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**NEGOTIATING NEW MODELS OF CURRICULUM
IN CHANGING TIMES: YEAR I**

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This paper will explore the findings from the first year of our three-year study involving four boards: Halton, Lincoln, Norfolk, and Waterloo RCSSB. The study focuses on how these boards are dealing with the changes mandated in THE COMMON CURRICULUM and the TRANSITION YEARS documents. These are curriculum policy documents developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. The latest version of THE COMMON CURRICULUM was released in 1995 and it presents the philosophy and outcomes to be achieved by students from grades 1 to 9. The mandate of the study was to examine how each board is dealing with various aspects of the policies including: (1) outcomes-based education and alternative forms of assessment; (2) integrated curriculum; and (3) how teachers, administrators, students, and members of the community are collaborating around these issues. On analyzing the data we found that educators also discussed the change process, leadership, and stress.

**METHODOLOGY**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 59 people in the four boards. In each board we interviewed some individuals at the system level (e.g., a superintendent, coordinators and consultants) and principals, vice-principals, and teachers in two schools in each board. We asked that principals select a range of people in terms of age, experience, and approaches to teaching. We did not want to interview just teachers who were enthusiastic about the changes. In most cases, the data revealed a broad range of opinion, so we felt the principals accommodated our request.

**FINDINGS**

This paper has condensed the findings to those themes that were most dominant.

**Outcomes-Based Education**

OBE still means many things to the educators that we interviewed. For the most part, teachers understand outcomes based education as a focus on results, or products. One elementary teacher said this:

*"Outcomes Based Learning ... I understand that as a method of learning whereby certain specific knowledge items and skills sets are prescribed, I guess in our case by the Ministry. Those outcomes are used to guide us in what we teach and how we teach with the ultimate end being to achieve those specific guidelines. I see it as a case that the outcomes are what drives the whole procedure of teaching."*

A consultant defined outcomes as "being what we want kids to know and be able to do, understand, and value as a result of the learning experience."

A few teachers stated that OBE involves the production of a product. For example, one teacher stated:

*"I found that I am already using it without even knowing it. In my grade 11 class - it's a journalism course - and the whole course really is outcomes based because the end product of the class is to put together a school magazine so that would be the outcome."*

Many teachers also agree that OBE consists of a major shift from focusing on content and time-based criteria to emphasizing student learning. One teacher perhaps defined it most succinctly:

*"Every student can learn and will learn, not in the same way or not in the same day, but every child will experience success, but they will experience it at different times. Outcomes based learning looks at what the students are learning. To me that was a big shift in my ideas of looking at teaching."*

Teachers told us that when they have the opportunity to work collaboratively with some support, they can overcome their concerns about outcomes based education. An elementary teacher said:

*"It wasn't until we started planning together that they all started to come together and I actually even had written down my learning outcomes."*

A significant number of teachers found OBE complex and confusing. A consultant voiced her concerns:

*"There are school boards which have written junior and senior kindergarten outcomes that are the scariest things I have ever seen, who have gone so overboard with the whole process that they come up with something that is really regressive. They are down to a checklist kind of thing."*

It is difficult to assess how many teachers are actually using the OBE approach. A couple of individuals at the system level suggested that perhaps 15 to 20% are using an OBE approach in curriculum planning. Next year we will try to get a closer reading of how many teachers are actually using OBE.

**Integrated Curriculum**

Most teachers saw integrated curriculum as connecting subjects to real life experiences. Several individuals also focused on holistic education and its emphasis on connections as a context for integrated curriculum. For one principal there was a concern about artificial themes and forcing subjects into these themes in an unnatural way:

*"I do feel that it is really important to provide a curriculum in school that is reflective of life. So, for me, it makes tremendous sense that we look at the connections and the interconnectedness that one finds in real life. That should be mirrored in the schools, so I think it's really important to look at how subjects connect with each other."*

A consultant said:

*"What I find so much with the teachers that I worked with is that there is a theme where you can ram as many things into it as possible. That is not my view of integration. I don't think that it should be artificial. I think integration is meaningful learning."*

Some teachers expressed concern about integrated curriculum. One secondary school principal said,

*"There is tremendous fear around that concept ... [The teachers] have invested most of their life around a subject and they fear the erosion of that."*

