

## Principals' Perspectives: Professional Learning and Marginal Teachers on Formal Plans of Improvement

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This qualitative study examined the perspectives of principals related to professional development for teachers on formal plans of remediation for underperformance in the classroom. The principles associated with job-embedded professional development as well as cognitive dissonance provided a basis for analyzing data collected throughout the interviews and analysis. The population included 12 elementary, middle, and high school principals from 2school systems in the United States. Data analysis from the interviews yielded three major findings clustered as themes related to: 1) Cognitive dissonance, professional development, and marginal teachers 2) Confidentiality trumps collaboration, and 3) Professional development by the numbers. By examining professional development practices for underperforming teachers, the findings contribute to our understanding about some perspectives that school principals hold about a population of teachers at-risk. Implications are offered.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b></p> <p><i>Received</i> March, 2, 2016</p> <p><i>Accepted</i> June, 10, 2106</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Marginal teachers, Principal leadership, Professional development, Job-embedded learning</i></p>

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### **Introduction**

The work of the principal remains “complex and multidimensional,” and “the effectiveness of principals depends, in part, on how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities” (Rice, 2010, p. 2) including prioritizing and focusing on systems that promote the growth and development of both students and teachers (Zepeda, Jimenez, & Lanoue, 2015). Principal leadership is critical in light of accountability (Wallace Foundation, 2013; Zepeda et al., 2015), the focus on student achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), and overall efforts to improve schools (Hallinger & Heck 2010). Effective principals support teaching and learning, and they:

Relentlessly develop and support teachers, create positive working conditions, effectively allocate resources, construct appropriate organizational policies and systems, and engage in other deep and meaningful work outside of the classroom that has a powerful impact on what happens inside it. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 1)

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) developed a set of standards for school leaders. The realm of this research falls with the domain of the leader being able to develop the professional capacity of school personnel, primarily teachers whose classroom performance, namely instruction, has been characterized as marginal.

In the context of the United States, teacher evaluation has been heavily influenced with the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and its call for highly-qualified teachers to teach in standards-based classrooms. Teacher quality was a step in the right direction, but this provision was not enough because “Public education defines teacher quality largely in terms of the credentials that teachers have earned, rather than on the basis of the quality of the work they do in their classrooms or the results their students achieve” (Toch & Rothman, 2008, p. 2). Darling-Hammond (2012) in many ways refocused the term teacher quality as it “refers to strong instruction that enables a



wide range of students to learn” (p. i), and this notion becomes even more important when teachers fail to perform in the classroom to the detriment of student success.

The federal priorities prescribed in the 2009 Race to the Top Program (RTT) situated teacher evaluation as its center-piece where student scores on standardized tests would be matched to individual teachers to gauge teacher effectiveness. “Teacher effectiveness, in the narrowest sense, refers to a teacher’s ability to improve student learning as measured by student gains on standardized achievement tests;” however Little, Goe, and Bell (2009) cautioned that “although this is one important aspect of teaching ability, it is not a comprehensive and robust view of teacher effectiveness” (p. 1).

Teacher effectiveness matters because this qualitative study examined the perspectives of U.S. school principals about professional development targeted for marginal teachers who had been placed on formal plans of remediation for underperforming in the classroom. Moving the idea of teacher effectiveness into the classroom where instruction unfolds, effective teachers support student learning when they “follow a regular instructional cycle. They assess student learning; analyze assessment results to identify student strengths and needs; plan and implement instruction based on identified strengths and needs; and monitor student progress to further adjust instruction as needed” (Bullmaster-Day, 2011, p. 4).

In 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law, *The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*, the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1965), replacing the defunct *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and the waivers associated with teacher and leader evaluation brought forward with the American Reinvestment Stimulus that funded the Race to the Top Program. States and their systems will now have latitude to re-examine the policy requirements of their teacher evaluation systems. In coherent systems, instructional supervision, teacher evaluation, and professional development are enacted in seamless ways where these processes, if enacted with

fidelity, work in tandem to support teacher learning and growth (Zepeda, 2016, 2017). Principals are the primary actors in developing and supporting coherent approaches so that these systems benefit teachers and the instructional programs within their buildings.

