporting teaching and learning within individual schools, coupled with differences in how SDs engage with research to inform policy (Honig et al., 2017). Moving forward, if SDs are to conduct their own research to ground assessment policy, they may require research-focused training, along with explicit guidance around to what extent APs ought to align with the Ministry-sanctioned "research-based effective practices for classroom assessment" and the "philosophical ideas and guiding principles for assessment in Saskatchewan" located within their new assessment guide (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b, p. 7). Though AP alignment with the province's assessment guide is a notable gap in the research, and an important next step given the publication of the new document, a recent examination of APs across the province has demonstrated that the policies are internally and externally inconsistent in how they take up contemporary assessment principles (Hébert & LeNouail, 2023).

The Impact of Higher Policy Autonomy and Lower Financial Autonomy on Policy Development and Implementation

By and large, superintendents believed that some SDs were disadvantaged in their capacity to develop and implement assessment policy, citing a number of pertinent factors including the windshield time required to both access and bring individuals together from geographically dispersed schools, and differences in availability of personnel from central administration to engage in this type of work. Though the suggestion was made that the will to design meaningful and effective assessment policies should be of primary concern, the size of SDs and the resources available were referred to as an equity issue in the development of assessment policies and practices, particularly for remote and rural school divisions who might struggle to engage in policy creation and implementation owing to disparities in how funding must be allocated (Preston et al., 2018). Technology may, in some respects, offer a solution to time and cost of bridging distance in some of these divisions, though, it will not address personnel concerns or on the ground support required for implementation. A provincially-produced assessment policy would lessen the financial pressure on SDs.

Provincially-funded training around such an assessment policy, targeted specifically at teachers, would also ensure that high-quality professional development opportunities are being provided in all SDs. This move is particularly important for rural and remote schools, addressing

previously identified gaps in access to professional development, while disrupting the "train-the-trainer" model wherein only administrators are provided access to professional development opportunities, thus directly targeting retention strategies around community-building and collaboration while attempting to mitigate isolation (Cruise, 2012; Janzen & Cranston, 2015; Preston & Barnes, 2018).

Desire for Provincial Guidance

SDs seemed keen on being provided with some formal guidance on assessment policy from the Ministry, including additional support for outcome-based reporting, a provincial reporting system, the elimination of departmental exams, and an updated handbook. Superintendent responses highlight not only the inextricability of assessment and instruction, but the extent to which the objectives established by the government further restrict assessment and reporting processes. Ministry support would provide clarity for SDs around how assessment ought to be reported using the Ministry-produced curriculum; clarity is especially important given that many teachers have struggled to not only implement standards-based grading, but also to conceptualize the extent to which it represents a substantive shift away from more traditional approaches to grading (Guskey, 2009; O'Connor, 2018). Beyond the classroom, assessment literacy must be inclusive of school administrators, in order for elements of outcome-based assessment (e.g. assessment for learning) to be effectual (Engelsen & Smith, 2014).

High-stakes standardized assessments such as departmental exams have the potential to erode assessment literacy insofar as they are incongruous with many of the principles of standards-based assessment, namely, an emphasis on learning over performance, and a framing of assessment as an element of the learning process rather than its terminal act (Brookhart, 2017). It might also be difficult for SDs to align departmental exams with research-informed APs, given that research has demonstrated that standardized tests disproportionately disadvantage racialized, marginalized, and low-income students, increasing levels of stress and anxiety for test takers, negatively impacting students' sense of self, narrowing learning outcomes within classrooms, and segregating school populations (Eizadirad, 2019; Kearns, 2011; Rezai-Rashti & Lingard, 2021). Departmental exams are also inappropriate measures of student learning when administered to Indigenous students in rural and remote communities, evaluated in a language that is not necessarily their mother tongue (Macqueen et al., 2019), and according to "Westernized and Eurocentric educational standards of success" (Domoff et al., 2023, p. 1).

Finally, regarding the handbook, that SDs resort to assessment policies produced by other provinces, and in fact, reference other provinces' assessment documents in the production of their own assessment-based administrative policies, might also be interpreted as a call for more Ministry support.

Limitations and Future Directions

A number of limitations are present in this study. First, our account of superintendents' perceptions of SDs' policy and financial autonomy would have been strengthened by using this framework more explicitly during interviews. Yet, this exploratory study was not initially framed by organizational autonomy. Second, data collection was limited to interviews with superintendents. Consequently, we were unable to speak to how assessment policies are enacted at the school or classroom level. Relatedly, we did not include the voices of important stakeholders

such as principals and classroom teachers. Doing so was simply beyond the scope of this study. Third, this text does not offer a careful analysis of either the Ministry-produced *Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook*, or any of the assessment policies produced by individual school divisions. As noted, an analysis of school division policies serves as the basis for another text (Hébert & LeNouail, 2023). Fourth, the new *Supporting Student Assessment in Saskatchewan* document, published by the Ministry while this article was under review, will shape future conversations about assessment in the province. The document supersedes the 1991 handbook, and may serve as the basis of division assessment policies moving forward. The Ministry has reponded to at least one need identified by superintendents in publishing it. That said, what we offer in this text is an important snapshot of challenges superintendents face as they engage with assessment policy, at a particular moment in time.

