

## **DO BRITISH COLUMBIA'S RECENT EDUCATION POLICY CHANGES ENHANCE PROFESSIONALISM AMONG TEACHERS?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Beginning with the Sullivan Royal Commission on Education in 1988, British Columbia (BC) teachers experienced a policy context that led to a decade of intense professional learning around innovative instructional strategies and curriculum. From 2001 on, the policy context changed considerably. There has been a flurry of changes designed to bring about both a cultural and economic re-structuring of the school system and significant changes to the professional side of teaching. This study reports on teachers' perceptions of these policy changes to ascertain the extent to which the changes have impacted on the opportunities available to teachers to engage in professional collaboration.

It was found that teachers still reported some satisfaction with work structures conducive to collaboration but that the kinds of activities they engaged in were largely done around the edges of the school day. Teachers reported infrequent engagement in those tasks that require teachers to be committed to the kind of joint instructional task

that is often associated with deep collaborative professional learning. This contrasted considerably with what previous studies had found evident in professional collaboration during the 1990s. The study also found differences between more and less experienced teachers. Both groups reported experiencing structural impediments to collaborative professional learning but, whereas this state of affairs frustrated more experienced teachers, less experienced teachers did not show a similar openness to activities emphasizing group work.

The study concludes that the rapid policy shifts, diminishing financial support, and class size regulation changes have all contributed to a different form of socialization for today's beginning teachers than their more experienced counterparts had to face during professional induction. Since British Columbia faces unprecedented levels of retirement up till 2010, this could mean that we could be witnessing a shift in the professional attitudes of teachers who will constitute the body of the future workforce. This change toward a narrower conception of professionalism constrained by fiscal efficiency and accountability prevents us from talking glibly about professional learning and confronts us with a stark choice between *politically* fighting to protect professional learning as a core component of teaching in an era of diversity or *pragmatically* reconsidering what professional learning means within a policy context that reframes teachers' work as a labour relationship.

## Background

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British Columbia (BC) experienced an era of policy changes that led to educational renewal. The policy changes had their genesis in the report of a Royal Commission<sup>1</sup> on Education (1988). Less than six months after the release of the Commission's report, the provincial government had made a public commitment of major funding over a ten-year period to implement the Commission's recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> There were probably many factors that contributed to the Provincial Government's decision to initiate a Royal Commission on Education and it is not unreasonable to believe that some of these reasons might have had less to do with education than with the overall political objectives of the government. However, the publicly stated motivation for this major initiative was simply that it was long overdue because there had been no systematic review of the educational system in British Columbia since the last Royal Commission in 1960. The terms of reference for the Commission indicated: "British Columbia today faces unprecedented challenges as the result of fundamental economic and technological change. The Government has concluded, therefore, that it is timely to clearly evaluate where we are going in education and to select the most appropriate and cost-effective means of meeting our objectives." (BC Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 4)

New programs were designed to respond to a combination of societal and educational changes. Societal changes included such things as new roles for women, new family structures, increasing cultural diversity, dramatic changes in political and economic patterns at the global level, rapid advances in technology and growing concerns with the environment and sustainable economic development. Educational changes included increased attention to such topics as direct teaching of thinking and learning strategies, fostering student meta-cognition, promoting creative and critical thinking, tapping the power of social learning, developing social responsibility in students, and the various innovations in education which have addressed these new appreciations such as process writing, literacy instruction, cooperative learning, case study approaches, strategic instruction and the use of new technology. The framework of principles and goals proposed to guide the development of these programs and to lead the public education system in British Columbia into the next millennium was outlined in *Year 2000: A Framework for Learning* published by the Ministry of Education in May 1990.

In order to "enable learners" to develop the characteristics of an educated citizen, the framework suggested that the school system focus on three major goals of intellectual development, human and social development, and career development. These goals were to be attained in collaboration with parents and the community. These goals were paralleled by a set of five principles for schooling.

1. Learning requires the active participation of the learner.
2. People learn in a variety of ways and at different rates.
3. Learning is both an individual and a social process.
4. Curriculum and assessment should be learner focused.
5. Assessment and reporting should help students make informed choices.

The first three principles related to the learner. The fourth principle related to curriculum, which was considered to include both intended learning outcomes and planned learning activities. The fifth principle related to assessment, which was considered to include all the formal and informal techniques used to gather information at the school, district or provincial level. Assessment was distinguished from evaluation

but the document indicated that the central aim of both should be to help the child to learn.

The educational programs to be constructed on the basis of the defined goals and principles were divided into three separate programs according to the age of the learners. British Columbia had never had such program documents before. Curriculum had often been interpreted to mean a finely specified, sequentially prescribed body of topics and learning outcomes that all students must address. An important shift expressed in the new programs was a move away from viewing curriculum as "ground to be covered," or something to be "delivered," to a broader concept of curriculum that begins with a focus on the learner. The former view neglected the extent to which students' needs, interests and choices affect learning experiences. It also ignored the manner in which curriculum is shaped by teachers' expertise and judgments. The intended change could therefore be characterized by the expectation that teachers would become curriculum builders rather than curriculum deliverers. Beginning with the mission to "enable learners," the *Year 2000* outlined a learner-focused curriculum intended to support all students as successful learners within a flexible and responsive education system. While establishing clear principles and high expectations, the *Year 2000* promoted decentralized decision-making and local educational initiative. This vision of K-12 education had the potential to vastly improve both teaching and learning in the province. However, it was also an ambitious and challenging program that required significant professional creativity and dedication on the part of teachers implementing it. Not surprisingly, a good deal of professional collaboration took place in the province during this policy period to meet such challenges.<sup>2</sup> This professional collaboration supported groups of teachers who came together to inquire in a focused way into issues of curriculum, teaching, and student learning.

Several studies investigated the professional learning of BC teachers during the 1990s. Erickson (1991), Dockendorf (1992), Grimmett (1993, 1996), MacKinnon (1996),

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the *Year 2000* was but one of several influences on the lives of British Columbia teachers. Beairto (1995) noted three others that were particularly noteworthy. They were the inclusion of children with special needs, the rapid increase in the number of students with English as a second language, and the organizational change from professional association to union on the part of the Teachers' Association.

Erickson and Brandes (1998) documented different forms of teacher collaboration: *teacher networks*, that comprised facilitative leadership and collaborative learning approaches; *teacher research*, that featured voluntary participation, a balance between respect for and challenge of perspectives, and teacher ownership of focus and methods; *teacher study groups*, that had agendas of common interest to the participants typically focusing on teaching strategies, subject-matter content, and discussing research; and *school-university partnerships*, that included university professional programs and teacher research projects linking issues of theory with problems of practice. The studies showed how collaboration during this period served as an innovative redirection of teachers' learning around curriculum policies, culminating in Grimmett and Dockendorf's (1999) phenomenological characterization of this kind of learning as an exciting exploration of the uncertain maze ways of a professional labyrinth. In addition, Patriarca and Lamb (1994), Anderson (1996), and Quigney (1998) showed how collaboration led to professional decision-making around inclusion in BC classrooms, and Yore (1997) displayed how collaboration played an important role in BC elementary school science classrooms. Thus, the open nature of educational renewal in the 1990s both invited and spawned professional collaboration among teachers. While the same mission, principles of learning, and curriculum guides are still in place, however, policy changes since 2001 have shifted the emphasis toward a tighter understanding of curriculum delivery.