This qualitative study addressed the topic of principals working with marginal teachers in their schools, and focused on their perspectives about professional development associated with the provisions described in formal plans of remediation. The principals' perspectives were analyzed and summarized to gain insight on a timely area associated with accountability and professional development for marginal teachers. This research is important because principals are not always willing to share their experiences about working with marginal teachers (Blacklock, 2002; Causey, 2010; Fuhr, 1990). This reluctance is typically attributed to the confidentiality issues related to personnel and the potential for litigation (Blacklock, 2002; Blankenship, 2017), responses of other teachers in the building (Zepeda, 2016), and possible accusations of teacher mistreatment (Blase & Blase, 2003). This study attempted to add to the research by examining principals' perspectives about professional development associated with marginal teachers on formal plans of remediation.

### **Review of the Literature**

As background and to frame this study, four major areas in the literature were examined including the principal as instructional leader who enacts supervision and teacher evaluation; professional development and job-embedded learning; and marginal teachers.

#### **The Principal and Supervision and Teacher Evaluation**

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) claim, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at



school”(p. 7) and, as leadership improves so too should student achievement(Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004).There are many ways in which the principal as instructional leader has been cast in the literature. The early literature set the foundation for principal as instructional leader as one who shapes the school’s instructional climate (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982) and builds capacity in others by distributing instructional leadership to those closest to the instructional program—teachers (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2013; Marks & Printy, 2003).

The Wallace Foundation (2013) indicates that principals “can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes. They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” (p.6). As a key decision-maker, the principal’s role in leading practices and procedures associated with instructional supervision and teacher evaluation are important to understand (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009).

### **Supervision**

Supervision is a formative process that positions teachers as active learners. Clinical supervision includes classroom observations and conferencing before and after observations (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017). Through this model of supervision, school leaders are able to give timely and specific feedback to promote teacher reflection (Schooling, Toth, & Marzano), wrestle with difficult problems in a fault-free environment that supports taking calculated risks (Ponticell & Zepeda, 2004), and receive honest feedback about performance (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Kyriakides, Demetrio, & Charlambous, 2006). Teachers want principals who are present (Zepeda & Ponticell, 1998), who have built relationships based on trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), and who have at heart the teachers’ best interest, wanting to see them improve with the appropriate supports.

## **Teacher Evaluation**

Teacher evaluation systems in the United States have become complicated and are at the forefront of just about every school, system, and state since the implementation of the waivers with Race to the Top. The Race to the Top Program created by the Obama administration under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 included revising teacher evaluation systems and processes that would include, for example, more uses of student performance data, or value-added measures (VAMs), in the overall assessment for individual teachers. Essentially, student achievement data are linked to individual teachers, and the growth, positive or negative, is attributed to teacher performance. The *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* goes into effect in 2016 and leaves the policies related to the evaluation of teachers and leaders to the discretion of the states. The shifts in power now situate states as the major decision makers in matters related to teacher and leader evaluation.

Teacher evaluation is both a formative and a summative process, and the formative-summative struggle has been a perennial one (Gall & Acheson, 2010; Glickman et al., 2014, Popham, 2013). Admitting an enduring struggle with the dynamics of the formative-summative tensions, Popham (2013) suggests that school leaders engage in both, but to do so “separately” (p. 22). The results of all formative processes lead to summative evaluation for the year (Nolan & Hoover, 2011). The primary intents of summative evaluation are to meet state statutes and district policies, assign teachers a rating at the end of the year, and in some cases determine whether a teacher will return to work the following year (Stronge, 2010).

Teacher evaluation systems have failed because “teachers do not receive the feedback they need, and professional development is not aligned with areas of need” (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2014, p. 729). Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) report “Only 43 percent of teachers agree that evaluation helps teachers improve” (p. 14), and all too often, “Excellence goes unrecognized, development is



neglected and poor performance goes unaddressed” (p. 10). To continue with the thinking around coherence, high-quality professional development tailored to meet individual needs would work in tandem with supervision and teacher evaluation.

