

The Professional Learning Community to Implement the Results-Based Management Approach (RBM) in Québec

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Abstract

School principals are agents of change in the implementation of education policies as they oversee accountability actions that serve to monitor and evaluate student achievement and identify the measures required. In Québec, where *results-based management* (RBM) is encouraged, the *professional learning community* (PLC) approach ensures this accountability by enabling members to gather, manage, and analyze student data. This case study pertains to the experience of one principal who sought training on how to integrate a PLC in his school. In the context of RBM, characterized by an increase in administrative tasks, this principal ultimately experienced a low sense of effectiveness regarding his supervision practices by having few legal structures to support this supervision. Two series of teaching activities are proposed related to prioritization tasks and the role of PLCs in a context of work intensification and RBM.

Keywords: professional learning community, Results-Based Management, teacher supervision, principals, accountability

Case Narrative

Francis is a Québec City high school principal with five years of experience. In his former school, he focused primarily on his administrative duties and less on his educational role. Because his school board had no guidelines regarding teacher supervision, Francis was concerned about the lack of framework and thus found supervision risky. He had not taught in over five years and therefore felt that he lacked the expertise to effectively supervise his tenured teachers who were specialists in disciplines other than his own. He also thought that he did not have enough time to perform this duty and that he lacked student data collection and analysis skills.

Francis was under pressure from all sides. On the one hand, his teachers' associated supervision with evaluation and therefore viewed supervision as an attack on their professional autonomy; on the other hand, were his district's expectations with respect to RBM: namely, that he (1) supervise his teachers individually and collectively and (2) report on his students' outcomes. The existing RBM policy (as established by the school team, their district, and the Ministry of Education) created several challenges for Francis, such as the element of control conveyed by this policy, the arduousness and complexity of the existing tools, the fact that administrative management was prioritized over pedagogical actions, and the difficulty getting teachers to participate. After four years in this school, he decided to establish a professional learning community (PLC). Unfortunately, this PLC dissolved soon after due to various issues, including the lack of clarity regarding the roles of each member, the limited sharing of power within the PLC, and the lack of collaboration and cohesion when introducing certain practices.

In hindsight, Francis recognized the weaknesses in his past experiences with a PLC. These issues were not based on evidence, and they were too strongly influenced by perceptions, opinions, subjectivity,

and mandatory member participation was not well received. Furthermore, Francis was not always present to supervise each session and was alone to implement his PLC. Despite the fact that Francis had previously attended training workshops given by experts on how to establish and develop PLCs, the long-term repercussions of these seminars proved to be limited, as he received no guidance or follow-up from the training facilitators following the theoretical portion of the activities. Consequently, Francis failed to keep his work journal up to date to document the development of his PLC.

In September 2018, Francis transferred to Saint-Laurent High School in the greater Montréal area. Francis had mixed feelings: he was sad to leave his old school, where he had managed to establish a climate of trust, but he was enthusiastic about the challenge of starting over in a new environment. This climate of trust had developed over time, particularly because of the underlying power context and the need to preserve a balance between pedagogical support and control. He succeeded by being present, using the strengths of each member, encouraging participation (notably by forming groups of volunteers), sharing responsibilities, and always placing the students' needs first.

The new school has 400 students, a deprivation index of 3/10 (1 being the least disadvantaged), and teachers who have between 1 and 25 years of experience (an average of 5 years). The district's Education Services presented Francis with an annual report (diagnostic rather than negative), followed by the recommendation that he increase his Secondary 5 student achievement rank on the provincial assessments by 2% in both French and English. Francis was reassured that he would receive the help and support of pedagogical counsellors and Education Services.

With its Student Success action plan, his district sought to strengthen the existing integration, supervision, and guidance programs of its schools. One proposed objective was to introduce structured and adapted teacher supervision practices to encourage commitment, perseverance, and mobilization. "It's a good start," thought Francis. He, therefore, reflected on how he could better supervise his teachers and the type of help he would require from his school district.

Among the actions planned, Francis hoped to provide supervision to guide his school team to gather and manage the students' data; this would enable him to submit these results to his district at the end of the following school year after having analyzed them and evaluated the effectiveness of the efforts deployed throughout the year to reach the targeted goals. Francis asked for a list of Secondary 5 students who were at risk in French and English. He had already taken statistics courses and knew how to use his district's data processing software. The pedagogical advisor expressed an interest in helping Francis establish links between the results of the collected data and the annual action plan. However, because of the failure of his previous PLC, he remained hesitant regarding the idea of instigating a new initiative.

