

A Cross Canada Inventory: Evidence of 21st Century Educational Reform in Canada

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Abstract This paper reports on an initial website review of Ministries of Education, provincial teacher associations and select school jurisdictions across Canada with respect to their publically available and visible policy commitments to 21st century educational reforms. This review was conducted for the purposes of drawing conclusions about the current state of these reform efforts in Canada and, consequently, to provide implications for the future. Through the implementation of thematic analysis findings revealed that the publically available 21st century reform policy of provincial Ministries of Education tended to be best described by one of three frames: the futurist frame, the political frame and the teacher as change agent frame.

Keywords 21st century education · Reform · Policy · Frames

Introduction

Guiding educational systems towards the adoption of 21st century competencies has become a global movement. Stemming from the UNESCO (1996) document *Learning: The treasure within*, a reform movement that identified outcomes as competencies rather than skills began to make its way into the ethos of national educational systems. This reform included an expectation of technological integration in schools to promote equity, elevated teacher excellence as critical to educational development, and linked economic growth to educational advancement. Beginning in 2001 in Quebec, Canadian Ministries of Education (CMEC) began to move in this direction, resulting today in varying levels of publically available,

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online evidence that speaks to 21st century educational policy reform and its implementation.

From Quebec, this reform movement based on the development of 21st century competencies spread, in a highly disjointed manner, to Alberta in 2008 with literacy curriculum reform (Alberta Education 2008), to British Columbia (Premier's Technology Council 2010), to Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2010), and to Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education 2014), and has begun to emerge as a matter of urgency in Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Ministry of Education 2015). A website review of the remaining provinces of Manitoba, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and of the territories of Nunavut, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories revealed less publically available evidence specifically recognizable as 21st century educational reform but did present commitments to teaching and learning that echo this reform movement.

Methodology

This review was conducted using thematic analysis to discern themes in publically available reform documents in each of the Canadian territories and provinces. The resultant findings were categorized within particular frames such as one might encounter in the media, each website contributing to a particular view of the topic. In this way each website became the frame through which to view 21st century policy commitments on behalf of the relevant Ministries of Education, teacher associations and select school jurisdictions.

The act of treating themes as frames has been employed in many instances where a snapshot view is desired. For example, it was employed by Clark and Binns (2006) in their examination of perceptions of heart disease in high-circulation magazines. In this case, several frames were apparent including the medical frame, the lifestyle frame and the social-structural frame. In the medical frame the perception upheld was one of a heroic medical system battling an unruly physical body while in the lifestyle frame individuals were encouraged to wage their own wars using lists of healthy habits. The less prevalent social-structural frame acknowledged the connection between economics and health. As a result of this review, three frames became apparent including the teacher as change agent frame, the political frame and the futurist frame.

Methods and Data Sources

The Ministry of Education website for each province and territory in Canada was examined for two elements. First, it was determined if any policy documents were present that described or suggested a commitment to 21st century educational reform. If yes, each document was examined to determine the audience and the extent to which it provided not only guiding frameworks but recommendations for implementation. Each document was also examined to determine a primary theme, or frame, through which commitments were articulated. Second, the themes

encapsulated were examined and, as a result, the three frames including the futurist frame, the political frame and the teacher as change agent frame were developed.

Each province or territory was categorized according to the frame that dominated its policy discourse. In the teacher as change agent frame, 21st century reform efforts were articulated less from a theoretical or political standpoint that placed education as a means to the future and more as a commitment to strong teacher pedagogy in the present. In this frame, the pragmatics of teacher professional development and the implementation of specific programming were highlighted. The political frame was characterized by evidence that suggested a strong commitment to the ideals of 21st century educational reform from a theoretical perspective as opposed to the more pragmatic elements of implementation. The political frame spoke to the ministries for whom 21st century educational reform was addressed and articulated primarily as political policy. Finally, the futurist frame included those Ministries of Education for whom 21st century reform efforts were well underway. A strong public consultation process and a plan for implementation that included a strong sense of education as playing a critical role in preparing students for a globally interconnected and somewhat ambiguous future hallmarked this frame.