### **Professional Development**

Researchers have identified features of professional development that support the transfer of learning to classroom practice (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2013; Desimone, 2011; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Timperley, 2008). Desimone (2011) suggested there is consensus on features of effective professional development:

- Content focus: Professional development activities should focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content
- Active learning: Teachers should have opportunities to get involved, such as observing and receiving feedback, analyzing student work, or making presentations, as opposed to passively sitting through lectures.
- Coherence: What teachers learn in any professional development activity should be consistent with other professional development, with their knowledge and beliefs, and with school, district, and state reforms and policies.
- Duration: Professional development activities should be spread over a semester and should include 20 hours or more of contact time.
- Collective participation: Groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school should participate in professional development activities together to build an interactive learning community. (p. 69)

These features “have been associated with changes in knowledge, practice, and, to a lesser extent, student achievement” (Desimone,

2011, p. 69), and Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) shared:

While the impact on student achievement is a critical indicator of the effectiveness of professional development, we believe the impact of professional development on teacher knowledge and instructional practice is also relevant, as these are worthwhile outcomes in themselves that support increased learning for students. (p.15)

Job-embedded learning is a key feature of professional development that supports teachers as adult learners.

### **Job-embedded Learning**

Job-embedded learning is a construct that supports (1) relevance to the individual teacher, (2) feedback as an integral to the process, and (3) the facilitation of transfer of new skills into practice (Zepeda, 2015). Wood and Killian (1998) define job-embedded learning as “learning that occurs as teachers and administrators engage in their daily work activities” (p. 52). Among their findings is the conclusion that schools must

restructure supervision and teacher evaluation so that they support teacher learning and the achievement of personal, professional, and school achievement goals. . . . [B]oth supervision and teacher evaluation should be modified to focus on school and/or personal improvement goals rather than the district and state required observation forms. (p. 54)

Zepeda (2012, 2015, & 2017) promotes that coherence is built between instructional supervision, teacher evaluation, and professional development when learning for adults is embedded within the workday over a sustained period of time. Through such processes as “collective critical reflection,” “emphasis on teaching skills,” and the linkages to “formative evaluation results” job-embedded learning evolves to foster highly-personalized learning for teachers (Creemers, Kyriakides, & Antoniou, 2013).





## **Marginal Teachers**

The issues surrounding marginal teacher performance point to the need for remediation through very formal processes including targeted professional learning. In the US, there are over 3.1 million full-time teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) and between 5 to 15 percent of teachers in any given school are marginal (Tucker, 2001). Marginal teacher performance is a perennial issue; however, “improving teaching quality and reducing the variability within that quality is a primary responsibility of school district leaders, building level leaders, and teachers” (Mead, Rotherman, & Brown, 2012, p. 3).

There are no universal descriptions of what constitutes marginal performance, but from the literature, marginal teacher performance includes sporadic and weak instructional approaches that do not match content and learning goals (Smith, 2008); difficulties teaching statewide content standards (Darling-Hammond, 2012); incessant classroom management issues (Jackson, 1997; Lawrence, Vachon, Leake & Leake, 2005); inadequate preparation for instruction (Fuhr, 1990). Fuhr (1990) indicated that a marginal teacher is “a fence rider” and that “marginal teachers usually do just enough to get by” while being evaluated (p. 3). Teachers whose classroom performance is marginal are often put on formal plans of remediation or what are often called plans of improvement.

## **Plans of Improvement**

In the United States, teachers who are designated as underperforming (marginal) are put on a plan of remediation that explicitly spells out what classroom practices must be remediated and the learning objectives for each area in need of improvement. The intents of these plans fulfill two intents. The first intent is the developmental side in which a plan of improvement “reflects the school system’s concern for its teachers’ professional development... [and] helping each teacher do so is an integral part of an instructional

leader's role" (Tucker, 2001, p. 53). The second intent is the legal and procedural one. A plan of improvement specifies areas that a teacher must improve. A plan of improvement includes, for example, areas of concern, objectives and goals for improvement, the strategies to meet improvement, the support and resources needed, and timelines to meet areas of concern. The plan of improvement is monitored by the principal or another school leader. The types of support include professional development intended to assist the marginal teacher to improve performance in and out of the classroom.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This study was framed within the qualitative research paradigm to address the topic of principals and professional development as they worked with marginal teachers in their schools. The researcher wanted to understand "the process by which events and actions take place" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30) and to do this, the study focused on the perspectives of principals about professional development associated with the provisions described in formal plans of remediation. Given the homogeneity of the participants—12 elementary, middle, and high school principals from 2 similar school systems in the United States—a collective case study was chosen to allow the researcher to investigate several cases of the same phenomenon (Stake, 2000). The study was guided by one overall research question: What perspectives do principals have about professional development for marginal teachers on a formal plan of remediation?