Two months after taking office, his school district announced a program to recruit approximately 12 principals on a volunteer basis to participate in a research-action-training project (R-A-T) led by a university. This type of research initiative is designed to (1) meet the training needs of school principals responsible for teacher supervision through an approach involving reflection and (2) support the intent of an experienced university research team to address these professional development needs. The goal of this R-A-T was to assist principals in establishing and supervising a PLC. Francis saw this as a perfect opportunity to discuss how he could lead and support his PLCs more effectively.

During the monthly 90-minute R-A-T meetings, Francis and his peers were able to discuss and share their respective practices to improve student learning and comply with accountability requirements. Francis and the other participants were thus able to collectively examine the theoretical and practical aspects of supervision practices, reflect on related issues, and explore new ideas and supervision practices in the context of a PLC. This shared knowledge (research, practices, experiences) came to guide Francis's actions.

During the R-A-T sessions, Francis learned how the other principals dealt with this reality. He felt inspired by **Nathalie**, who exercised pedagogical leadership by maintaining high standards and guiding her teams using increasingly mature PLCs that centered on student achievement in reading. The pedagogical orientations of her PLC were based on evidence and the students' previous results. This principal persevered, even when the results were not as expected. She never missed an opportunity to show her appreciation to her teachers for their efforts.

Francis also shared several characteristics with **Patrick**. This principal primarily used individual teacher supervision, which he undertook with his vice-principals, to improve teaching and learning practices and student outcomes. While his teachers did not see him as a detective or an intruder and did not

mind his in-class observations, they made it known that he was not an expert on the subjects they taught. He was also interested in setting up a PLC on a volunteer basis at the beginning of the next school year to ensure group supervision. Francis saw opportunities for collaboration with this principal.

Francis also identified very much with **Jean-Charles**, who expressed feeling that he was “between a rock and a hard place” because he had to deal with the fact that his teachers did not like the idea of quantifying, disseminating, and comparing student results by class. The latter perceived the PLC rather negatively because of the gap between the goal (in terms of achievement) and the resources available in their rather disadvantaged area. In response to Jean-Charles falling short of his district’s expectations regarding the improvement of Secondary 4 student outcomes in math, the district shortened its reins which left Jean-Charles feeling that the actions taken to launch and lead his educational project were being dictated by his superiors. In this context, the priority of this principal was to establish a climate of trust with his team to encourage learning.

Francis also empathized with **Suzanne**, who laughingly referred to a “love triangle” between herself, her school board, and her teachers. Although this principal stated having met her district’s expectations, she understood that her teachers were not totally on board with the RBM approach, which they felt was too directive, coercive, and bureaucratic. Suzanne spoke of the various meetings she had with her superiors and felt that these meetings took up too much time, which she felt could have been better spent on her teachers.

At every meeting (often holding back her emotions), **Nicole** related her experiences with difficult teachers who refused to get involved, who justified their opposition by their right to professional autonomy, and who did not hesitate to involve their union. Her teachers were against what they felt was “top-down” management. Since he had experienced some of these situations himself, Francis believed he could help Nicole.

His context also differed from **Myriam**’s, who often spoke of her “dilemma” working in a highly advantaged area and how she could continue to improve the results of students who already excelled. She used the participative leadership approach. During her supervision of the PLCs in her school, she identified potential obstacles, used inclusive language (e.g., using the “we” in expressions such as “our” action plan and “our” students), and exercised transparency.

Today, Francis feels well-supported in his second attempt to establish a PLC. He can now count on the help and input of highly motivated peers and researchers. Significant challenges remain, however, particularly in terms of time management, to make teacher supervision a priority. Francis understands that time must be set aside to attend professional meetings, pursue his own continuing education, actively participate in training activities held in the school, brainstorm with teachers, keep abreast of pedagogical reforms, and share his discoveries with the school team. That said, the RBM approach is known to mobilize a significant number of organizational, time-dependent, and human resources, which can render this bureaucratic model both cumbersome and complex.

1. What advice would you give Francis to help him devote less time to administrative duties and more to instruction-related tasks, including supervision in his PLCs?
2. Propose a work plan. Where should Francis start?
3. By collaborating with his colleagues, Nathalie and Patrick, how can Francis use the PLC to show accountability to his superiors?

These questions are intended to further an understanding of the principal’s responsibility in the PLC in a perspective of accountability. Few studies have examined the role of PLCs in applying accountability, as the primary mandate of the PLC is to serve pedagogical supervision. Indeed, not only is the relationship of trust between principals and their teachers a predominant factor in the development of the PLC, but the use of data to evaluate and control teachers has been shown to be counter-productive (Bou-chamma, April, & Basque, 2017).

