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INTERPRETING 21ST CENTURY EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN ALBERTA: A PILOT STUDY

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This paper will highlight the unique findings of a pilot study designed to understand the interpretations made by classroom teachers of 21st century educational reform, with particular attention on the effects of these findings for pre-service teacher education. The study was conducted with two teachers and two school-based leaders in one Alberta school division known for its commitment to 21st century educational ideals. It was found that both teachers and school-based leaders are interpreting 21st century education in very different ways. Most interestingly is the propensity for 21st century education to become hallmarked by one aspect that then becomes foundational.

Keywords: 21st century; reform; K-12; teachers; pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

Alberta Education has invested considerable time and resources in the creation of policies outlining their vision of education for the 21st century in Alberta. Under the previous Conservative government this was communicated to schools via the Framework for Student Learning (Alberta Education, 2011), which outlined competencies all students in Alberta schools should have upon graduation. While this document, under the current New Democratic Party (NDP), has lost its position of significance, 21st-century educational reform is still being addressed through whole-scale curriculum reform designed to address the need for competency-based curricula. In 21st-
century educational literature a discussion of competencies addresses both what teachers ought to do and what knowledge and skills are valued (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012).

There is little research to suggest, however, whether teaching and learning has changed with the introduction of competency-based education. The pilot study described here, conducted by two researchers from the University of Calgary, aimed to shed light on that important reality by examining teacher and school-based leader interpretations of 21st century educational reform and the ways in which those interpretations were then enacted at the classroom level. As a result, implications for both kindergarten-to-grade-twelve education and post-secondary education were developed as they continue to strive towards the attainment of a 21st century educational model, a model that has implications nation-wide as provincial departments of education continue to grapple with educational reform (Burns, 2017).

ABBREVIATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Three bodies of distinct yet interconnected literature supported this study. Of greatest significance to the teachers and school-based leaders in this study was the policy literature created by Alberta Education, which spoke specifically to the theoretical construct of 21st century educational reform including those competencies that were deemed necessary for social resilience and learning excellence (Alberta Education, 2010, 2011, 2013; Hull, 2013; Peterson, 2004; Task Force for Teaching Excellence, 2014). The theoretical and legislative framework from which school-based personnel both create programming for children and create a vision and mission for schools was presented in this literature. Of particular importance to schools, and to teachers more specifically, was the vision of the educated Albertan of 2030 in the Alberta Education (2010) document, Inspiring Education. Through a consultative process with Alberta Education, “Albertans articulated their vision for education through specific outcomes which have been summarized as ‘the Three
Es’ of education for the 21st century,” which describe a student who is an “engaged thinker and an ethical citizen with an entrepreneurial spirit” (pp. 5-6). In a follow-up to this report, a framework describing seven competences associated with the Three E’s (Alberta Education, 2011) was developed and, along with supporting literature, has informed the work of schools, school leaders and educational policymakers for several years.

Literature concerned with effective 21st century teaching strategies that encouraged the development of 21st century educational competencies (Jacobsen, Lock & Friesen, 2013; McFarlane, 2011; Pence, 2010) and school leadership for educational reform (Butler, 2014; Fullan, 1998; Gaetane, 2008; Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Mullen, 2011) also formed a foundation for this study. This literature spoke primarily to methods of teaching and leading, focused on the role of specific teaching methods and the development of a school vision for that prioritized change and innovation. The underlying premise of these two bodies of literature were that leadership practices or instructional methods “…of the industrial past are inadequate for the myriad challenges and opportunities facing 21st century students” (Friesen & Scott, 2013, p. 2). Both teachers and leaders were called upon as change agents.

**METHOD**

This pilot study was undertaken in one elementary school in southern Alberta. The school was approached based on its reputation for excellence in competency-based educational reform efforts. The school-based leaders in the participant school selected two teachers for inclusion in the study and the two teachers and the two school-based leaders were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Semi-structured interviews were employed to ensure adequate opportunity for each of the participants to describe in their own words their interpretations of 21st century educational reform and competency-based education. Additionally, observations were conducted for one-half
day each in the classrooms of the two teachers using Friesen’s (2009) teaching effectiveness framework as a guide for the observations. Observations were conducted to permit the researcher to observe evidence of the interpretations gathered through the interview process. Finally, publically available school documents were examined for their descriptions of and attentions to reform efforts in the school and school division as evidence of a school-wide or district-wide strategy for educational reform. All data was analyzed thematically.