Discussion

Due to the nature of the Canadian federation, the education of citizens is held as a matter of provincial concern. Although ministers meet annually as part of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), a body by which educational concerns and directives are discussed from a national perspective, policies are crafted and implemented provincially. “CMEC provides leadership in education at the pan-Canadian and international levels and contributes to the exercise of the exclusive jurisdiction of provinces and territories over education” (CMEC, para. 2, n.d.). This exclusive jurisdiction is evidenced by the educational policies of each individual province. What follows is a description and examination of multiple provincial education websites, taken together to develop a snapshot of each frame and, as a result, the national commitments to 21st century competency-based educational reform.

The Teacher as Change Agent Frame

One example of the teacher as change agent frame can be found in Manitoba. Its Ministry website and publications do not explicitly outline a comprehensive, system-wide strategy for integrating 21st century competencies into their education system. Instead, the more immediate skills of numeracy and literacy are addressed in individual subject areas and reference to technology integration, entrepreneurialism, cross-curricular connections, and other generally-accepted 21st century competencies are found in a new document, *Curriculum Essentials* (Manitoba Education 2016) which appears to be crafted as a companion, teacher resource

document to current curriculum. Alternatively, the Manitoba Teachers Society (2016) attends to matters of local concern that impact teachers including workload, student poverty, increasing success for students with special needs, and promoting Aboriginal student learning. Highlighting the teacher as change agent in the immediate present, professional development involving technology integration was suggested but it was within the current structures, not as a future-oriented activity.

At the school board level, the Manitoba School Boards Association (2016) presented foundational statements that reflect the autonomous nature of the school board districts, and envisioned itself as “a respected and influential voice for public education in Manitoba... A valued and effective advocate for local education governance” (para.1). Additionally, their vision and mission statements reflected a commitment to autonomous governance of local school boards, a commitment that honoured the role of teachers to make a true difference in their immediate communities, rather than a far-reaching strategy to align with nationally developed 21st century skills or competencies as described by the CMEC (n.d.).

The publically available evidence from the Manitoba Ministry of Education stands as a clear example of the teacher as change agent frame. Within the description above, one can see the provincial commitment to teachers as the source of educational reform in Manitoba immediately. From a strongly committed plan for teacher professional development to a focus on the current skills of numeracy and literacy, the policy surrounding educational reform in Manitoba reflects the critical role of the teacher and includes a sense of urgency with regard to reform in Manitoba classrooms immediately.

The Political Frame

A clear example of the political frame is provided in the educational reform efforts of Nova Scotia. In 2011 the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education, with the assistance of third-party academic leaders in the field, began a discussion on those areas of the Education system that required attention. This initial discussion prompted a response from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) (2011). The NSTU criticized some of the fundamental assumptions that arose from the resultant report and, while agreeing with some of the report’s recommendations, the NSTU highlighted several politically-oriented areas that needed to be addressed within a reform movement including the number of students in each class, the composition of classes which included diverse learners with challenging needs, increased teacher workload to implement reforms, and change fatigue generated by ongoing implementation of different educational initiatives.

This initial report was then followed by a comprehensive discussion with Nova Scotia citizens (Minister’s Panel on Education, 2014) that garnered a response rate of 19 000 people. Again, the results suggested that Nova Scotia’s education system was in need of reform. In response, the Ministry developed the policy document *Nova Scotia’s action plan for Education 2015: The 3R’s: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild* (Nova Scotia Ministry of Education 2015). At the core of the proposed reform were four pillars: a modern education system, an innovative curriculum, inclusive school

environments, and excellence in teaching and leadership – pillars which reflected the 21st century skills and competencies stemming from documents on school reform put forth by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 1996). Reflected in the pillars developed by the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education (2015) were an emphasis on early learning of numeracy and literacy, a commitment to wellbeing and closer governmental oversight of the teacher profession. The focus on these reforms began in 2016 with Kindergarten to grade three students, with a larger implementation following. Integral to the implementation of these reforms was the careful examination of the experiences of other school jurisdictions in ensuring a smooth transition for schools (Ministers Panel on Education 2014).

The reform efforts of the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education stand as an excellent example of the political frame. As the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education (2015) educational reform policy document has been recently released for implementation, there exists a strong commitment to systemic change at the provincial level, which school jurisdictions within Nova Scotia are now starting to take up. What remains to be seen is if the Ministry's stated goal of learning from other jurisdictions in the implementation phase of policy reform will impact the take up of the four pillars of reform.