Teaching Notes

This case study examines various situations and challenges experienced by school leaders. Meeting with his peers enabled Francis to learn about the different views regarding teacher supervision in the context of RBM. As a preamble, the following figure illustrates the accountability process and the balance Francis

must strive for between the top-down approach of RBM and bottom-up style of the PLC. It also highlights the role of the R-A-T project in establishing a PLC.

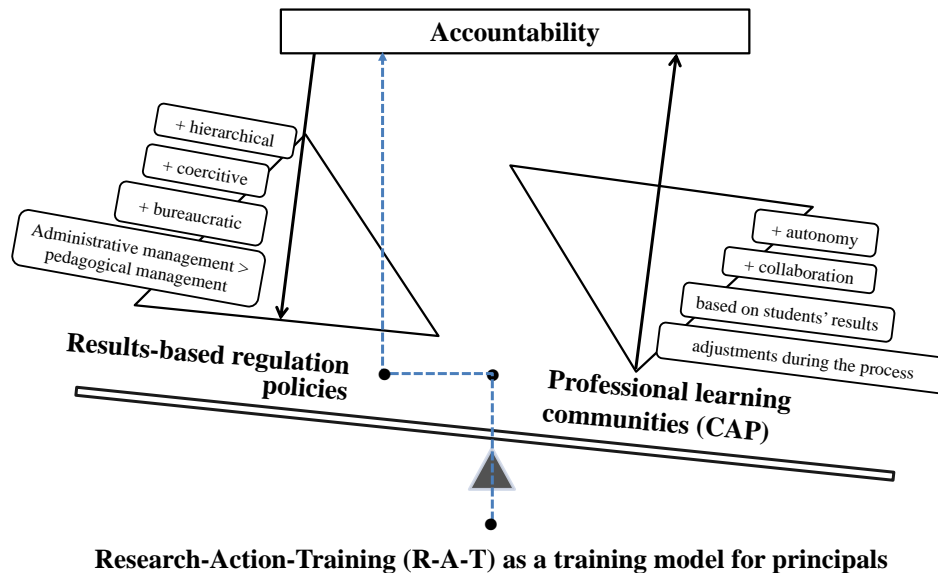


Figure 1. Accountability: Seeking balance between top-down and bottom-up through the PLC and training (adapted from Bouchamma, April, & Basque, 2017).

In light of the increasingly complex administrative and pedagogical duties of school principals, Francis considers the PLC to be an excellent model to exercise both pedagogical management and accountability practices within an RBM approach. The PLC is defined as a mode of operation focused on collaboration within the school team, where the group is encouraged to adopt reflective actions and activities for their continuous professional growth and the improvement of their students (Roy & Hord, 2006). The PLC thus represents a way to maintain accountability through an RBM approach by applying certain basic principles in the school, such as autonomy, collaboration, and the use of student data (DuFour & Eaker, 2009).

Parallel to this perspective, RBM is defined as a management approach based on the expressed expectations and analysis of a group toward an organization, its context, and its available resources (MEES, 2018a). RBM is thus structured to direct the efforts of the system's stakeholders in compliance with legislation and established control mechanisms regulating the actions and results of school districts and their schools (Maroy et al., 2017). In the province of Québec, accountability policies carry legal considerations (Public Education Act, 2019). Ultimately, the goal is to monitor and evaluate student achievement and to develop strategies for sustainment. The school principal is, therefore, an agent for change in implementing education policies as well as an intermediary between regional and local education authorities (Barrère, 2013; Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002; UNESCO, 2006). In short, principals must find a balance between the top-down accountability policies of RBM and how they can be effectively applied in the school setting, particularly in regard to teacher supervision practices.

The following section outlines the challenges encountered by Francis, as well as a few key actions to overcome these issues. Two series of activities are proposed, which are accompanied and contextualised by a review of the literature:

- Series 1: Organizing time to make supervision a priority through the PLC
- Series 2: Using the PLC for pedagogical and accountability purposes

Activity 1: Organizing Time to Make Supervision a Priority Through the PLC

Francis and his colleagues have difficulty implementing and developing PLCs because of the time they

spend on administrative duties that are unrelated to pedagogy. Here, it is crucial that teachers have autonomy in their practices, which in turn gives principals more time to attend to their other duties. The PLC is thus an ideal approach to help render teachers professionally accountable.

To address the issue of lack of time, principals should, for example, use supervision models that *involve other actors* (mentoring, self-supervision using the portfolio, learning and practice communities, etc.). Their actions must also *be prioritized*. Bouchamma, Giguère, and April (2019) recommend supervising teachers with difficulties, newly hired teachers, and non-tenured faculty first; these individuals should be involved in the PLC as soon as possible. Principals should also establish *pluriannual* priorities for the other teachers through the PLC and *recognize teachers* who have excelled in their work during the year.