**FINDINGS**

Two key findings presented themselves within the scope of this pilot study. The first was that the teachers in this study tended to privilege one aspect of 21st century educational reform to the neglect of others. For example, technology in one case and environmental stewardship in another become the definition of 21st century learning for those particular teachers. A second finding brought to light was the inherent difficulties of and need for leadership supports in establishing and implementing a school-wide vision of 21st century learning. Both teachers were apt to focus in on one element of the Alberta Education (2010) document and tended to exclude other aspects of competency-based education. For example, Teacher A noted, “21st century teaching is all about the environment. If I don’t do anything else with these kids, I want them to see that the planet needs their care.” On the other hand, Teacher B felt the same passion but about technology, noting the same desire to instil in his students the importance of technological advancement. Technology was not seen by this teacher to be a tool for learning, but instead was seen as the learning itself. He noted that, “students don’t really like school but they do like computers and it’s because computers are their reality. If we don’t include technology in everything we aren’t preparing them for real life” (Teacher B). In both cases the teachers had intricately intertwined their classroom design with one aspect of competency-base education.
A second finding that emerged was that each teacher had a very different view of the future of educational reform, one that differed significantly from the views held by school leaders. The school-based leaders upheld a more rounded idea of competency-based reform, noting the need for multiple competencies to work together to prepare students for an unknown future. Leader A stated that, “Schools are really changed. Our students don’t know it’s different. For them this is their normal, collaboration, thinking skills, working together as a team and all those associated creative thinking skills. It has to be this way because we don’t even know what jobs might exist for them so we can’t train kids like we used to. We have to get them to want to learn and know how to learn.” This integrated vision for educational reform in the classroom appeared difficult to support in the lived realities of individual classrooms, showing that 21st-century educational reform was being shaped and driven by multiple interpretations of government policy. As the two teachers interpreted competency-based education for themselves, each implemented only those aspects they deemed critical, noting that time and curricular expectations didn’t allow for a more integrated approach. This also showed a tendency to view the competencies put forth in government policy as additional to the curriculum, not as a means to delivering curriculum.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings suggest three important implications: 1) the success of competency-based educational reform, 2) the success of postsecondary teacher education programs, and 3) potential changes to practice for educators within postsecondary teacher education programs. First, if such differing interpretations are being made, and enacted, within the scope of this pilot study done at a small elementary school, it is reasonable to expect that such interpretations are being made by other teachers also. This has implications for school-based leaders as they attempt to enact a school-wide vision of competency-based education in a political climate where the future of competency-
based education is also in flux. If teachers now find it necessary to prioritize one competency over the others, one can assume this will only intensify with the introduction of new government policies including an entirely redesigned curriculum and new definitions of educational success. School-based leaders will be called upon, more than ever before, to interpret competencies with teachers and to provide support for the integration of multiple competencies in the delivery of curriculum as opposed to in addition to curriculum.

Secondly, the findings in this pilot study suggest a more immediate role for teacher education programs in the development of an integrated approach to competency-based education. If new teachers can enter the classroom with a holistic idea of educational reform and its role in the delivery of curriculum, school-based leaders may find it easier to create a school-wide vision of 21st century education. This is, however, dependent on a number of factors including the shifting reform agendas of government and school division interpretations of competency-based education. In both of these circumstances, teacher education programs do not have any jurisdictional authority; this said, teacher education programs can lead the way in developing solid understandings of educational reform through research and the development of strong community and government partnerships.

Finally, acknowledgement of the shifting interpretations and enactments of 21st century educational reform will require a contemplative response from university educators. This research suggests that teacher education instructors will need to be cognizant of providing a well-balanced and holistic presentation of educational reform literature to students. Currently, this literature is taken up in a variety of ways in the teacher education program at the University of Calgary and this research suggests that, while we are attentive to these innovations, instructors will need to be increasingly mindful of their interpretations of educational reform so as not to unduly prioritize one
element over another. Indeed, an examination of the ways in which university instructors interpret educational reform literature may be a next step in addressing how educational reform lives within the context of teaching and learning and the requisite role that teacher education may provide.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study stands as the beginning of an examination on the interpretations that school-based personnel make in the implementation of 21st century educational reform efforts. It is clear that what is required is continued research on a provincial and national scale, for until it is understood how competency-based education is interpreted and enacted in the classroom, it is unclear as to the extent to which teaching and learning has, in fact, changed. Until this is known, both the implementation of educational reform and the education of future teachers will remain moving targets.

References