A teacher in the same school said, "In terms of integrated learning, I don't see that happening a lot at this point." However, the teacher added, "It's starting, the English Department and the History Department will get together and do a unit on mythology or a unit on war." A consultant talked about secondary school teachers: "The whole concept of integration to make an end product isn't really there. It is not part of the day-to-day job." In another high school they felt they had to move back from integration to a more subject-based approach. The vice-principal said,

*"We are going to back off slightly and focus more on traditional subject areas for next year while still trying to maintain the vision of change.... It is not easy to do. It's rather confusing."*

There are many reasons for the difficulties and they will be discussed more fully in the section on the change process. Some of the obstacles include lack of time, timetables, entrenched beliefs in separate subject matter, and protecting territorial turf. One consultant also stated that many principals are not comfortable with integrated curriculum and thus provide no leadership or support. She concluded, as many other educators have, that most integration occurs at the primary level and then diminishes through remaining divisions with the specialization years having the least integration. At the transition-years level, she comments, rotary has been eliminated so that teachers have to teach subjects they are not familiar with. She concludes this has caused a great deal of stress. Like the principal quoted earlier, she believes there is considerable fear around the whole process of integration at the transitions-years level. She also concludes that the most effective way for integration to occur is when a whole division in an elementary school works together and begin planning together.

Several of the participants in the study described successful attempts at integration. For example, a consultant described how one secondary school developed a unit for grade 9 students called, "Who are we." The students developed a booklet describing themselves in terms of learning styles, their achievements, and their interests. The students then conducted an in-service program for teachers describing themselves. Another consultant described a unit developed in Transportation Technology, which looks at human processes involved in transportation and the environmental implications of transportation systems. In another school they have developed an integrated program for Grades 11 and 12 in the area of communications technology. This unit focuses on how people work together and solve problems. However, the teacher stresses that students still need the background before they can integrate material. This teacher also claims that some students cannot handle the freedom of moving from class to class to do an independent project.

In summary, most participants in this study understood integrated curriculum as connecting subjects to real life experiences. Several also focused on holistic education and its emphasis on connections as a context for integrated curriculum.

There was a concern about artificial themes and forcing subjects into these themes in an unnatural way. Integrated curriculum is most common at the primary level and then diminishes as one moves through the various divisions. There are many barriers to integrated curriculum at the secondary level including lack of time, the timetable, and the teacher's commitment to subject matter. However, despite these barriers, there were signs of movement towards integrated curriculum in most of the schools where we conducted interviews.

**Student Assessment**

Unlike outcomes based learning and integrated curriculum, there was not much discussion on how individuals understood assessment from a conceptual lens. Most of the discussion focused on what people actually did. A teacher in an elementary school stated: "Before we might have been too specific and perhaps too subject oriented, whereas now it's becoming a little bit more global in effect. Assessment has to take on a more diverse flavor; we have to use a lot of different assessment techniques which primary people have done so that's not really news for us. Each time we plan, we try to get a cross-section of assessment techniques."

There was agreement that primary teachers were comfortable with alternative forms of assessment and this comfort level decreased as you moved through the various divisions. Administrators were concerned that transition-years teachers were still using mostly paper and pencil tests.

A vice-principal in the same school referred to portfolios and said, "portfolios are a concept rather than a reality right now." Finally, a teacher in another secondary school stated, "We are graduating skilled test-takers; instead, we need people who can solve problems rather than take tests."

Many of the teachers we interviewed, including secondary school teachers, described how they were exploring alternative modes of assessment:

*"If there is an area that we are weak in, including myself, it is student assessment procedures.... Much of our energy goes into summative evaluation with paper and pencil tests.... It would seem to me that we haven't really done very much work on developing formative assessment instruments."*

**Change Process**

One of the original objectives of the study was to examine the collaborative process. However, we found that collaboration was part of a larger factor - the change process. Most participants felt that change was happening in pockets, or on a broken front. Several barriers were cited. A barrier at the secondary level was the timetable, which obstructs integrated programming. Again, teacher commitment to the individual subject was cited as a barrier. The most frequent barrier was the lack of time to plan and collaborate. Thus, teachers cited the reduced opportunities for professional development. A teacher put it this way:

*"And it seems that we don't have time to break in something new. It's like a new pair of shoes, we put them on, we wear them from morning till night and we have to experience the pain as we go along. We don't have time to work with it, read it through, think about it, interact on a professional basis to use it."*

Despite these barriers participants in this study often cited leadership in their school as very helpful and supportive. Administrators in this study were establishing a variety of ways to involve staff in the change process. These included various forms of staff councils and action research teams in the schools.