### **Data sources**

Two school districts in the United States in a single southeastern state were purposefully selected as research sites. The purposeful sampling technique was used due to the highly-confidential nature of



the topic in general of working with marginal teachers. Essentially, the researcher had entrée into both school systems. The superintendents of the school systems were aware of the importance the findings might hold to influence not only the refinement of practices for their school principals but also the contributions such a study might have to open up new areas of inquiry given the press of accountability and evolving teacher evaluation systems in the United States. The researcher sought to select principals who had experience with personnel and who had similar training and procedural guidelines and expectations for dealing with marginal teachers. New or inexperienced principals would not be able to provide perspectives about dealing first-hand with marginal teachers.

Within each of the two school systems, six principals were interviewed and included two principals at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In total, the population included 12 participants, all practicing school principals that had 5 or more years of experience being a principal at their present site. The superintendents of the school districts gave the researcher a list of principals who had five or more years of experience in the schools which they currently served as leader. From these lists, the researcher sent an open-ended invitation to be part of the study. In total, 14 principals agreed to be part of the study, 6 from one system and 8 from another system. Before the first round of interviews, 2 participants dropped out from the study, bringing the total to 12 principals evenly distributed across the 2 school systems.

The primary source of data came from interviews that were carefully “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2009, p.106) to open the conversations between the researcher and the participants. Data collection spanned 6 months in 2012-2013 and included 2 interviews lasting approximately 1 hour with each of the 12 participants. In total, 22 interviews were conducted.

## **Research Methods**

As the methods of this study were framed, there were certain ethical considerations that had to be reconciled including the nature of the content of teacher evaluation and plans of improvement and that legally matters of personnel are confidential. Audio-recordings could not be used given the ethical considerations involved in matters of personnel (e.g., confidentiality), and moreover, audio-recording these meetings could have stifled, even promoted a chill effect between the principals and the researcher.

## **Individual Interviews**

Data included detailed notes taken during the 22 interviews, a researcher's journal in which ideas, follow-up questions, and general impressions were recorded after each interview. Throughout the duration of the research, notes, memos, and codes were made in the journal to aid in further analysis and then to frame findings. The interview was the centerpiece of data collection as the way "to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or a set of experiences...the goal is to construct as complete a picture as possible from the words and experiences of the participant" (deMarrais, 2004, p. 52). Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used as opportunities to understand the "words that reveal the" perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 104) with the hope to be able to craft a holistic picture about professional development for marginal teachers on plans of remediation.

## **Document Review**

Records, documents, artifacts and archival information constitute a particularly rich source of information not only about settings but also as a way to follow the data trail (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). Formal plans of remediation were an ideal source to



examine the content related to learning objectives, professional development, and timelines; however, detail study of these documents was not permissible given the confidential nature of these items. At the end of the first interview, the researcher asked participants if they would be willing to let the researcher examine a formal plan of remediation. During the second interview, 7 of the 12 principals allowed the researcher to review illustrative plans of remediation without allowing the documents to leave the office. Notes about professional development linked to the learning objectives specified with the plans of remediation were recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis began immediately after the first interview and continued throughout the research process. Given the highly confidential nature of this study, no interviews were audio-recorded; therefore, the data included only the researcher's notes kept in a log. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the study progressed, the ideas associated with professional development and marginal teachers were catalogued for ongoing and later analysis of the notes that numbered in length 210 typed, single-spaced pages. This process assisted the researcher to frame any ideas to ponder.

A process of coding, reducing, and sorting the data into categories was followed after the first interview. Memoing techniques allowed the researcher to record the 'ahaaa' insights, and then to develop preliminary codes for recurring items that emerged. The reduced data were used as a basis for the preliminary interpretation of the participant's perspectives about professional development and marginal teachers and their perspectives about the relationship to the plan of improvement. The second interview provided the opportunity to present the preliminary findings to the participants and to ask additional questions about areas relevant to the study. The participants were given opportunity to further elaborate or clarify

statements made during the first interview. Following the second interview, the process of coding, reducing, and sorting the data was conducted again. The second interview data were then combined with the data from the first interview to provide a more robust picture of the participant's perspectives related to professional development and marginal teachers.