### **Fast Forward to 2001 and Beyond**

Many challenges now face BC educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some arise from demographic changes. In addition to a diversification of the student population, the province has experienced a substantial turnover in its teaching workforce. Building on Grimmett and Echols's (2002) documentation of 8,172 retirements between 1995 and 2001, Hawkey (2007) showed that between 2001 and 2006 inclusive, roughly 1400 teachers in the province retired each year (8,306 over the six years). She thus predicted that, with approximately 36% (12,336) of the 33,385 provincial teacher workforce in 2006-2007 being older than 50, there would continue to be high retirement rates until 2010. Moreover, increased changes in student diversity and learning needs, accompanied by the public press for standards and accountability

systems (Lessard & Brassard, 2005), have all created pressure for educators to continually learn and adapt their practice. Numerous studies demonstrate that professional learning communities can be a powerful force in enabling teachers to implement the kind of school reform that leads to improved student learning outcomes such as those asked for in the *Year 2000* documents (Alvarado, 1998; Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Resnick & Hall, 1998). But, as Mitchell and Sackney (2001, p. 1) point out, “simply charging them [educators] with this responsibility will not necessarily bring about the types of profound improvement that are envisioned”. Rather, they argue for the deliberate and explicit building of three pivotal capacities—personal capacity, interpersonal capacity, and organizational capacity—that foster student learning-oriented professional learning communities in schools.

The question this paper seeks to address is: Do the recent British Columbia education policy changes enhance or impede these capacities among teachers? Using a subset of data from a five-year investigation (2002-2007) of teachers and principals across Canada, we examine the extent to which building capacity for professional learning is affected by the perceived impact of numerous policy changes on the working conditions of educators in metropolitan Vancouver. What, then, has happened in the BC Education policy context since the 1990s, specifically in the last seven years?

### **The BC Education Policy Context<sup>3</sup>**

Since 2001 there has been a flurry of changes in provincial education policy in British Columbia. Two different themes are initially evident in the policy context of the province. One is a trend toward economic and cultural restructuring guided by worldwide pressures of globalization and heavily influenced by a neo-liberal worldview emphasizing individual enterprise, free-market competition, privatization, and deregulation. A second is an emphasis on restructuring the professional side of teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws on the nascent work undertaken by Chan, Fisher, and Rubenson (2004) but the organization and categorization of policy initiatives and their effects come from our subsequent analysis.

## **Cultural and Economic Restructuring**

In 2002, the BC government released the report of a Select Standing Committee on Education. This report, *A Future For Learners*, concluded that the system was over-regulated and encumbered by collective agreements, and called for greater accountability and more meaningful involvement of learners, parents and community members. Its arguments became the platform for several policies introducing economic and cultural changes.<sup>4</sup>

## **Economic Changes**

Within weeks of being elected in 2001, the government signaled its intentions by moving quickly to introduce changes to the funding formula for education. Previously, the formula was quite complicated with a base allocation that was supplemented by numerous additional grants, e.g., for English as a Second Language (ESL), special education, etc. The new formula was a simplified approach to education funding in which all funding for each district was comprised of an increased base allocation per enrolled student, with no additional grants. This change in the funding formula sparked considerable debate about whether or not educational provision for ESL, Aboriginal education, and students with special learning needs had been reduced. The government's rebuttal was that boards could now fund such provision from their increased student base allocation envelope.

Considerable debate ensued about whether or not these changes led to an actual reduction of education funding. From the government's perspective, the ostensible commitment was to give school boards more flexibility, autonomy and control over the delivery of education services. Relative to this commitment, the government could justifiably claim that they had increased the funding for schools because they had increased the per-student amount. But from the schools' perspective, it was also true that, in terms of real spending dollars, the funding for most school districts had been reduced for a number of reasons. First, the overall student enrolment in the province

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<sup>4</sup> Although this report followed the initial policy changes enacted in 2001, it provided an after-the-fact justification for those policies, as well as the ones that followed from 2002 on.

was decreasing, something confirmed by White (2008) who documents that student enrolment declined by 6% between 2001 and 2006, thus reducing funding based on per-student allocation. Second, changes to government funding resulted in a dollar-amount reduction of funds targeted for ESL and diversity, a reduction that White (2008) analyzes as a decrease of 175 FTE since 2001. Third, changes to government funding also reduced the amount of funds targeted for special education leading to a reduction of 572 FTE between 2001 and 2006 (White, 2008). Fourth, *The Education Services Collective Agreement Act* (2001) imposed a process for a collective agreement between the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and British Columbia Public Employers' Alliance (BCPEA), ultimately transferring the costs of the third year of a 7.5 % mandated settlement to districts whose budgets the government had already frozen in October 2001 (Comeau, 2002). Fifth, in March 2002, the government transferred \$50 million in capital debt servicing expenses to school boards, and informed school boards that they had to cover the increases in Medical Service Payments (MSP) premiums (health insurance) in their regular operating grants. These cost increases meant that up to one-third of a billion dollar costs for schools across the province would not be met by government funding (Comeau, 2002). Hence, school districts were forced to cut costs and reduce services, because they were not legally permitted to run a deficit.

### **Cultural Changes**

Accompanying these economic changes were cultural restructuring policies that focused on making districts, schools and teachers more accountable, including changes in standards and testing and the creation of district accountability contracts. *The School Board Flexibility Bill* (2002) established School Planning Councils with parental representation as a way of promoting greater accountability and increasing parent and community involvement. This legislation built on the tenor of the report *A Future For Learners* (2002) but, in providing the School Planning Councils with limited representation (i.e., the principal, one teacher, and three parents), the legislation essentially freed districts from broader consultation processes with their constituency groups. At the same time, *The School Board Flexibility Bill* (2002) paved the way for shifts in the Ministry's relationship with districts. The legislation stated that there would be fewer regulations, i.e., deregulation, and greater autonomy for districts with ultimate



fiscal accountability being decentralized to the district school boards. Boards, in turn, were given “flexibility” and “autonomy” to make decisions about capital funds and encouraged to become more entrepreneurial in marketing their resources, particularly in “offshore schools.”<sup>5</sup> Accountability would be monitored through the creation of and negotiation around written documents called “accountability contracts” in which districts lay out their educational plans that are to be based in a review of data at their disposal, including (though not limited to) achievement data. In a very real sense, then, these measures were a way of declaring that the Ministry would intervene more actively when they determined such action necessary.