Almost everyone talked about the importance of collaboration. One superintendent said, "I think collaboration is the only way that we are going to get through this."

Despite the barriers to collaboration there were examples of many different forms of collaboration involving students, parents, and community members, as well as teachers and administrators.

*"All of a sudden, people start acting like they are part of collaborative learning groups, which I find very fascinating. They begin to see some of the power that the new structures are starting to bring to them. For example, four teachers quickly learn more and more about the really difficult kids in the class. They can mobilize to help these students and to help themselves."*

In fact, change did seem to happen if one looked over the full year and not just at one piece at a time. Like the principal cited above, change tended to happen "all of sudden." Perhaps it is as one consultant said: "Life goes on in the old way for a very long time and it seems as if nothing will ever change when, suddenly, there is a significant shift in people's attitudes":

*"It is almost as if they need time to rumble around in a negative place until they get the spark to move on; but when the spark is ignited, it bursts into flames. Again and again I have witnessed the lighting of this spark."*

It's not clear why change happens in this spontaneous way. However, in the next two years of the study we would like to examine this aspect of change more closely.

**Stress**

One of the themes that emerged from the study was that a significant number of teachers are feeling pressure. One consultant said: "I guess the worse part right now is teacher morale.... They are finding it very, very confusing dealing with so many initiatives."

Some teachers talked about the swings between highs and lows. One secondary school teacher said, "Some days you think you are winning and some days I think I'm losing." A consultant put it this way: "Some days it's wonderful, it's invigorating. But then some days it's very tiring."

An elementary teacher said,

*"This will work, but you'd better change the report cards, change the method of reporting, and give me some time. I'm one step ahead of the kids because I am inventing this curriculum as I go. If I have to do that for the whole year, I'll need a rubber room about December. I cannot work where I am only one step ahead of the kids.... I am frustrated right now because I waded into this in September, and it's only the middle of November and I've come to a stone wall. Maybe if I were younger and stronger, I'd climb over it.... I need a ladder, I need somebody to help me over."*

In summary, the change process is occurring on a broken front with small pockets of teachers. When it does occur, it seems to happen very suddenly after a long period of stagnation or negativity. Many barriers were cited but the most common was time. Other barriers included timetables and other structural factors such as lack of professional development days. Some teachers referred to cumbersome binders of outcomes, while others referred to the lack of leadership on the part of the Ministry of Education and Training.

Despite these barriers, many of the people expressed hope. Both administrators and teachers were involved in projects that they talk about with enthusiasm and pride. Principals in many of school have involved staff and sometimes students in helping to set the direction for their school. They have tried to make the change manageable by focusing on smaller elements. And, most of all, they have attempted to support collaboration between teachers, with students, and with the community. Many people felt that collaboration was the key to the whole process. As one principal put it: "Without collaboration the Common Curriculum is doomed." Finally, several participants identified teacher morale and stress as a major difficulty. Many people simply seem worn out; again, collaboration may be one of the things that can help teachers deal with stress.

**DISCUSSION**

First, it seems important to acknowledge that this study looks at a select group of educators. Although we asked the principals to allow us to interview teachers with a wide range of attitudes toward innovation, the schools where we conducted the interviews were generally chosen because they were moving ahead on innovations. We did meet with some educators who were resistant to change and not hesitant to tell us about it. For the most part, we talked to professionals who were concerned that there be changes in the educational system and anxious to get the changes right. However, had we gone to other schools, the data might have been quite different in its quality.

In the schools only 15 to 20% of the teachers were actually using an outcomes based approach (as approximated by the individuals in this study). However, some of the people we interviewed did have some sense of what outcomes meant in practice. The focus was on results and a shift from what the student does to what the teacher does. On rare occasions we would talk to a teacher who had all the jargon in place and sounded like he or she had attended a Bill Spady seminar. Still, a significant number of people in the study found OBE complex and confusing to use in practice.