The next step in the analytical process included the categorization of themes. In examining data with similar meaning, the researcher looked for emerging ideas across the responses by the principals. According to Hyener (1985), the researcher must examine clusters of meaning to establish central themes that in turn express the principal meaning of the data. It was important to analyze the data in relation to the original research question. By integrating concepts and incidents, the researcher was able to go, "back into data and forward into analysis" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 23). A more comprehensive understanding of the work of principals, professional development and the plans of improvement related to the marginal teacher emerged.

### **Contexts and Participants**

The participants in the study include 12 elementary, middle, and high school principals employed in two single large, urban school systems in a southeastern state. All participants had a minimum of five years of experience as principal at their current school. Both school systems, System A and System B, were approximately homogenous related to size, student demographics, and the communities these systems served. Table 1.1 highlights System A and System B.



Table 1.1.  
*Context of School Systems*

	System A	System B
<b>Total Schools</b>	29	28
Elementary	19	18
Middle	5	6
High School	5	4
<b>Teachers</b>	1,468	1, 421
<b>Students</b>	20,088	1, 421
Black	63%	60%
White	15%	12%
Hispanic	14%	19%
Asian	6%	4%
Other/Multi	2%	5%
Free and Reduced Lunch	87%	91%
Graduation Rate	83%	79%

### Participant Profile

Twelve participants included six from System A (2 elementary, two middle, and 2 high school principals) and six from System B (2 elementary, two middle, and 2 high school principals). The homogeneity of gender included four female elementary school principals in Systems A and B; at the middle school there was one female and one male principal and in System B there were two male middle school principals. At the high school level, all were males.

Table 1.2 further offers information about the experiences of the 12 principals.

Table 1.2.  
*Experience and Education of the Participants*

	System A	System B
Years of Experience in Education	22 [averaged]	25 [averaged]
Years of Experience as an Administrator in the System		
Elementary	7	5
Middle	8	7
High School	10	13
Advanced Education		
M.E.d.	All	All
E.Ds.	2	2
Ph.D/Ed.D	4	4

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. The size of the sample is small and represents two very like systems related to overall demographics; however, the homogeneity of the group presents strength in thinking about cautious generalizations (Merriam, 1998). Another limitation is that the researcher had to rely on interview notes that could only be scripted given the sensitive nature about talking about marginal teaching. Although methodological procedures such as extensive memoing after each interview and member checking inviting the participants to read transcribed field notes, audio-recordings and verbatim responses to questions would have been more stable.





## Findings

The three major themes that emerged from the data are presented.

Theme 1: *Cognitive Dissonance, Professional Development, and Marginal Teachers*

Theme 2: *Confidentiality Trumps Collaboration*

Theme 3: *Professional Development by the Numbers*

The first theme centers on the cognitive dissonance experienced by the principals while working with marginal teachers.

**Theme 1, Cognitive Dissonance, Professional Development, and Marginal Teachers:**

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance provided a way to examine the perspectives of the 12 principals shared during interviews (n=22) related to professional development for marginal teachers they are or have worked with in their formal role as the leaders of their schools.

Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with the interplay and tension between thoughts that are at odds with other thoughts. The dissonance occurs when beliefs and assumptions are contradicted by new information or when two or more ideas or values compete with each other (Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957; McLeod, 2014; O'Keefe, 1990; Zepeda, 2006). Cognitive dissonance increases with the magnitude of importance for the individual (Festinger, 1957). There were several instances where dissonance occurred for the principals surrounding accountability.

### Accountability and Coherence

The principals viewed the plan of improvement as a "documentation trail" that cued as one principal stated, "this plan signals you are on your way out the door," and another indicated the plan of improvement process is "emotionally charged." Participants also indicated that in many ways, the "rigid" nature of the plan of

improvement “stifled growth” because “teachers on them, only look at what they are required to do to keep their jobs.” However, the principals knew they had to act on what they believed was in the best interest of the school and its students. Moreover, they believed “deep down” and “in my soul” that all teachers “want and desire to be the best they can be,” shared one principal. This same principal also noted that it was his “duty” not to be influenced about a marginal teacher’s performance,” beyond what is “in the plan of improvement.” He further elaborated that the “plan of improvement is his accountability” to teachers “and all my students.”

The participants used such words and terms such as “prescriptive,” “narrow,” the “letter of the law,” and “constraining” to describe the plan and its focus on teacher learning and improvement. The principals also felt tension leading to frustration with the plan of improvement itself because really, the document is a “legal one. In many ways, growth has nothing to do with it.” This principal went on to explain that legally, “a teacher improves as a result of professional learning or not. If not, ‘good bye.’”