The Futurist Frame

The implementation of educational reforms from policy to practice is well underway in many Canadian provinces. Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta are multiple years into their transformations based on 21st century skills, and all four provinces have policy documents requiring schools and school boards to implement integrated technology skills development, cross-curricular competencies and entrepreneurialism and economic outcomes making communication and collaboration foundational abilities to drive student achievement (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2012; Alberta Education 2013; Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education 2014). Driving the educational reform movements appears to be the expected economic gains for each province as a result of improving educational systems and promoting teacher and administrator excellence in the implementation of reform efforts (Premier's Technology Council 2010; Alberta Education 2010; Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education 2014).

Teacher organizations in these four provinces have had varying levels of response to the movement of the systems towards 21st century competencies. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (2015), for example, provides clear alignment between the work of their teachers and educational policy reform, providing web-based examples of successful integration of competencies into classroom practice. A review of their website and publications reveals a support for the educational reforms outlined by the Saskatchewan government through providing teachers with links and resources to enable the government's vision (Saskatchewan Teachers Federation 2015).

The British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) also appears to align itself with the British Columbia Ministry of Education's (2012) policy document *Enabling Innovation: Transforming curriculum and assessment* but from a different perspective. Naylor (2011), in his BCTF discussion paper drafted in parallel to the Ministry document, suggested that the reforms pursued by the Ministry of Education were already supported by teaching professionals through philosophies such as constructivism, long valued by British Columbia teachers. While this has been recognized as challenging within a framework that also highlights policies related to improving international rankings and standardized accountability measures, Naylor (2011) suggested a number of current examples of teaching practice already constructivist in nature and aligned with 21st century skills and competencies, and suggested that the BCTF position itself as in support of teaching and learning within this framework.

In contrast, the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) website appeared not to contain any policy documents specifically in response to its Ontario Ministry of Education's (2014) *Achieving Excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario*, but did present numerous professional development opportunities and opportunities for teachers to participate in research application and design through Teacher Learning Co-Ops (Ontario Teachers Federation 2016). The Teacher Learning Co-Op, according to the OTF website, is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education and has a focus on collaboration and mentorship, clear examples of 21st century educational reform. The OTF's position on the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2014) *Achieving Excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario*, however, remains to be seen.

The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), in contrast to the three other provincial organizations, had a clear stance on the educational reforms that were developed under the Conservative government and then reconceptualised under the New Democratic Party. In response to an Alberta Education reform document developed under the previous Conservative government and now more difficult to find in the public sphere, the ATA countered with *A great school for all: Transforming education in Alberta* (2012). This has recently been revisited by the ATA (2015) in their document *Renewing the promise: A great school for all*. In this document, the ATA suggested that a measured approach to changing educational practices and structures was required in order to engage teachers in leading change. This included five opportunities that ought to be taken in the development of a new future for education and included a focus on equity, on learning and teaching, on research-informed decision making and on the development of teachers and school leaders. To this end, the Alberta Teachers' Association offers an extensive professional development program for teachers while participating in public consultation parallel to Alberta Education.

At the school board level, across all four provinces, alignment between the Ministry of Education's policy documents and the school board mission and vision statements are evident. Language of the reform policy documents can be found on school board websites, such as the Rocky Mountain School District (6) in British Columbia that states "In our Quest for Quality, we are committed to developing responsible learners, competent professionalism, integrity and respect. Through

collaboration and communication and with a commitment to quality results, we take an enthusiastic, innovative and entrepreneurial approach to education” (Rocky Mountain School District 2016, para. 2). Also, in Saskatchewan, a clear focus on accountability can be found in vision statements, which suggest that:

With enthusiasm and optimism, we continue to look forward to the challenges and triumphs ahead. We are reinvigorated with the knowledge that we will be working not only with local stakeholders but also with the Ministry of Education to advance student achievement levels. Vision 2020, the provincial Education Sector Strategic Plan, and Student First work makes for exciting days ahead! Data-based decisions will always remain a focus as well as our priority to provide a caring and respectful school environment for staff and students through our vision of ”Learning Without Limits...Achievement For All.” (Good Spirit School Division, 2016, para. 3)

This is echoed by the province of Ontario where school board strategic plans, goals and strategies are in line with the *Achieving Excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario* (Ontario Ministry of Education 2014) document, supporting the four major goal areas, and working to “inspire innovation and a passion for learning in every student” (District School Board of Ontario North East 2016).