Complete the following exercises on how to manage time to make the PLC a priority.

Activity 1.1: Identifying Priorities.

1. Do you agree with this order of priority?
2. What would Francis's priorities be?

Activity 1.2: Organizing Time to Make Teacher Supervision a Priority Through the PLC

(based on Bouchamma, Giguère, and April, 2019)

This self-evaluation can be administered to principals (and Francis) to identify their actions to make teacher supervision a clear priority by means of the PLC.

Table 1

My Organizing Time to Make Teacher Supervision a Priority Through PLC

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Does not apply
Teacher supervision through the PLC is my priority. To have time to give it my full attention...				
1. I place it before my administrative duties.				
2. I plan the PLC meetings at the beginning of the school year.				
3. I put the PLC meetings in my schedule.				
4. I delegate administrative duties to certain members of my staff (vice-principal, teaching, or non-teaching staff) to attend these PLC meetings.				
5. During the PLC meetings, I delegate certain pedagogical responsibilities to teacher leaders.				
6. I keep informed on the PLC meetings I miss by reading the minutes or their written reports.				
7. I ask the mentors and peers to report on the supervision of some of their peers.				
8. I ask my teachers to build their professional portfolio and I follow up.				
Others:				

Activity 1.3 :

1. Do you agree with these actions will result in more time given to the PLCs?
2. Can you identify other actions Francis could undertake to save time and make teacher supervision a priority?

Activity 2: Using the PLC for Pedagogical and Accountability Purposes

This sequence addresses issues related to RBM implementation, its impact on pedagogical management, and the role of the PLC in integrating RBM processes.

Inherent challenges of RBM implementation. Francis listened to his peers speak of different situations and learned about other viewpoints and the existence of different levels of appropriation of the notion of accountability. While some chose data collection and analysis that enabled them to conduct a personalized follow-up of their students, others used standardized testing in addition to the government assessments. In the latter case, the principals were helped by authorities from their district Education Services to analyze their data (Maroy et al., 2017).

The following exercise facilitates reflection on actions principals can undertake in terms of data collection and analysis tools as a key practice for pedagogical management and accountability practices.

Activity 2.1: Using Data Collection and Analysis Tools

(adapted from Bouchamma, Giguère, and April, 2019)

Based on the presented case study, determine whether Francis uses data collection and analysis tools in his PLC and answer the questions that follow.

Table 2
Using Data Collection and Analysis Tool

	Yes	No	Not mentioned in the text
1. Francis has the necessary data collection tools.			
2. Francis knows how to adapt these tools to his teachers' needs.			
3. Francis collects data by targeting certain specific areas which he and the teachers have predetermined.			
4. Francis considers the annual action plan when he collects the student data.			
5. Francis has a list of the failing and/or at-risk students in the basic subjects.			
6. Francis is capable of analyzing the data he has collected.			
7. Francis is able to make connections between the results of the collected data and the annual action plan.			
1. Do you agree that these actions will make better use of data collection and analysis tools? 2. Can you identify other actions Francis could undertake to use data collection and these analysis tools more effectively?			

Studies on accountability policy reforms show that principals and teachers are far from passive in regards to this legislation; however, they must adjust their management and teaching practices to be more effective (Spillane et al., 2002) and to navigate around these logical aspects in their work (Spillane & Ander-

son, 2013). Indeed, research in the United States has shown that schools who do not meet their targeted achievement goals may be subject to serious administrative sanctions (Spillane & Anderson, 2013; West, Peck, Reitzug, & Crane, 2012). Québec's Education Act declares that the Ministry of Education may adjust or reduce the authority of its school districts or schools who fail in their contractual obligation to attain the anticipated results (Brassard, Lusignan, & Pelletier, 2013).

In the case presented here, colleagues Jean-Charles, Nicole, and Suzanne referred to the top-down aspect of RBM. The fact is that researchers and practitioners alike have criticized RBM as being too hierarchical, coercive, directive, and complex (Bernatchez, 2011; Brassard, Lusignan, & Pelletier, 2013), in addition to representing a means to control local organizations who join other ones, thereby rendering the system too bureaucratic and mechanistic (Brassard, Lusignan, & Pelletier, 2013). Moreover, as reported by Jean-Charles, RBM continues to be less appreciated in disadvantaged areas because of the gap between educational goals (student achievement) and the availability of resources in these areas (Brassard, Lusignan, & Pelletier, 2013; Lapointe et al., 2011).