*The Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act (2002)* was subsequently passed to address the system’s perceived overregulation and collective agreement constraints. It gave local school boards management flexibility in their governance, giving them the powers to determine class size, class composition, and staffing. Previously, each school board decided what the maximum class size in their district would be (it was often part of the negotiated local collective agreement) and this limit applied to all classes. Under this new legislation, the *province* set a limit on *average* class size per district. Boards were then free to vary class size significantly across the district, provided they comply with the district’s average class size limit set by the government. Because it changed class sizes previously negotiated in local agreements, this Act proved to be highly controversial for most educators and was publicly debated and contested in many quarters.

### **Re-Structuring the Professional Side of Teaching**

At the same time as enacting policy to restructure the cultural and economic aspects of the system, the government also strove to restructure the professional side of teaching. *The Teaching Profession Amendment Act, 2003*, was legislation that changed the British Columbia College of Teachers’ (BCCT) structure. It had originally been established by legislation in 1989 but its Council was deemed by the government to have fallen into the hands of the union. In addition, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act required

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<sup>5</sup> “Offshore schools” are educational institutions outside of Canada that deliver the BC provincial curriculum. While these offshore schools can make money for the districts that support them, they also represent a potential drain on district staff time.

the College to develop standards of practice. *The Skills Development and Labour Statutes Amendment Act* (2001) made education an essential service, thereby taking away the union's "right to strike". Thus, it appeared to many educators that the government's re-structuring was primarily informed by political ideology rather than by a deep understanding of the needs of the profession.

Ultimately, these two aspects of the policy context—increased accountability with de-regulation and restructuring the professional side of teaching—are not that different when looked at fiscally and politically. Fiscally, both have amounted to fewer resources available to districts and schools to fund the various educational services they offer. Politically, the government's drive to make the system more accountable has been behind many of the economic de-regulation and professional restructuring policies. In effect, the government has been intent on curtailing the power and influence of the teachers' union both as a means of improving the functioning of districts and schools, and as a way of increasing professional standards and practice in the ranks of teachers. This has led to the situation in which critics, most notably the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), have interpreted the government's financial restructuring and de-regulation emphasis as undermining the professional side of teaching (Schaefer, 2003). They have disseminated the view that these government policies have begun to mobilize forces of de-professionalization in the province. Such a view suggests that de-regulation and de-professionalization work against opportunities for teacher collaboration. The question this paper seeks to address thus becomes whether or not metropolitan Vancouver educators view the government-initiated changes in this way and, if they do, to what extent do these perceptions impede opportunities for professional learning communities.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Twenty-five years ago, Little (1982) provided an early example of how powerful professional collaboration can be when she showed that the successful implementation of an innovative program was linked with norms of collegiality and experimentation within a school. Later in that decade, Rosenholtz (1989) found a strong relationship between the structures, norms, and pattern of interactions in the work communities of

schools and the potential for the kind of teacher development that positively influenced student learning. This prompted Fullan (1991) to call for policy initiatives to "redesign the workplace so that innovation and improvement are built into the daily activities of teachers" (p. 353).

What then is the relationship between professional learning communities and student achievement? Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) reported findings on 11,000 students enrolled in 820 re-structured secondary schools across the USA. In those schools that were characterized as professional learning communities, the educators had worked together to transform their classroom pedagogy. They engaged students in high intellectual learning tasks, and the students in turn achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history and reading than students in more conventionally organized schools. Moreover, the achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds were smaller in these "learning community" schools than in conventional ones. These strong results came about because teachers held themselves accountable for student learning and shared a collective responsibility for the success of students.

Professional learning communities thus encourage teacher consideration of curriculum goals and their meaning relative to the students and the subject matter they teach. Such opportunities provide substantive support for the transformation of teaching because, as McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) have reported, teachers' ideas of good teaching and classroom practice are defined in discussion with colleagues. Neumann and Wehlage (1995) summed it up this way:

The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities: that is, they found a way to channel staff and students efforts towards a clear and commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the purpose; and teachers in those schools took collective responsibility for student learning. Schools with strong professional communities were better able to offer authentic pedagogy and were more efficient in promoting student achievement. (p. 3)

What, then, makes up the interconnections, mutual influences, and dynamic relationships that Mitchell and Sackney (2001, p. 1) characterize as being at work in professional learning communities? Neumann and Wehlage (1995) suggested that teachers need a collective vision of high quality student intellectual work. They need to facilitate this high quality work by using the kind of pedagogy that brings the vision to life in their classrooms. The school's organizational capacity must reinforce the kind of professional community that promotes such quality learning and pedagogy. And, to be effective, professional learning communities need financial, technical, and political support from administrators and policy makers, particularly those external to the organization.

These descriptions of teacher professional learning communities can be seen as an ideal toward which schools and districts would aim, particularly when they implement rich and challenging instructional programs such as those outlined in the *Year 2000* documents. The question this paper seeks to address thus becomes: To what extent do the perceived effects of policy changes strengthen or undermine educators' perceptions of their professional capacities to collaborate with colleagues in ways that focus on improving student learning? That is, to what extent do teachers perceive the current conditions as those that foster such professional collaboration and to what extent and in what ways do teachers engage in professional collaboration? To this end we summarize data from teacher questionnaires and interviews about their engagement with and experiences of collaboration in their schools, their major concerns as educators, and the educational policies they feel affect their work most.

## Method

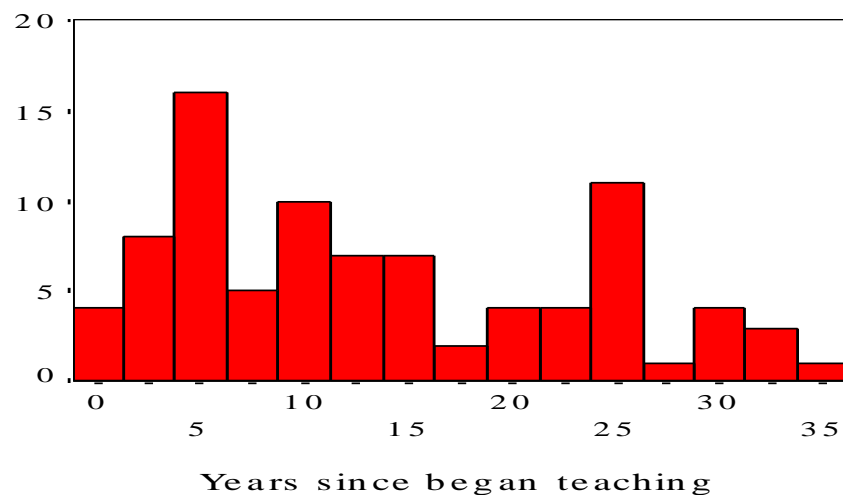
The inquiry reported here is part of a larger study, *Current Trends in the Evolution of School Personnel in Canadian Elementary and Secondary Schools*.<sup>6</sup> Research ethics approval was acquired at each university involved in the larger study. We report on data and findings from the Vancouver area site only.

