

## **Transforming Education within Canada: Personal, Political and Professional Perceptions**

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### **Abstract:**

Herein educational transitioning involving human, personal, and political factors is detailed and reported as a common element to be observed globally. Human factors within this transformative movement includes teachers, students and parents who make a difference in the efforts to successfully implement school reforms. Personal factors include philosophy, values, social, and ethical orientations. Educational change efforts are reflective of political pressures, government ethos, rationalization, and budgetary tension. Given the ethos of Canada we now have a very restricted number of large-scale educational reform studies in Canada, hence a need for this investigative voice. Admittedly, the reforms are often based on educational trends, not evidence, are implemented too rapidly, and are without effective feedback schemes that apply a cause-effect lens to study change, progress, and visioning.

**Keywords:** *Educational Change, Reform, Large-Scale Transformation*

### **Introduction:**

The macro view of global educational change, transformation and development was constructed from the individual nations who moved towards a standard that was often measureable, overt and infused within the cultural mission of the country. For instance, within North America, the United States “. . . Comprehensive School Reform Program (part of No Child Left Behind) was designed to improve student achievement by helping schools to implement evidence-based reforms” (United States Department of Education, 2012). Across the Atlantic Ocean, the United Kingdom moved to introduce a national curriculum and new national-assessment systems (Lee, 2001), and across the Pacific Ocean, Japan introduced more parental choice, greater autonomy for schools, and encouraged the use of individualized teaching methods (Jones, 2011). Similarly, Australia has worked through its National Education Agreement (COAG, 2008) on the following four areas of reform:

Developing a national framework of schooling, linking Australian government funding to state and territory outcomes for schooling; increasing school level

transparency and accountability, to improve student and school performance; closing the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; and developing and implementing a national curriculum across all learning areas from K–12. (Fullan, 2011, p. 1)

Looking at the nations who lead in many areas of education and schooling, we begin to see just how pervasive change and transformation is globally. Yet if we change, transform, and reform, as we have in the past, we may not advance because,

...it is not the presence of standards and assessment that is the problem, but the **attitude** (philosophy or theory of action) that underpins them, and their **dominance** (as when they become so heavily laden that they crush the system by their sheer weight)...[W]hat is required is to build the new skills, and generate deeper motivation...[F]ocusing on standards and assessments does not highlight adequately the **instructional improvements** that are the core driver in the equation. [It] is the learning–instruction–assessment nexus that is at the heart of driving student achievement. (Fullan, 2011, p. 3)

Hence, the attitude of the people in key positions, such as teachers and principals are a priority, as well as the targets within each reform. If we look in the wrong places we may not see what we are looking for, and if we fail to qualitatively consider the people and their dispositions, movement forward may slow, become impaired or brought to a standstill altogether.

### Literature Review:

#### Reform and Change: A Regional View

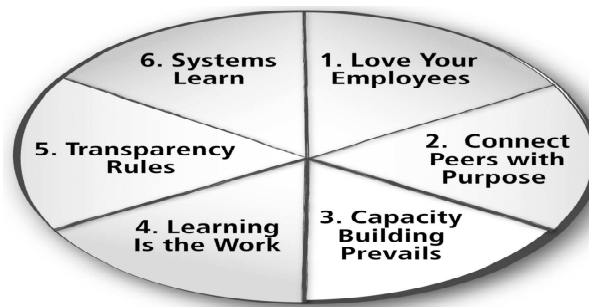
In the past twenty-five years, restructuring involved the provision of new structures to support a change in practice, whereas re-culturing involved changing the values, beliefs and norms within a school (Ryan, 2011). Stone (2011) concluded, after looking at the past 30 years in education, in both Ontario and the Northern United States “from the 1990s forward, the Age of Standardization and Marketization was characterized by both globalization and the collapse of trust, spurring increased public accountability and reforms that focused on standardization and measured outcomes” (p. 224). The pace of this change, reform and implementation has been less than perfect, leading one large Canadian teacher union to conclude:

With the recent unrealistic schedule of curriculum change, however, even the most gifted teachers have difficulty providing such a learning environment. All teachers, need a coherent implementation schedule

designed around the realities of system capacity, financial and human resources, availability of supply teachers, and opportunities for professional development if effective educational improvement is to happen and if students are to experience a “pedagogy of care” within the classroom and school. At present, teachers experience only a curriculum “rush” and such a schedule does not exist. (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Federation, 2012, p. 6)

In other words, the changes are doomed unless the implementation schedule is realistically and carefully planned. The change planned must be legitimate and tied to logical goals that are grounded within sensible timelines. Even Fullan’s (2008) ‘secrets of change,’ which has been acknowledged as a necessary guide in moving education forward, needs to have a logical implementation timetable.