Conclusion

The Ministry's production of a new, updated, assessment handbook is a step in the right direction, insofar as the resource could reduce the amount of time SDs spend conducting research on assessment. SDs' reliance on other provinces' assessment policies suggests the importance and use of such documents in policy construction. Yet, devoid of a current Ministry-produced assessment handbook and supplementary resources, SDs continue to be tasked with development and implementation of their own assessment-specific administrative policies. Remote and rural schools in particular seem to be at a disadvantage in terms of the resources they have to attend to this work, specifically, bringing people together and sending administrators to schools to support implementation. Though more resource-rich divisions may be able to provide detailed, current, and research-informed assessment policies and adequate support for classroom-based assessment, other SDs may be left without; that said, as budget cuts to education continue, we may see, overall, more policy "losers" than "winners".

It has been suggested that provincial assessment policies promote a top-down and standardized approach to assessment, one that ignores the local needs of individual SDs and schools (Parker, 2019). Yet, research around how school divisions engage in change and implement new initiatives has attempted to dismantle this top-down/bottom-up binary, highlighting that policy change and support can be both externally imposed and internally adapted to meet local needs (Anderson & Togneri, 2005). Similarly, a Ministry-produced policy need not result in standardized assessment at the local level as, to paraphrase Ball (1993), what is intended of a policy is not always what is enacted. To assume standardization as a response to or consequence of policy production ignores the role of readers in interpreting and adapting such texts; as Ball (1993) explained, "action ... is not determined by policy in the sense of an absolute uniformity across settings. Solutions to the problems posed by policy texts will be localized and should be expected to display ad hocery and messiness" (p. 13). In the case of Saskatchewan, the exact role of a Ministry-produced assessment "resource" in the creation of assessment policy seems to be unclear. Perhaps more importantly, in considering the voices of those engaged in the practiced reality of policy construction, superintendents have expressed a desire for more support from the Ministry, along with more clarity regarding the development of Ministry-produced assessment documents. With school division needs in mind, it might be time for the province to re-think the role of the provincially-produced assessment handbook, and to reconsider the amount of policy autonomy and financial autonomy afforded to SDs.

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Notes

1. For provincial reporting systems, see: British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019; Government of Quebec, 2011; Manitoba Education, 2021; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Child Development, 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022; The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021a, 2021b; Yukon Department of Education, 2017

2. For policies, directives and/or framework documents from other provinces, see British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016; Manitoba Education, 2006; Northwest Territories Ministry of Education Culture and Employment, 2010; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021; Nunavut Department of Education, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021a, 2021b; Yukon Department of Education, 2019.

3. Saskatchewan also funds certain qualified independent schools (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022c).

4. The province's English Language Arts curriculum provides the most detailed overview of assessment, containing a series of rubrics that specify achievement levels for the various curriculum goals (e.g. Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, 2010). A companion document for the English Language curriculum grades 1-3 titled *Saskatchewan Reads* was also produced by a provincial reading team, comprised of members from 11 SDs, Treaty Six Education Council, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, and Prince Albert Grand Council Education "with contributions from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education" (Saskatchewan Provincial Reading Team, 2015, p. 2). The document contains information about assessment, specifically, definitions of assessment for, as, and of learning, four principles of

assessment, a set of language-arts specific reflection questions around assessment, and a list of possible assessment tools to use for observation and data collection.

5. Saskatchewan also participated in the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, which developed *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind: Assessment for Learning, Assessment as Learning, Assessment of Learning* (Western and Northern Canadian Protocol, 2006). Though the document serves as the foundation for Manitoba's guiding assessment document, it has not been implemented in any official capacity in Saskatchewan.

6. The updated handbook is less explicit in its function pertaining to policy development, indicating, as noted, that it provides evidence-based practices for assessment, and offers "philosophical ideas and guiding principles for assessment in Saskatchewan classrooms" (p. 7).

7. Separate schools are still permitted to set their own levy mill rates, though if higher than that set by the province, funding from the province will be adjusted accordingly (Garcea & Munroe, 2014; Government of Saskatchewan, 2022a).

8. The Saskatchewan Federation of Teachers is the union that represents all teachers in the province.

9. Representatives from twenty-one of the province's twenty-seven publicly funded school divisions are listed as members of either the reference or writing committee (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2022b).

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Appendix: Interview Questions

School Divisions

1. What is your school division's approach to assessment?

2. How, if at all, does the size of your division and the resources you have available impact your research and development around assessment policies and practices?

3. The provincial document that speaks explicitly to assessment is the Student Evaluation: A Teacher Handbook document, published in December of 1991. Based on your understanding, is this a document that is still being used by educators in your board? What other policy documents do educators in your board reference re. assessment?

4. What, in your view, do you need from the province to best support meaningful assessment in the classroom?