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<sup>6</sup> The larger study is a five-year investigation (2002-2007) supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through its Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Program to study the working conditions of teachers and principals across Canada.

## Sample

A nested case study design was used for collecting a sample of 102 teachers and principals. Four districts in the metropolitan Vancouver area of British Columbia were contacted to solicit their agreement to participate. These included three large urban school districts, together with a province-wide district that encompasses all Francophone schools. All four districts selected are situated in large urban areas, with schools of widely ranging sizes, ethnic, and socio-economic settings.<sup>7</sup> The analysis reported here involved the responses of 90 teachers out of the 8,362 employed in these four metropolitan Vancouver districts.<sup>8</sup> There has been some attrition in the study, with approximately 9% of the participants not responding to the second questionnaire. Only those participants who filled out questionnaire #1 were interviewed.



**Figure 1: Number of years since began teaching<sup>9</sup>**

The metropolitan Vancouver sample includes teachers with a wide range of teaching experience ( $M = 14.4$ ,  $SD = 9.6$ ), but is skewed somewhat toward less experienced

<sup>7</sup> While the Francophone district encompasses the entire province, the schools and educators participating in the study all reside in metropolitan Vancouver.

<sup>8</sup> In 2003 when data gathering began in earnest, the largest district had 3,611 teachers and 248 administrators, the second largest had 3,405 teachers and 292 administrators, the third had 1,319 teachers and 131 administrators, and the smallest had 227 teachers and 27 administrators.

<sup>9</sup> Those teachers listed with "0" years of experience were in their first year of teaching at the time the questionnaire was administered.

teachers (see Figure 1). Age is fairly evenly distributed from young teachers to those near retirement, with 31% between the ages of 24 and 35, 28% between ages 36 and 45, and 36% between ages 46 and 55+. Most are female (61%) and either married or in a common-law relationship (63%). Just under half (49%) have children.

By contrast, the total provincial teacher population, which in 2006-2007 was 31,298, down 14.6%<sup>10</sup> from 36,650 in 2001-2002 (BC Ministry of Education, Form 1530 Data, 2006-2007), includes a disproportionate number of teachers with over 25 years of experience. Age is thus not evenly distributed across the current provincial population. A large proportion is in the 46 plus age bracket, with the largest number falling between the ages of 50 to 54. Seventeen and a half per cent are between the ages of 24 and 35, 36.15% between the ages of 36 and 45, and 46.35% between ages 46 and 55+. Sixty-two per cent are female and 38% are male (Hawkey, 2007). Hence, except for the female-male distribution, the study sample is not so much representative of the current teacher population as it is likely of the post-2010 one when record levels of retirement will begin to recede.

### **Questionnaires**

Findings are based on a subset of data from two questionnaires given to the teachers involved in the study. The first questionnaire, administered in 2003, captured a range of background information from each teacher, including: basic demographics, professional experience (education, current courses and grade levels, etc.), professional activity (e.g., frequency of involvement in the activities of the teachers' federation, satisfaction with support provided by colleagues, etc.) and job satisfaction (satisfaction with salary, workload, duties, etc.). A subset of the demographics and professional experience items are used to describe the sample. In addition, items that relate to overall satisfaction with their work environment, and their satisfaction with the support they receive from their colleagues, are presented.

The second questionnaire was administered in 2004 and captured information on a wide range of teaching practices. Those items about the frequency of engagement in

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<sup>10</sup> During this period, there had been a 6% decline in student enrolment.

collaborative activity with their colleagues and their opinions about those collaborative experiences are presented.

Most items are six point Likert scales, except for some items capturing information on demographics and professional experience. These are multiple-choice (e.g., gender) or fill-in-the blank (e.g., year began teaching) items. Descriptive analysis in the form of frequency counts and/or means were done for all items.

## **Interviews**

Initial findings from a subset of data from two interviews (recorded and transcribed) are presented. The first interview (lasting on average about 40 minutes and completed by 86 teachers) conducted in the 2003-2004 school year with each teacher was in the form of a career narrative in which the respondents discussed their decision to teach, their pre-service education and training, their first teaching job, their career path after their first job, their present teaching situation, their plans for the future, and their major concerns as educators. Readings of the full transcripts indicate that comments about professional collaboration are woven throughout the narratives. However, for the purposes of this paper, a review of just three questions from the sections of the interviews about their present circumstances and current concerns was conducted:

- "How would you describe the professional climate of your school?"
- "How do you best learn about ways to deepen and improve your practice as a teacher?"
- "Right now, what are your main concerns as an educator? ... About your school? ... Your students? ... Your working conditions?"

The second interview, conducted in 2005 and completed by 80 teachers, covered four main topics: a review of changes in each participant's career since the first interview; an exploration of the ethno-cultural diversity in their schools/classrooms and its impact on their practice; an exploration of the ICT infrastructure in their schools/classrooms and its impact on their practice; and finally a discussion of various policies implemented in British Columbia since 2001 and their impact on the participants' practice. The first question in the section on policy influences was open-ended, designed to identify those

policies of which participants were aware and perceived as salient to their work before conducting more detailed probing of specific policies. We report participants' responses to this open-ended question:

"In the last five to ten years, what education policies have had an influence, either positive or negative, on you and your work? Please describe the impact each has had on your teaching practice."

Whereas these questions were asked of both teachers and school administrators, we report only the teachers' responses.

## Results

In this section, we present our analysis of teachers' perceptions of policy changes and their experiences of collaboration.

### **Conditions Related to and Experience of Collaboration**

Teachers involved in this study reported on their satisfaction with work structures and conditions conducive to collaboration, on the frequency and type of collaboration, and on their personal experience of collaborating with colleagues.

### **Satisfaction with Work Structures and Conditions**

In general, the participating teachers reported working in school environments conducive to collaboration. Table 1 shows that their responses indicated they are satisfied with the overall atmosphere within their schools ( $M = 4.5$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), with relationships among school staff members ( $M = 4.4$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), and with the relationship between school staff and administration ( $M = 4.6$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ). Their responses further indicated they are highly satisfied with the support they receive from other teachers ( $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ).



