

Reflection on:

Implementation of 21st Century Competencies requires Revolution not Renovation

The abstract of this paper, which was written two years ago when I was beginning my doctoral journey, remains an accurate summary of why I have continued on this journey.

It was my first attempt to communicate my thinking, and connect it to the broader field of educational leadership and policy, and to major theoretical frameworks in the field. Through the process I discovered that I had a lot to learn in both areas, and that there is little critical literature relating to the last half-century of education in Ontario.

This theoretical paper provides both an analysis of current K-12 education in Ontario, and the historical policies and practices that lead to the 2016 Ontario educational policy document, “21st Century Competencies – Toward Defining 21st Century Competencies for Ontario”, that provides direction for the future. The research process began with the general question of how might the current thinking around 21st Century Competencies result in changes in policy to support changes in schools and in learning.

In my paper, I consider three change models that might be used to support implementation of the recommendations of this policy document: renovation, layering and rebuilding. I outline the strengths and weaknesses of each model, and conclude that the most effective model would be to rebuild. Were I to revisit this topic, I would now explore further how these three metaphors connect more strongly to the change processes of Michael Fullan and Chris Argyris.

Over the two intervening years, I have engaged in dialogue with colleagues, read extensively, and implemented both renovation and layering in my work as a secondary school principal. My 35 years in Ontario schools has given me depth of experience with all three

models: renovation and layering as ongoing work with school effectiveness and school improvement, and rebuilding with the curriculum and structural changes in 1999 as we eliminated grade 13 or OAC, and compressed the secondary school curriculum to four years.

While the changes in 1999 appeared to be implementation of a new structure and curriculum, I observed many educators who were able to rename their practices, but not actually change. Although the government promised consistency across the province (they advertised that students would now be able to move mid-year and seamlessly transition to the new class), in reality there was and is still a great deal of autonomy for the classroom teacher.

True rebuilding would have required not just exemplars of student work, but exemplars of course, unit and lesson designs, and models of assessment rather than just criteria. Although the government had spent the previous five years attacking the teaching profession, there appeared not to be a will to impose a “cookie-cutter” curriculum, with a clearly articulated scope and sequence. So, as the curriculum was implemented, each individual teacher, department, school, and board took the policy documents and worked independently, resulting in a great range of variation as finally observed in the classroom.

I believe that a more prescriptive and more detailed policy document would have elicited a strong backlash from teachers, but would have resulted in a superior experience for Ontario students. In my experience as a school and system leader, changes occur more quickly when an unpopular model is provided, which is then modified, than if the participants have been required to design and implement the entire change process independently. There is a human tendency to take the easier path, and so teachers will repurpose and modify existing materials more readily than they will design “from scratch”. This repurposing has resulted in the retention of classroom materials and processes that bear only a tenuous connection to the current policy.

As I was at the beginning of my doctoral journey, I did not recognize the wealth of data that I had available to me as a result of this experience. This paper might have been more effective had I been able to apply the process of coding and analysis that I learned later in my qualitative research course. I was also missing much of the theoretical background that was developed in subsequent courses, and this remains an area of growth for me, as my undergraduate studies were not in the social sciences. At the time of writing, I had not yet completed a comprehensive literature review that would have informed my discussion and conclusions.

The work of Laura Pinto, which I discovered later, provides a model that might have made the writing of this paper much more effective. Her 2012 book, "Curriculum Reform in Ontario: 'Common Sense' Policy Processes and Democratic Possibilities", provides analysis of policy and historical documents and documentation of the change process, along with comparison with a similar change process in Brazil. She articulates a conceptual framework that provides her writing with a clear structure, and introduced me to critical-theoretical policy analysis.

This first paper served as the foundation for my work in subsequent courses, and in the development of the focus of my program. It also is my first attempt to connect theory to practice, and revealed to me the richness of my experiences as an educator, and the value that my perspective might have. I was able to connect policy, leadership and change, in the context of visioning and policy development.