Most principals spoke of the tensions of knowing you have a marginal teacher and the “what ifs” that could play out if teachers did not make marked improvements in their practices. The principals often referred back to students and the impact that marginal teachers have on them. One principal expressed it this way: “I am not going to stand by and continue to let a marginal teacher hurt kids.” Morally, the principals knew they had to intervene on behalf of students. They followed up with accountability was contributing to the focused attention on marginal performance, and they had to do “something to curtail marginal teaching” in their schools.

The plans of improvement were viewed with a “clinical” and “definitive” lens in that only the professional development on the plan would be approved by the principals. As one principal indicated, “nothing less or nothing more” would be provided “for the



teacher.” Principals reported feeling torn between mandating professional learning to fulfill the “letter of the law,” and reaching out to the “reasons why” teachers were put on a plan of improvement. Many principals reported that the plan of improvement automatically put teachers on “edge,” and had the potential to create a “wedge” between teachers and leaders, and put both teachers and principals in a position of being “in a fishbowl.” The principals used descriptive images to describe what it was like for them to work with marginal teachers. Other metaphors and images included: “hatchet man,” “walking the tightrope,” “guard of the building,” “bull dog,” and “worst nightmare.”

### **Time and the Plan of Improvement**

The notion of time and the plan of improvement was a reoccurring idea with extended commentary about the significant amount of time required to successfully work with marginal teachers. Leaders experienced “frustration” with the amount of time it takes to see improvement. One principal shared “Marginal teachers can’t be ‘fixed’ overnight!” One principal shared, that “sometimes it is gradual; sometimes it takes a couple of years to see a real change.” Another principal vehemently said, “I hate how long the process takes. It can be a whole year before you even see any improvement, so that means that is a whole year that those children have lost.” A middle school principal shared however, “time is not an option. I must see growth and see it quickly.” Another principal said, “With accountability, we just do not have the luxury of time—and time is *not* what I am willing to give any more.” A principal summarized, “accountability has been a deal changer for working with marginal teachers.”

The time associated with working with marginal teachers was a tension for these leaders in that “time with marginal teachers takes time away from working with all teachers in an equitable manner.” Another principal shared that she resents having to work with

marginal teachers because “others who are high performers get left behind.” Almost every principal shared that the time factor was “to the detriment of other teachers who are performing and have needs, too.” Another participant described how he wanted to spend as much time as he could in the classrooms with the teachers, especially those who are struggling. However, as the principal of a large high school, “there are only so many hours in the day.” He elaborated, “I can’t always be in classrooms, and I can’t spend all my time trying to find professional development that is tailored for a unique need. Our system just does not allow us that luxury.”

One principal indicated that the time required to work through the process, especially the documentation and paperwork, with a marginal teacher “turns a lot of principals off.” Another principal described the plan of improvement as a source of “frustration,” noting that the plan “takes energy and effort to do things right.” Another principal indicated, “You can invest too much time in all that mess,” and in many ways that curtails “my ability to really care, when I know improvement may not make any difference. The teacher could be a ‘goner’ who will probably not return.”

**Theme 2: Confidentiality Trumps Collaboration.** The second theme centers on tensions related to confidentiality and the issues involving other school personnel in professional support. The tension for many was that they knew that encouraging collaboration could act as a support for teachers, but the risks were just “too high” to promote this type of assistance. All the participants addressed the issue of confidentiality. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the topic of marginal teachers, and personnel issues in general, confidentiality played a role at each step of the process. “As a leader, I can’t discuss the needs of one teacher with another,” expressed the prevailing thoughts of the principals.

One principal indicated that “regardless of what is said or not, everyone knows which teachers are on plans of improvement, and my hands are tied.” Most principals believed that they could not



enlist the support of other teachers given the potential legalities associated with plans of improvement especially if a teacher would likely not be renewed. One principal shared, "It's a lonely world for me and for the teacher on a plan of improvement." Another principal indicated, "I stand alone, and it has to stay that way." Another principal shared a situation where a teacher was having "a really difficult time, and her colleagues wanted to help. They came to me, and I had to refuse to discuss the situation. I felt that I had to be silent." This principal elaborated, "I know that these teachers had good intentions, but to share what the teacher needed would compromise issues down the road" Furthermore, "I was told by central office not to enlist the support of others." On a personal and professional level, the principal shared, "It was very difficult, because other people would ask about it, or say things, especially parents, and you didn't want to say anything that you shouldn't, but you also knew something was really wrong."