**Table 1: Satisfaction with aspects of school environment related to collaboration**

	<b>n</b>	<b>Very unsatisfied 1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Very satisfied 6</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Overall atmosphere within the school	88	2.3%	5.7%	11.4%	23.9%	35.2%	21.6%	4.5	1.2
Relationship between teachers	87	1.1%	5.7%	17.2%	18.4%	39.1%	18.4%	4.4	1.2
Relationship between teachers and administration	88	2.3%	6.8%	6.8%	19.3%	44.3%	20.5%	4.6	1.2
Satisfaction with the level of support received from other teachers	90	0	1.1%	7.8%	16.7%	34.4%	40.0%	5.0	1.0

### Frequency and Type of Collaboration

As Table 2 and Figure 2 show, most of the respondents collaborate with their colleagues in a number of ways. Approximately 67% discuss their students with their teaching colleagues several times a week and 63% provide or receive moral support to or from colleagues at least once a week. Almost half of the participants exchange materials with one another regularly (at least once a week) and 26% of them indicate that they share work tasks, such as adapting programs, making materials or planning teaching together on a regular basis. Working on pedagogical innovations collaboratively happens occasionally for most respondents (81% indicated a few times a year to a few times a month). However, team teaching is fairly rare among the sample. More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they never did team teaching, while 25% indicate that they did so just a few times a year.

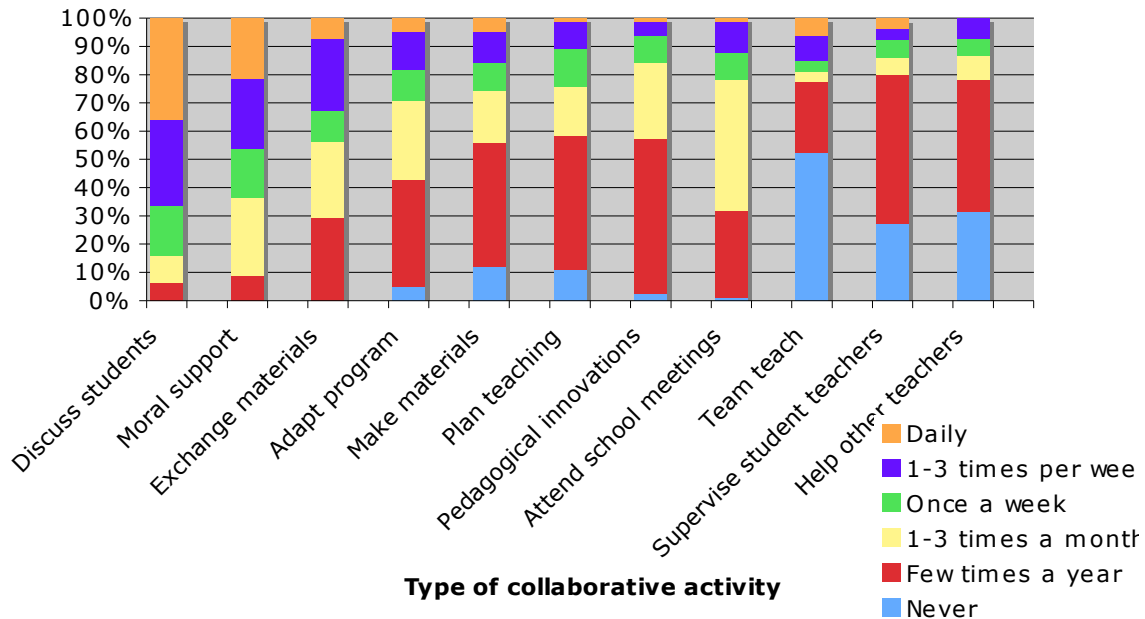
Likewise, the nurturing of student teachers and mentoring of colleagues is provided by relatively few of the teachers in the sample. Approximately 30% of the respondents indicated they did not participate in these activities at all and few did so on a regular basis (14% reported supporting student teachers on a weekly basis or more, 13% mentored other teachers that frequently).

Responses to the interview question, "How do you best learn about ways to deepen and improve your practice as a teacher?" were also reviewed for indications of the extent to which participants perceived their colleagues as sources of learning. Of the 86

participants who answered this question, 58 (67%) mentioned learning from their colleagues in the context of their work. These respondents said they learned from their colleagues through informal conversation and exchanges of materials, through observations of their colleagues' teaching practice, and through meetings both casual and formal, such as study groups, planning teams, committees, and gatherings of professional organizations (e.g., Phi Delta Kappa).

**Table 2: Frequency of engagement in various collaborative activities**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Few times a year</b>	<b>1-3 times a month</b>	<b>Once a week</b>	<b>1-3 times per week</b>	<b>Daily</b>
<u>Discuss students</u> "I discuss students with one or more colleagues"	81	0	6.2%	9.9%	17.3%	30.9%	35.8%
<u>Moral support</u> "I receive or give moral support (advice, encouragement, lending an ear) to colleagues when they have problems with students or with their teaching"	80	0%	8.8%	27.5%	17.5%	25.0%	21.3%
<u>Exchange materials</u> "I share teaching material with one or more colleagues"	82	0	29.3%	26.8%	11%	25.6%	7.3%
<u>Adapt program</u> "I collaborate with my colleagues to adapt the current program"	82	4.9%	37.8%	28%	11%	13.4%	4.9%
<u>Make materials</u> "I develop common teaching material with one or more colleagues"	82	12.2%	43.9%	18.3%	9.8%	11.0%	4.9%
<u>Plan teaching</u> "I plan teaching activities with one or more colleagues"	82	11.0%	47.6%	17.1%	13.4%	9.8%	1.2%
<u>Pedagogical innovations</u> "I participate with my colleagues on pedagogical innovations"	82	2.4%	54.9%	26.8%	9.8%	4.9%	1.2%
<u>Attend school meetings</u> "I participate with colleagues in meetings relating to teaching and/or students"	82	1.2%	30.5%	46.3%	9.8%	11.0%	1.2%
<u>Team teach</u> "I team teach with one or more colleagues in the same classroom"	80	52.5%	25.0%	3.8%	3.8%	8.8%	6.3%
<u>Supervise student teachers</u> "I look after or supervise beginning teachers (student-teachers, teachers on probation, substitutes)"	80	27.5%	52.5%	6.3%	6.3%	3.8%	3.8%
<u>Help (tutor/mentor) other teachers</u> "I help one or more colleagues by supervising, mentoring or tutoring them with their teaching"	82	31.7%	46.3%	8.5%	6.1%	7.3%	0%