**Figure 1.** Fullan’s (2008) ‘Secrets of Change,’



Knowing the secrets of change is only a first step. Knowing how much time is required to implement such steps is really a local question requiring insight into the capacity for change by local and regional school boards and communities.

### **Canadian Context: One Perspective vs. One of Many:**

Over the past twenty-seven years, I have worked as a fully qualified educator in Canada. I have worked in the public education system and the separate (Catholic) school system. Within the public system, I have taught at the elementary (Kindergarten to grade 8) and secondary levels (grade 9 to 12) in, and outside, classrooms. Within the Catholic school system, I have taught at the secondary level and during this time what I have realized, teaching in both systems, at various levels, is that the amount and quality of complaints emanating from parents, students, staff, and the larger community in general, concerning education, is constant. This is not to say we, in Canada, only have problems, as this would be an untruth. We have a world-class education system in Canada that has been ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the world (OECD, 2010a) and that is admired by many countries. Canadian students do very well on standardized achievement tests in

literacy, science and mathematics (PISA) and our educational systems continue to evolve in our relatively young country.

Our country demands constant improvement and our citizens are vocal when it comes to education, as we view the children who attend, as the future. Canadians are forward looking and seek new standards, new policy, and better results on an ongoing basis within education. As a result of this need to move up and forward

Canada has done well on the world stage of educational change. If this stage is to become a platform for even more dynamic change in the future, the country needs to have more than professional peace with or even “buy-in” from its teachers. It needs its teachers and their federations to be co-creators of change on the broadest scale for a strong and just society in the future. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011, p. 16)

We need to reach for new standards, and not reach only for standardization, as some have suggested that “standardization reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools” (McNeil, 2000, p. 3). Canada does have 10 provinces, each with a provincial Ministry of Education who oversees, curricula, policy and legalities, among other elements of Canadian education and schooling. Each provincial Minister is an educational authority who oversees professional, political and governing issues in each province (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2008). Each provincial Ministry communicates changes through regional Boards of Education, and in turn each Board instructs school personnel concerning new legislation, policy and required general changes.

Canada is officially bilingual, and many schools are bilingual, yet French-only schools can be found across Canada with similar issues to the English only schools. We also have First Nations made up of Indian, Inuit, and Metis people (Aboriginal) who attend school in urban and rural settings both on and off reserves. The reserves were developed many years ago by the Federal (national) government of Canada to provide a home base for many Indian people. First Nation leaders and the Canadian Government continue to look for ways to address problems, issues and dilemmas within education for First Nation people in both Federal, provincial, and Band controlled schools. These First Nation issues and dilemmas, while of national importance, are beyond the scope of this chapter.

For the informed reader, it is not a surprise to learn that education, worldwide, has sustained a great deal of criticism, change, and turbulence over time (Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 1994; Hawley, 1988). “All educational reform efforts . . . encounter some resistance” (Muncey & McQuillan, 1993, p. 394), because reform efforts often bring with them new words, phrases, and modes of operation which take time to be absorbed, understood and negotiated by all stakeholders.

Therefore, school reform should be examined over an extended period of time, as it is “a ubiquitous part of today’s educational landscape . . .” (Fein, Kame’enui & Good, 2009, p. 1). This extended period of time is herein understood as more than a year and possibly as much as a quarter century to realize the impact of education changes. My own research concerning secondary education reform (Ontario, Canada) developed over several years. The first study, completed in 2003, was published in 2005 (Ryan & Joong, 2005). A second study in 2008 (Ryan & Joong, 2011) illuminated a steady move towards centralized control of new curricula and standardized testing (accountability), which has exerted transformational pressures on education (Ryan & Joong, 2011). These transformational pressures increase due to substandard student testing outcomes at the international, national, and provincial levels, and raise accountability questions, which have led to a pervasive global view that “no country can be satisfied with its current level of achievement” (Sahlberg, 2009; Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2008, p. 301). However,

the Canadian educational system, which is not one single system, but many, is already somewhere between great and excellent in its standards of performance. The way forward from here is not to wring a few more percentage points of tested achievement in basic subjects out of the nation’s classrooms. Nor is it to embrace politically and ideologically popular reform strategies from lower performing countries such as maintaining widespread standardized testing or introducing performance-based pay. The way forward is to strengthen the teaching profession even further. (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011, p. 17)