Both System A and System B in which this study was conducted are larger, urban areas. However, one principal indicated the communities "from where our students come from are really small neighborhoods." This principal explained that confidentiality can be a problem that carries over into the community of her school, because at her school "a lot of teachers also live in this community, and socialize in this community, with the parents in this community. A lot of things from schools pill over." A majority of the principals indicated that they would not include "people" resources from within their buildings to support marginal teachers for fear of legal repercussions, the potential fall-out of other teachers in their buildings, and as a way to help the struggling teacher "save face" among peers.

There were three principals (all elementary) who did try to enlist the support of peers to help marginal teachers remediate weaknesses relayed to their instructional practices. However, they all expressed that confidentiality can be difficult to maintain when employing the help of coaches and other building personnel in assisting and

supporting a marginal teacher. One principal shared, “The team only needs to know what they need to know, but obviously, if they are helping, they know something is going on.” Confidentiality comes in to play because “word spreads quickly in a school environment” when a teacher is on a plan of improvement. These three principals indicated that “it was worth the risk,” “they would do everything in their power to support a marginal teacher,” and that the calculated risks “make a difference” for teachers who are struggling. A majority of the participants, however, did not share these views and for them to support collaboration could, in the end according to one participant, “make a mess.”

It is interesting that learning opportunities did not enlist the support of others and that many of the principals were resentful of marginal teachers who took up more time with monitoring progress eclipsing opportunities for performing teachers to have administrative attention. Confidentiality provided to be a barrier for principals to reconcile whether others should be involved with working and nurturing marginal teachers.

**Theme 3: Professional Development by the Numbers.** The third theme centers on professional development for marginal teachers. To examine data about professional learning for marginal teachers, Desimone’s (2011) framework (see literature section) was used as way to order data found in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3

Framework for Effective Professional Development (Desimone. 2011)	Findings
Content Focus	Professional development content was <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “by the numbers” and prescriptive focusing on the “approximate” needs elaborated in plans of improvement.</li> <li>• approximate to needs</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>deemed successful by check marks after items in the plan of improvement</li> </ul>
Active Learning	<p>Marginal teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>worked alone or only with the school leadership</li> <li>had no extra supports for feedback, peer observations, modeling, shadowing teachers who have more expertise, and other types of corollary supports appear to be absent</li> <li>"sat" in workshops offered by the central office</li> </ul>
Framework for Effective Professional Development (Desimone. 2011)	Findings
Coherence	<p>Professional development for marginal teachers was</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>not tied to any school-wide effort or purposefully linked to instructional supervision</li> <li>was tied more to teacher evaluation</li> </ul>
Duration	As soon as the plan of improvement ended so too did supports.
Collective participation	Marginal teachers were not encouraged or rarely offered the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers. The principal or other members of the administrative team were the safety net

### **Prescriptive Professional Development**

Given the tenor of accountability and the uses of student achievement linked to teacher performance, the participants focused more intently on connecting professional development to evaluation. Overall, principals did provide professional development for the marginal teachers they supervised on a plan of improvement; however, data points to a compliance-drive model of professional learning that was highly prescriptive based on the judgment of the principal. One participant shared that he “decided on what type of professional development was needed” and “how much and for how long.” Another principal shared that she had “no qualms” or “second doubts” about “knowing what was best for the teachers based on the reasons the plan of improvement was developed.”

The principals from one school system repeatedly used the word “deficits” to describe the issues that marginal teachers faced in the classroom. By extension, many of the interviews focused on the principal’s role leading “deficit-based” professional learning opportunities. One of the middle school principals indicated that he “would occasionally consult with others” when deciding what professional development was appropriate; however, he was “the final word” on all matters to teachers who had to “ultimately own their issues.” Overwhelmingly, the principals shared similar sentiments about “assigning professional development” on the “needs of the building, the needs of students, and the requirements of the curricular program.”