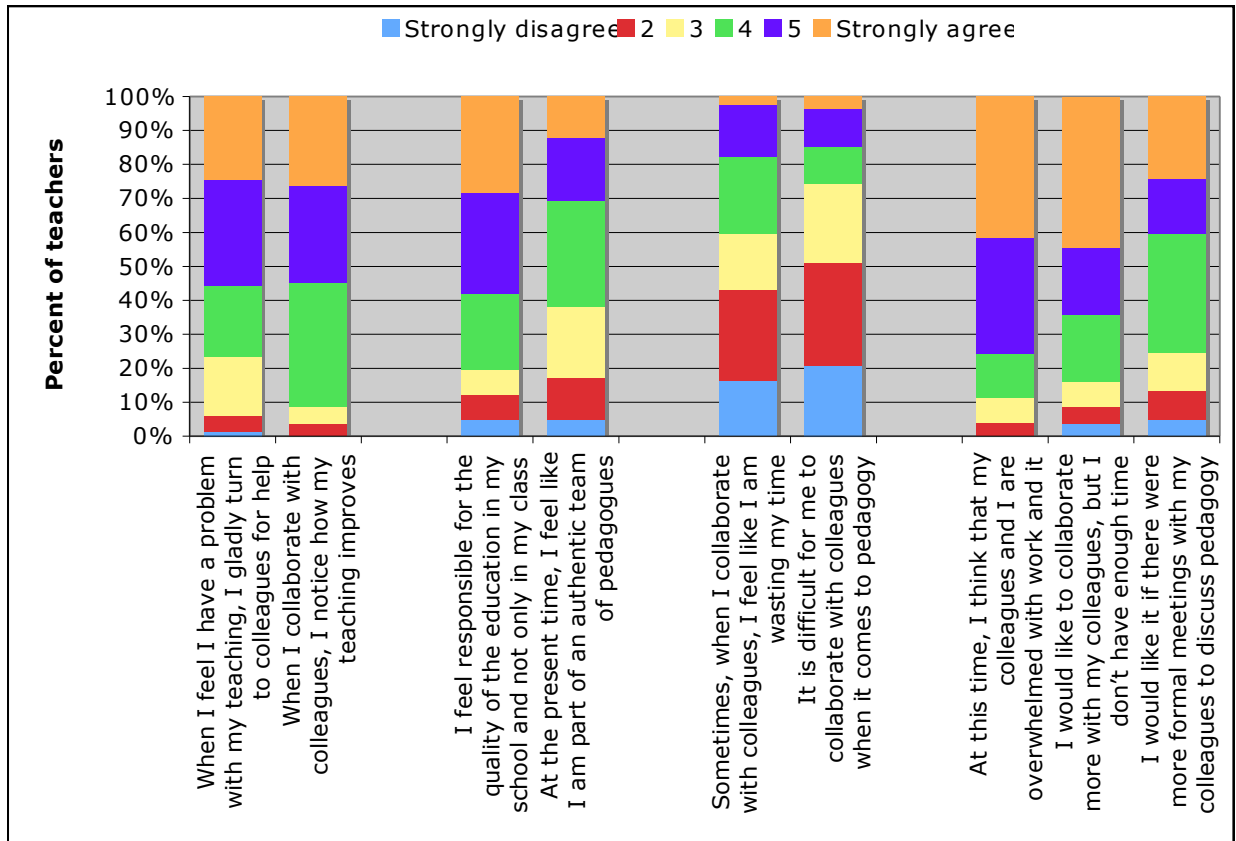
**Figure 2: Frequency of engagement in various collaborative activities**

### Experience of Collaboration

The respondents were generally positive about their collaborative experiences with others. (See Table 3 and Figure 3.) In general, they felt comfortable turning to other teachers for help ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and believed their teaching improves when they collaborate with others ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ). They even indicated a sense of shared mission in their schools. Most indicated a sense of responsibility for the education of the entire school ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) and many felt they are part of an authentic pedagogical team ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Only one quarter of the participants indicated they feel uncomfortable collaborating on pedagogical matters ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). However, many indicated that they feel overwhelmed by work ( $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), have difficulty finding time to collaborate ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) and some wish there were more formal meeting time available to support such activity ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). Despite a general sense that the respondents value collaboration, 40% indicated that at least some of the time they considered it a waste of time.

**Table 3: Mean and frequency of response about collaborative experiences**

Statement	n	Strongly disagree					Strongly agree	M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5	6		
When I feel I have a problem with my teaching, I gladly turn to colleagues for help	81	1.2%	4.9%	17.3%	21.0%	30.9%	24.7%	4.5	1.2
When I collaborate with colleagues, I notice how my teaching improves	80	0%	3.8%	5.0%	36.3%	28.8%	26.3%	4.7	1.0
I feel responsible for the quality of the education in my school and not only in my class	81	4.9%	7.4%	7.4%	22.2%	29.6%	28.4%	4.5	1.4
At the present time, I feel like I am part of an authentic team of pedagogues	81	4.9%	12.3%	21.0%	30.9%	18.5%	12.3%	3.8	1.3
Sometimes, when I collaborate with colleagues, I feel like I am wasting my time	79	16.5%	26.6%	16.5%	22.8%	15.2%	2.5%	3.0	1.4
It is difficult for me to collaborate with colleagues when it comes to pedagogy	82	20.7%	30.5%	23.2%	11%	11%	3.7%	2.7	1.4
At this time, I think that my colleagues and I are overwhelmed with work and it is difficult for us to meet for collaboration	79	0%	3.8%	7.6%	12.7%	34.2%	41.8%	5.0	1.1
I would like to collaborate more with my colleagues, but I don't have enough time	81	3.7%	4.9%	7.4%	19.8%	19.8%	44.4%	4.8	1.4
I would like it if there were more formal meetings with my colleagues to discuss pedagogy and/or students	82	4.9%	8.5%	11.0%	35.4%	15.9%	24.4%	4.2	1.4



**Figure 3: Experience of collaboration**

The kind of barriers to collaboration asked about in the questionnaire was limited to those of time and workload. Analysis of the interview question “How would you describe the professional climate of your school?” indicates that other barriers to collaboration exist. Examples of these include: physical or organizational divisions between teachers (e.g. all mathematics teachers are in one wing of a larger high school or French immersion teachers rarely interact with those in the Anglophone track of a school)<sup>11</sup>; lack of stability within the staff, political changes, including union actions; program cuts, large classes, inexperience with the school, and personnel layoffs.

<sup>11</sup> We agree with John Wiens’ (personal communication) critique that these factors represent contestable notions about children, their learning, and teachers’ practices.

### **Collaboration and Teaching Experience**

Other research has demonstrated links between teaching experience and collaborative practice. For example, experienced teachers are more likely to mentor other teachers or supervise student teachers (Gervais, 2002; Grimmatt & Ratzlaff, 1986; Héту & Riopel, 2002). In addition, interview data suggested that less experienced teachers might exchange materials or consult others more frequently to bolster their practice. To explore these issues, Spearman rank (SR) correlations between the number of years each participant has been teaching (as captured in a selected response item, (a) 1-4 years, (b) 5-8 years, etc.) and their response to each item were conducted. The correlation between experience and frequency of collaboration was statistically significant for only two of the kinds of collaborative activity asked about in the questionnaire. Metropolitan Vancouver teachers are somewhat more likely to supervise student teachers ( $\rho = .318, \leq 0.005, n = 78$ ) and engage in team teaching ( $\rho = .232, p \leq 0.041, n = 78$ ) when they are experienced.