Several individuals indicated that, once teachers were given adequate support, they moved into OBE planning without too much difficulty. When educators talked enthusiastically about outcomes, they were most often talking about how a group had gotten together to develop them. The membership of these groups was very diverse - from teachers in a school, to educators at the board, to members of a community.

Coming to a new understanding, then, seemed to involve the collaborative process and this collaborative element allowed people to create new meaning and enjoy the process.

Although the concept to curriculum integration was feared by many, it was largely because of the host of obstacles they perceived before them. Integrated curriculum is most common at the primary level and then diminishes as one moves through the various divisions. There are many barriers to integrated curriculum at the secondary level including lack of time, the timetable, the perception of forcing subjects into artificial themes, and the teacher's commitment to subject matter. Those who identified with their subject rather than with "teaching kids" held the most resistance to this approach. However, despite these barriers, there were signs of movement towards integrated curriculum in most of the schools where we conducted interviews. We should, perhaps, not dismiss the skeptics when critics such as Case (1994) believe that the Ontario version of integration is superficial.

Although the Common Curriculum (1994) has offered generic models, there is still much room for interpretation of integrated curriculum. There were a wide range of definitions; these definitions fit those found in the literature (see Jacobs, 1989; Drake, 1993; Burns, 1995). For some, integration was multidisciplinary - combining two or more subjects around a theme. For others, integration was interdisciplinary and meant teaching skills (such as language skills or information skills). The most common definition tended to be connecting the teaching to real life - the transdisciplinary or holistic approach.

It is interesting to note that teachers found that the real life context approach made sense and that the rationale was acceptable to them. As well, there were several examples of how people had tried to implement integrated approaches. Most attempts were greeted with enthusiasm. Few made reference to connecting outcomes to integration. At this time this connection is not natural; yet, it is the one that the Ministry of Education is asking teachers to make. This is probably because educators have not yet made sense of outcomes in a meaningful way. As well, the connection to assessment has not been made in a practical way.

It is significant that the assessment piece has not been dealt with in new ways. Perhaps this is because evaluation has always been done, so a teacher is not forced to redefine this aspect of education. But traditional methods of evaluation do not necessarily fit. For instance, it is difficult for teachers to assess integrated approaches because they are locked into old models of reporting; for example, they may have to give a grade for geography but are unable to differentiate geography within an integrated program. As well, outcomes do not seem to be well enough understood to be evaluated in any way other than the traditional pencil and paper testing. In reality, a transactional or transformational approach to outcomes demands that reporting and assessment be adjusted to fit the purpose of this type of learning (Spady, 1994). It seems safe to predict that, until report cards change in a fundamental way, teachers perceive there will be little need to wrestle with alternative ways of assessing.

Again, there was agreement that primary teachers were comfortable with alternative forms of assessment and this comfort level decreased as you moved through the various divisions. However, many of the teachers we interviewed, including at the secondary schools, described how they were using alternative modes of assessment. There seems to some experimentation going on in the schools even if there are not a lot of philosophical discussions.

One of the largest obstacles to a shift in assessment practices is the parents. Parents want traditional assessment because they understand it, as do the teachers. Coupled with this is the recent move toward standardized testing in English and the promise of a standardized report card. Educators are living in a kind of limbo. However, it seems clear that if integrated curriculum and/or an outcome based approach to learning is going to succeed, then the assessment practices must shift to fit these new approaches. Since it is widely acknowledged that evaluation practices drive the curriculum, it is very important that this piece be put in place.

Negotiating new models of education obviously involves a tremendous amount of change, not the least being a shift in beliefs about teaching and learning. "The bottom line is that the system as a whole needs to be reconfigured" (Caine & Caine, 1994). Change is notoriously difficult, even painful (Fullan, 1993) and this pain was voiced by many. Change is also slow. For the boards in this study actual changes in the classrooms and the ways teachers are teaching seemed slow, too. Although there were many different estimates of the percentage of educators who have changed, it is clear that the majority of the teaching force has not accommodated the changes yet.

Effective change cannot be mandated; it will only happen when it emerges from the grass roots and is supported from the top (Fullan, 1993). The changes that teachers are facing have been mandated. However, it is clear that the changes are being implemented unevenly and that educators are interpreting the mandates very differently in different situations.