The alignment of school board goals with the goals of 21st century competencies and skills is equally as apparent in Alberta where many school divisions have maintained their engagement with 21st century reform efforts, alongside the new provincial government. The 3E’s (Engaged thinker and ethical citizen with an entrepreneurial spirit) of the Ministerial Order of Education (Alberta Education 2013) are clearly evident on the Rocky View Schools website as they depict a 21st century learner as one who embodies ten 21st century competencies including global awareness, civic engagement and financial literacy to name only a few (Rocky View Schools 2016). This is then supported by numerous resources for teachers such as ideas on making learning visible and the implementation of inquiry-based approaches to learning.

The work of these four provinces provides a clear path to education as a globally connected endeavour intended to prepare students for a future they have yet to imagine. This futurist frame positions education, and teaching, as a path to the unknown with the teacher’s primary aim to instruct students on how to learn. This is the essence of the futurist frame, an education system that is flexible in response to the needs of the future.

Back to the Future—The Quebec Experience

Before all other provinces, and in response to the need for sweeping reforms suggested by public consultations in 1994, the Ministère de l’éducation (2001a) of Quebec outlined the competencies required for Quebec students to succeed in a knowledge-based, technologically advanced society. The *Quebec Education program (approved version)* (2001a) outlined the three major outcomes addressed through a 21st century skills and competency-based Program of Studies. This

curriculum document (Ministere de l'education 2001b) documented the rationale and competencies as the construction of identity, empowerment of students, and a construction of a world-view. The basis of the student experience would be to develop from a student to a citizen of a global economy. Interestingly, however, was the absence of reference to economic improvement for the province of Quebec.

An important lesson to be learned from Quebec, however, is the importance of resiliency in any reform movement. According to Lessard et al. (2016) “In the absence of an effective communication plan, the perception—and I emphasize the word—of the Reform’s basic relevance and implementation among some school personnel, and among even more members of the public, was undoubtedly negative” (para. 2). The implementation of this transformative view of education was, it would seem, flawed from the beginning, with a lack of clear communication from policy makers to parents and teachers, and a lack of governmental technological and financial support identified as challenges (Lessard et al. 2016). However, this has not stalled the reform movement. As these reforms near their fifteenth year since moving from policy to practice, their success and failure provides a critical example for the advances and challenges created by basing an educational system on 21st century competencies. As Lessard et al. (2016) now note:

Incidentally, now that the first cohort has graduated from high school and started college, many detractors have been silenced by this inspiring new generation that is optimistic about the future! The stage is set for ongoing improvement and an opportunity to learn from a Reform that retains a solid foundation, despite its flawed rollout. (para. 3)

Evident from this statement is the complexity of implementing such educational reform yet this need not mean reform is destined to fail. Instead, Lessard et al. show us that the implications for future reform can be informed by and strengthened by lessons learned early on.

Implications for the Future

The three frames described here, and the depictions of reform offered by each, present possible implications as education continues to change for the betterment of students. First, it is clear from the frames presented that reform itself is open to interpretation and debate. At present, various provinces have demonstrated strong commitments in various ways from immediate educational reform through teacher educational development to policy-driven reform enacted by governments to a combination of the two highlighted by public consultation and the preparation of students for an unknown future. This variation in publically available evidence suggests that each province is reacting to unique pressures and to differing public expectations for education. Understanding the myriad ways in which these localized pressures and expectations affect the interpretation and implementation of reform efforts will be critical for success.

A second implication of these frames involves the perceived need, or not, for a national view of education. What remains to be seen is if global pressures to move to a knowledge-based, technologically integrated, and competency-centred educational system based on economic improvement will itself transform the Canadian educational system, leading to the need for a national strategy on 21st century educational reform. As such, understanding the various stakeholder interpretations of 21st century learning and teaching, and their ultimate ends as they are envisioned and enacted across the country, will be critical.

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