### **Policies Affecting Collaboration**

The current shifts in policy might have had a detrimental effect on teachers' ability to collaborate. But to what extent? Toward the end of the first career narrative interview, teachers were asked, "Right now, what are your main concerns as an educator? About your school? Your students or your working conditions?" More than half of the participating teachers (62%) responded that they felt they were "Doing more with less." They essentially felt they were being asked to do more and more (bigger class sizes, more diverse class composition, etc.) with fewer and fewer resources. The next most frequently mentioned concerns were those about meeting students' needs (53%), issues related to curriculum and pedagogy (49%) and workload and stress (42%). Only approximately one-quarter of teachers (24%) mentioned specific educational policies in their responses.

When asked in the second interview, "In the last five to ten years, what educational policies have had an influence, either positive or negative, on you and your work? Please describe the impact each has had on your teaching practice," teachers again

mentioned changes that indicated they felt they were doing more with less. They most frequently mentioned policy was changes in class size regulation (54% of teachers). The second most frequently mentioned policy change was that there was less support for special needs students (38%), followed by a general feeling of less funding available (35%), fewer staff than in the past (22%) and fewer resources (14%). After these concerns around class size and material support, changes in policies around testing and curriculum were the next most likely to be mentioned. Sixteen per cent of teachers mentioned policies related to changes for graduation, 16% mentioned changes in provincial testing, and 10% mentioned changes in the provincial curriculum or instructional programs.

What do these responses mean in the context of practice? Prior to 2001, there had been a great deal of collaboration around issues of inclusion and questions of pedagogy. The strong perceptions about increase in class size and the reduced support for students with special needs, together with their emphasis on doing more with less, suggest that teachers view their intensified work conditions as not permitting the degree or kind of collaboration that they previously experienced.

### **Summary of Results**

The results from this metropolitan Vancouver study show that, within a rapidly changing policy context that has restructured cultural, economic, and professional aspects of teaching, teachers still report some satisfaction with work structures conducive to collaboration and engaging in different types of collaboration. Those collaborative activities in which the teachers report engaging most frequently are exchanges of information and support that can be done around the edges of the school day. Discussing students, exchanging materials and providing moral support can all be done over coffee, during a brief moment before or after class or on a walk to the staff-room. Such activities do not require that two or more teachers work together to complete a joint task or achieve a common goal. The interview data suggest that a number of teachers see their colleagues as a source of learning. While there are significant exceptions, such as teachers who talk about formal or informal groups that meet regularly to focus on issues of student learning and improving practice, in many

cases the learning from colleagues described is done largely through these exchanges on the periphery. Those activities that do presume a joint purpose and, thus, for which focused time is more necessary (e.g., making instructional materials or planning teaching together) teachers indicate they engage in less frequently. While noting barriers to collaboration and indicating they wished they had more time to engage in collaborative work, the teachers nonetheless report being largely satisfied with the collaborative experiences they now enjoy.

At the same time, interview data about collaboration with others, their concerns as educators, and the policies that affect them most, indicate that over all teachers feel they are doing more with less. They feel significant pressure upon their time and experience professional concern over meeting diverse student needs. These pressures appear to make it difficult for teachers to seek out or participate in deeper forms of collaboration with their colleagues around issues of inclusion and questions of pedagogy.

## **Discussion**

What do these results tell us about the schools in which the participating teachers do their work? Do these organizations permit a confrontation with their explicit and implicit structures such that teachers can come to grips with the personal values, assumptions, and beliefs that shape and constrain their professional practice and learning? Do they shift the focus beyond the individual to how teachers engage in collegial relations and collective practice? And do they put in place those structural arrangements that increase flexibility and professional discretion by correspondingly reducing isolation and the dominance of decision-making by administrators and elite individuals? In short, do these schools foster the personal, interpersonal and organizational capacities of a professional learning community that can channel teachers and students toward a clear and commonly shared purpose for student learning?

One thing that is very evident is that teachers report engaging less in professional collaboration during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than was found by previous studies conducted during the 1990s. We think this important finding reflects the



changing policy context in BC since 2001. Teachers who perceive themselves as doing more with less have less time and energy to devote to collaborative learning. In addition, two of the study's significant ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) correlations about collaboration and experience—teachers supervising student teachers and engaging in team teaching—suggest that experience could potentially be an important variable in teachers working toward a vision of high quality intellectual work that is communicated to both students and parents. More experienced teachers are more likely than less experienced colleagues to engage in teaching activities that are framed around a collective responsibility for high quality student learning. However, none of this is really surprising. Experience has always been a factor in teachers deciding when to supervise student teachers (in this instance, we would argue, rightly so) and engage in collegial pedagogical activities. What is new, however, is that interview data confirmed that, while more experienced teachers are open to collegial discussions—particularly ones concerned with a collective responsibility to boost learning for students across a diversity of social, ethnic, gender, and linguistic backgrounds—they report structural barriers that prevent them from doing so. Less experienced teachers also report these barriers but do not show a similar openness to activities that fulfill Little's (1990) emphasis on "group work."

What does this study say about policy changes and professional learning in practice settings? It would seem to suggest that the policy context affects how teachers, whether experienced or not, think about collaboration as a form of taking collective responsibility for student learning. If teachers characterize the policy changes as requiring them to do more with less, they appear to be less inclined to engage in the kind of activities they perceive as costing them time and personal resources. This is particularly the case with the more experienced teachers who, while acknowledging the benefits (both to themselves as teacher-learners and to their diverse students) of focused collaboration around specific strategies promoting learning, also report not doing it very frequently at all. But these joint activities that develop a collective responsibility for student learning are the transformative aspects of professional collaboration that lead to an enhancement of the learning process *per se*. Working with other colleagues on the periphery in activities, such as, discussing students, exchanging

materials, and providing moral support, clearly provides teachers with a degree of job satisfaction but these exchanges neither permit nor foster the transformative experiences that have been shown to have a positive effect on student learning. What they likely represent are ways of coping with increasing workloads and wider ranges of student diversity. Thus, we may conclude that the context of rapid policy changes in BC since 2001 has had an effect of redistributing teachers' energies and focus in a manner that militates against their entering into the deeply collaborative exchanges that characterized professional learning in British Columbia in the 1990s. Put differently, the policy context appears to have negatively affected the personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities of the schools in which teachers do their work.