In some places there is little in the way of innovation. In some pockets educators have adopted the attitude that they are creating a new way of educating students and that no one really has the answers to how this new way looks in practice. In other pockets, educators are shortcutting this development process and adapting models developed by others. It will be interesting to note if shortcuts are possible or if all practitioners have to engage in the development process in order to fully understand what the new mandates entail. Or, perhaps there will come a time when there is enough meaning for the outcome-based, integrated approach so that teachers can easily work from set curriculum materials. This question is of utmost importance in light of the current government's mandate to provide 90% classroom-ready, curriculum material.

In this study our questions revolved around how individuals were making meaning of the mandated changes. We discovered that we really did not get a sense of the actual number of people who were exploring innovation. In our second year our questions will focus more on how people are implementing the innovations. As well, we will focus on how the work at the systems level connects to what is happening in the schools. Is there a different perception of what is happening at the systems level than at the school level? And if there is, how do we bridge the gap? Are there different levels of implementation and levels of resistance?

In the final analysis, we are really negotiating new models as we go along. For most people in this study a sense of the big picture is superficial. There is a real tension between working on the part and being unable to see the whole. However, the last chapter of education hasn't been written yet (Leithwood, 1994). The changes are so demanding that it seems impossible to grasp it all at once. Very few were making links between outcomes, integration, and assessment, or the philosophy underlying these changes. There was also a tension between wanting autonomy to do "their own thing" and the need for top-down direction. Teachers seem to make meaning of one piece of the change at a time and then are ready to move on to the next piece (Drake, 1995). For example, when teachers work with outcomes they discover that integration offers a good fit. Yet, regardless of where they start, if the philosophy about learning and teaching is in place, everyone seems to be more or less on the same path.

As practitioners in the field work with Ministry mandates they are discovering what works and what doesn't and this is affecting the initial mandate. In this way we do have bottom-up and top-down change. Perhaps it is best that we have the pioneers trying out the new models - pioneers are more likely to endure the frustrations and find ways around the current obstacles. The process is highly stressful as evidenced by the comments of educators in this study. Yet combined with the exhaustion is the excitement that educators are also experiencing as they experiment with new ways of teaching.

One secondary school principal said, "I think there is chaos across the province; there are pockets of good things happening, and maybe that will carry it off." Hopefully, he is right. Chaos theory suggests that there is a deep structure within the chaos and that patterns are occurring (Wheatley, 1992). According to chaos theory, we will experience these patterns as unpredictable, sharp changes in direction. Certainly the educators in this study experienced change in what seemed like a haphazard, inexplicable way. Perhaps there is no other way for a change of this magnitude to be simultaneously created, understood, and implemented.

There does seem to be one predictable piece: collaboration. This is the glue that holds the different efforts together and allows educators to come to new meaning. According to Morgan and Morgan (1992), in an Ontario Teachers' Federation report "Beyond the Glitterspeak," collaboration is a system-wide issue. Collaboration is needed to develop a learner centered approach to education: "Collaborative activity between students, teachers, parents, principals, administrators, support staff and local trustees lies at the heart of the process" (p. 3).

In this study, most efforts at innovation were accompanied by collaboration - often including many of the stakeholders that Morgan and Morgan suggest be at the table. It is here that collectively we can listen to many voices. For Fullan (Shaw & Beatty, 1994) and Hargreaves (1994), reculturing as well as restructuring is necessary if Ontario students are really going to experience an education that prepares them for the future. Collaboration seems to be the key ingredient in this reculturing.

We end this first year of our study with baseline indicators for how educators are making meaning of the mandated curriculum innovations. We are still very much in flux. Many questions remain unanswered. Public pressure for accountability continues to mount. In Earl's (1995) words, Ontario education is at a crossroads. We may retain the school improvement focus or we may shift to more centralized control of schools through Ministry policy. For example, the Ministry's recent emphasis on standards could lead to more standardization and rigidity in the curriculum. In general there is strong tension between the Ministry's push for more standards that are often based in specific subjects rather than the integrated approach outlined in the Common Curriculum. We will be examining this tension over the next two years.

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**END NOTE**

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