### **Providers of Professional Development**

According to the principals in this study, professional development for marginal teachers rarely occurred in-house with direct assistance provided by school personnel. When asked, the principals produced “menus of professional development” offered at the district level. When asked about “site-level” professional development for marginal teachers, several perspectives were shared.





One principal indicated that if a marginal teacher was in the “first-year of teaching,” the teacher could “consult with a mentor,” but the “initiation” would need to come from the marginal teacher. All participants indicated a reluctance to engage others at the “file and rank” of teachers at the site in any matters related to marginal teaching except in the instances where marginal teachers at the beginning of their careers could consult with a mentor. At the high school level, department chairs were not typically asked to work with struggling department members, but they shared that “teachers could consult with their department chairs.” The elementary principals across these two systems referenced that they had occasionally assigned either a math or literacy coach to work with “marginal teachers more” but “document [the] time” with these teachers.

### Discussion

The literature about professional development paints a strong portrait of learning that should extend over time (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011); be continuous, ongoing, and include follow-up opportunities (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2013); embedded within the workday and relevant to the teacher’s needs (Zepeda, 2015); content and grade specific (Desimone, 2011); and promotes collaboration, brainstorming, reflection, and inquiry (Timperley, 2008). Moreover, Desimone (2011) advocates for coherence to connect all learning supports, and Zepeda (2016, 2017) is resolute that instructional supervision, teacher evaluation, and professional development must be unified in purposes and intents—teacher growth and development. Unfortunately, these notions were absent from the interviews with this group of principals.

As an instructional leader, the principal is responsible for hiring and retaining teachers and that includes being the leader of professional learning. The 12 principals who agreed to be interviewed all had experience working with marginal teachers. It is interesting that professional development for marginal teachers was

viewed as a deficit proposition, the teachers were broken, and their deficits could be fixed through the remediation offered through professional development as initiated in formal plans of improvement. Absent also was discussion about teachers as adult learners that could learn from job-embedded professional development where teachers could learn from their work. The findings of this study must be balanced in that the teachers that the participants spoke about were ones who were having difficulties in the classroom. However, the needs of marginal teachers are of paramount importance. Perhaps a limitation of this study was that the researcher did not probe the principals to think about a single instance of a marginal teacher.

As a whole, this group of school leaders knew that marginal teachers needed a specialized, more intensive support system; however, the approaches that the leaders took with this population of teachers appears to be one of estrangement and exclusion from working with others in the buildings. It appears that the accountability context was forcing professional development to be a compliance-driven system with a menu of district-wide learning opportunities. A notable finding is that the principals delegated professional development more to the system level. Principals distanced marginal teachers from direct support from within the buildings with the exception of literacy or math coaches at the elementary schools. Professional development consistent with only what was available and not necessarily tied to individual needs appeared to be the norm for working with marginal teachers. As a researcher, I was struck by one comment about marginal teachers: "If they fail, I feel like I have failed."

### **Implications**

Professional development must not be viewed as a quick-fix to support the improvement of teachers who have marginal practices. Professional development for marginal teachers must go beyond



being viewed as a deficit model and avoid becoming a professional development compliancy model where opportunities to grow are only a part of a check-list. Professional learning must become personalized complementing what we know about developmental (Glickman et al., 2014) and differentiated (Glatthorn, 1997) supervision. Professional development for marginal teachers needs to include site-level supports that go beyond the assistance from school leaders. New ways of teacher collaboration (e.g., collaborative planning), uses of technology (e.g., chat rooms for teachers), and teacher leaders (e.g., peer coaches, mentors) can and should be part of the safety-net for a vulnerable population of teachers.

The perspectives of the principals were important, but the sample size was small. This research presents one way of examining issues about professional development for marginal teachers on plans of improvement. However, given the issues of confidentiality, the research community needs to think through more rigorous ways of exploring this and other areas with school leaders. Clearly, the interview process in this study had limitations one being the inability to audio-record.

Perhaps, a next area to research is to figure out a way to interview teachers who have been on a formal plan of improvement. However, it is unlikely that a group of teachers whether or not that they are on a plan of improvement, they have been released from a plan of improvement, or they have been non-renewed could be assembled. With the proliferation of on-line groups, perhaps this could potentially be a way for teachers to self-identify without full disclosure of their circumstances, identities, etc. The work of leaders with teachers who need extra support will continue given the complexities in which teachers work, and to this end, schools need leaders who can champion this type of work.

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