How, then, can we make sense of the government's economic and cultural restructuring of the profession and its effect on the teaching work force? Hargreaves (2000) theorizing is instructive here. He describes four distinct phases of professional practice in teaching: pre-professional, autonomous professional, collegial professional, and post-professional or postmodern professional. In the first two phases, teachers are regarded primarily as technicians in the classroom. In the pre-professional phase, teachers followed system-wide directives about particular instructional strategies. In the autonomous professional phase, although teachers were given greater authority to select from among particular pedagogical approaches, people in positions of power, i.e., superintendents, principals, etc., carefully prescribed their actual practices. In both of these phases, the curriculum was a "given" with little discretion left for teachers to co-construct or even modify it. The latter two phases have seen the emergence of inquiry both as an element of teaching itself and central to teacher professionalism. This is a focus on how teachers continue to learn to teach in the context of work: "teachers often learn best in their own professional communities . . . [in situations] built into ongoing relationships and teams within departments, in interdisciplinary teams across them, in special projects and task groups" Hargreaves, 2000, p. 165). In the third phase, then, collaboration among teachers fosters the kind of professional learning that inquires into and responsively addresses local questions and issues. The last phase is characterized by a coming to terms with complexity and uncertainty. As Hargreaves (2000) puts it:

So we are now on the edge of an age of postmodern professionalism where teachers deal with a diverse and complex clientele, in conditions of increasing moral uncertainty, where many methods of approach are possible, and where more and more social groups have an influence and a say. Whether this postmodern age will see exciting and positive new partnerships being created with groups and institutions beyond the school, and teachers learning to work effectively, openly and authoritatively with those partners in a broad *social movement* that protects and advances their professionalism, or whether it will witness the deprofessionalization of teaching as teachers crumble under multiple pressures, intensified work demands, reduced opportunities to learn from colleagues, and enervating discourses of derision, is something that is still to be decided. (p. 176)

Hargreaves, however, does not stay at the descriptive. He argues strongly that the time is right for the active intervention of all educators to influence the future direction of the profession by becoming a social movement for educational change that advances the principle that "if we want better classroom learning for students, we have to create superb professional learning and working conditions for those who teach them" (p. 176). In other words, the future of teacher professionalism in a post-modern phase could go either way; toward a responsible and responsive professionalism that incorporates all the gains from collaboration and community building, or, on account of passive acquiescence on the part of teachers, it could permit the forces of de-professionalization to revert it to the worst instances that characterized the earlier phases of pre- and autonomous professionalism through the institution of "centralized curricula and testing regimes" (p. 168).

The question of which direction teaching as a profession is taking in British Columbia is intriguing. Teaching in British Columbia, as in most Canadian provinces, is on the cusp between the third and fourth phases of professionalism that Hargreaves characterized. The policy context is one of change; one that Wiens (2008, personal communication) suggests is designed fundamentally to revolutionize power relationships. The provincial Teachers' Federation positions itself as authoring a social movement for educational

change (Naylor, 2005, 2007), while the government has putatively put in place policies designed to make the profession more responsive to parents and learners (at least that is the official rhetoric). The important question thus becomes: Given the government's heavy emphasis on a form of accountability that Hargreaves (2000) and the BCTF (Schaefer, 2003) argue fosters forces de-professionalizing teaching, to what extent do the changes in the British Columbia policy context impact on educators' perceptions of their personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities to engage in professional learning around issues pertinent to student learning?

Clearly, metropolitan Vancouver teachers are dealing with a diverse and complex student population in conditions of increasing moral uncertainty, where many different approaches to teaching are possible, even desirable, and where more and more social groups, particularly parents but also business stakeholders, have a clear influence on the characterization of practice. Would this suggest that teacher professionalism in British Columbia has entered Hargreaves' fourth postmodern phase? Possibly yes and partially no. Possibly yes, because all the circumstances accompanying rapid neo-liberalist policy shifts, (e.g., the influence of different social groups through partnerships, the government's emphasis on accountability contracts and use of standardized testing, etc.) have created intensified work conditions that make it difficult for teachers—particularly less experienced ones—to engage in the kind of collaborative activities that presume a collective purpose and time spent inquiring together. Partially no, because more experienced teachers appear to hold onto sentiments about professional collaboration to enhance how they teach and assess student learning but, also not yes, because of structural barriers that prevent such activity from taking place.

On one level, this difference in sentiment toward collaborative learning between more and less experienced teachers in the metropolitan Vancouver area could be a function of time and maturity. However, the rapid policy shifts, the diminishing financial support, and the class size regulation changes have all contributed to a different kind of socialization for today's beginning teachers than their more experienced counterparts had to face during professional induction. This would suggest that, at a deeper level, we

could well be witnessing a beginning shift in the professional attitudes of the teachers who will constitute the body of the post-2010 workforce.

We previously found (Grimmett, Dagenais, D'Amico, Jacquet, & Ilieva, 2008) that there are two contrasting discourses at work in the BC scene: a discourse of despair framed around the political constraints of policy changes designed to make the system more efficient and, in some senses, bring it to heel, as it were; and a discourse of hope framed around professional collaboration on matters of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, aimed at improving student learning, and unaffected at this point by the outer political discourse and policy changes. The findings from this analysis would seem to suggest that the discourse of hope is primarily found in the sentiments of experienced teachers who would wish to respond favourably to the vestiges of modernist teacher professionalism in the form of collaborative learning that is still officially endorsed by Ministry staff and encouraged by districts. However, if this is the case, it may then be a discourse that could be seriously diminished, if not disappear, when these more experienced teachers retire.

## **Conclusion**

Do the policy changes in British Columbia since 2001 undermine educators' perceptions of their capacity to engage with colleagues in professional ways that focus on improving student learning? Policy is intended by design to influence practice in some way. The policy changes in British Columbia since 2001 have begun to have an effect. A narrower conception of professionalism constrained by accountability and fiscal efficiency has begun to impact the practices of teachers in the workforce. Two decades ago, Grimmett and Ratzlaff (1986) found that experienced teachers were regularly involved with other teachers in planning and evaluating learning experiences and providing them with focused feedback. During the 1990s, several studies (Erickson, 1991; Dockendorf, 1992; Grimmett, 1993, 1996; MacKinnon, 1996; Erickson & Brandes, 1998) found that teachers frequently engaged in rigorous collaborative inquiry to improve both the assessment of student learning and the instructional strategies with which teachers

made connections between complex concepts and students' minds; and other studies (Patriarca & Lamb, 1994; Anderson, 1996; Quigney, 1998) showed how collaboration led to professional decision-making around inclusion in BC classrooms. At the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this appears to be changing. Whether this means that teachers' conceptions of their capacity for engaging in professional learning have been narrowed or completely reframed remains to be seen. We will know for sure after 2010 when the bulk of the current workforce has retired. What is clear now is that we can no longer talk glibly, or even naïvely about professional collaboration when the policy context emphasizes fiscal efficiency and a narrow form of educational accountability. Indeed, we may be faced with a choice: either join the *political* movement to protect and advance the modernist vestiges of professionalism because it is at the heart of teaching in dealing with the diversity and complexity of student learning; or *pragmatically* reconsider what collaborative professional learning means within a context that has begun to reframe how teachers work as a labour relationship.

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