Relevance of RBM for pedagogy. All things considered, principals generally recognize the legitimacy of RBM (Brassard, Lusignan, & Pelletier, 2013; Maroy et al., 2017) as it ensures effectiveness through established objectives. RBM supports a more systematic and directive pedagogical supervision by proposing such strategies as planning, follow-up, coordination, evaluation, and control to enhance effectiveness with regard to anticipated outcomes (Bouchamma, April, & Basque, 2017). Research in this field employs the term “pedagogical management” to refer to any approach used by school leaders (principals or district authorities) to supervise teachers based on their students' results to improve teaching and learning practices (Maroy et al., 2017). In fact, Francis's colleagues all appeared to agree that supervision practices, developing the skills of the school teams, and monitoring progress to reach achievement goals were determining factors of student achievement and not the ideological policies and referents per se (Maroy & Voisin, 2013).

RBM studies also show that principals have to adapt their practices by considering not only the directives from their superiors but also how well their teachers welcome this approach and the collaborative practices that are promoted to help boost student performance (Lapointe & Brassard, 2018). In other words, establishing RBM means addressing the needs of different levels of stakeholders involved in the process (Ministry, school board, and school) in addition to the needs of the students. As reported, this action was more difficult for Francis's colleagues Jean-Charles, Nicole, and Suzanne.

The following exercise serves to identify winning practices that lead to successfully establishing RBM through the PLC within the existing context of work intensification.

Activity 2.2 Winning Practices to Successfully Establish RBM

In this case study, both Nathalie and Myriam identified several winning practices to successfully establish RBM, such as: make adjustments when the objective is not met; be patient when results are not immediate; use evidence-based data when making decisions; refer to previous results to clarify objectives; motivate and encourage staff and acknowledge their efforts; identify potential issues beforehand; use inclusive language and participative leadership; consider the teachers' needs; and be transparent. These practices are both administrative and pedagogical.

- Do you agree with these winning practices?
- What could Francis realistically do?
- Can you think of other winning practices? To help you, you are invited to read the following articles and identify other winning practices that are not mentioned in this case study.

April, D., & Bouchamma, Y. (2017). Influence of pedagogical supervisors' practices and perceptions on the use of results-based management. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 183, 82–98.

Bouchamma, Y., April, D., & Basque, M. (2017). Les communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles : un mode de fonctionnement pour opérationnaliser la reddition de comptes. *Revista de la Asociación de sociología de la educación*. 10(3), 397–414. *de la Asociación de sociología de la educación*. 10(3), 397–414.

RBM intensifies how pedagogical activity is managed, which has led school districts and their principals to adapt RBM strategies to suit their organizational reality and adjust pedagogical practices to meet their achievement goals (Maroy et al., 2017). Consequently, RBM emphasizes the importance of supervising teachers beyond the structural changes (Maroy et al., 2016).

As Québec currently does not have an official government-approved program on teacher supervision, its principals have therefore adopted flexible measures developed by and with other education stakeholders, particularly through the professional learning community (PLC) model to monitor students' results, improve upon existing teaching practices, and promote accountability (Bouchamma, April, & Basque, 2017). In this context, the PLC provides a definite balance between the policies and their implementation by educators and connects these policies by encouraging autonomy, collaboration, and the use of student data (DuFour & Eaker, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study of one principal's path toward establishing RBM in their school made it possible to examine the measures used by other school leaders to develop both RBM as a valuable pedagogy management tool and the PLC as an effective way to implement this operational structure within the practice. Training through a research-action-training project was proposed to help develop the supervision skills of these principals.

Several key elements associated with this methodology were identified: collaboration with partners; the value of needs analysis; optimization of data collection tools and the training content for practitioners; flexibility in terms of the conceptual framework, training content, data collection method and functioning mode; the use of feedback and validation by the participants; and the latter's empowerment (Bouchamma, April, & Basque, 2017).

For Francis, it would be in his interest to collaborate closely with Nathalie who has significant expertise in supervising a PLC. In addition, perhaps Francis could share his successful practices and concerns with Patrick, who also wishes to set up a PLC in his school. Ultimately, Francis should always remember the ultimate goal of his actions: to improve educational services and student achievement. In his situation, specifically, Francis should focus on improving the results of his Secondary 5 students on the ministerial exams in French and English.

In conclusion, the following question and sub-questions we should ask are:

How can principals comply with government objectives and

- take into account the particularities of their context (culture of collaboration, climate, deprivation index, level of ethnocultural diversity, rate of advancement of the school teams, other individual characteristics)?
- respect the professional autonomy of their teachers?
- be creative and innovative?

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