Our Canadian response and movement due to these conclusive opinions, current research, and ongoing rhetoric has always been located at the provincial level since we have no National (Federal) education body responsible for education. Nevertheless, in spite of our performances in, and outside, of classrooms, all Canadian provincial governments have realized that neither centralization nor decentralization approaches work (Fullan & Miles, 1992), because, each attempts to standardize curriculum and performance in a way that is “inappropriate and ineffective except for the narrowest goals . . . Decentralization . . . is problematic either because individual schools lack the capacity to manage change or because assessment of attempted changes cannot be tracked” (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 117).

Efforts to create significant educational reform are needed to address both restructuring and reculturing if this is to be successful (Molinaro & Drake, 1998). The change must come from within since “neither external pressure nor initiatives within schools have resulted in widespread or sustainable change” (Earl, 2003, p. 12). Our folly is to continue to focus on accountability using standards, measurement, rewards and retribution as “. . . its core drivers. It assumes that educators will make the necessary changes to develop the skills and competencies to get better

results. However, leading with accountability is not the best way to get accountability, let alone whole system reform” (Fullan, 2011, p. 3).

### **A Cause beyond Oneself:**

We need to be aware that Canada, Singapore, Shanghai and Finland are global exemplars of educational achievement, progress and fairness as these countries (Tucker, 2011), have worked to re-culture, knowing full well that leaders must first successfully establish *a cause beyond oneself* mindset within their systems, districts and schools. To work from the inside out, empowering existing staff to move forward is a task for leadership that believes in this reculturing mode (Ryan, 2011). Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon (2010) explained how,

participants in successful schools show a remarkable tendency to see themselves as being involved in . . . a cause beyond oneself . . . [and] as part of the larger enterprise of complementing and working with each other to educate students. (p. 42-43)

They equate a cause beyond oneself with “a moral equivalent of war” (p. 42). This inside out mode is organic, ethical and empowering. “Teaching is a profession that is typically driven by ethical motives or intrinsic desire “(Sahlberg, 2009). This intrinsic desire can be labelled moral purpose, which is the foundation of helping, and this is what teachers do, or should do in their teaching and community roles (Ryan & Joong, 2011).

Cherry and Spiegel (2006) identified a commitment to a cause beyond oneself as one of six core values held by educational supervisors:

The Advocate represents those school administrators dedicated to a cause beyond themselves. These leaders devote their work to the improvement of humanity and educational institutions. Their sense of purpose is influenced by a set of core values that focus on inspiring students and adults to connect their learning and teaching to worthwhile causes and projects that enhance the local community or contribute to their moral development and social consciousness. These are the leaders who often base their decisions on the best interests of students, teachers and school staff. (p. 22)

This mindset is essential if we are to successfully shift to an environment in which teachers envision themselves as working and learning alongside each other to continually refine their practice, as they create the conditions for student success.

**People, Relationships, Knowledge and Innovation:**

There is a legitimate need to divide thriving change efforts into essential areas. These areas are people, relationship building, knowledge building, innovation, and the transparency of accountability throughout the system (Fullan, 2008). Each aspect is equal to the other, and in order to understand each element more thoroughly we must appreciate, for example that efforts to produce ready-made answers for school improvement have more to do with politics than pedagogy. Simply put, student achievement depends on a number of variables. Some students, for example, thrive in some subject areas and not in others. At times, some groups of students perform better as a grade than expected. Some students thrive with a particular teacher while others do not. And at times, the social factors of class, gender, and ethnicity intersect with school life to affect performance both positively and negatively. (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Federation, 2001, p. 12)

The need to improve, change and compete as a region, province, or country, has been linked to an economic barometer. As the economy falls, people tend to look towards education to alleviate the economic plunge (Ryan & Joong, 2011). Notions of reform take hold and the needs of a province or country crystallize due to global comparisons and competition (Sahlberg, 2009). This need to reform is easily grasped via our global cyber village, as we sense new forces and need to change schools to ensure our standard of living (Young, et al., 2008, p. 307).

**Ontario (Canada) Reform:**

Ontario is one of the largest provinces in Canada and is the most populated. Regarding the trajectory of its educational reform, there is tension between the provincial government, on the one hand, and teachers, administrators and unions, on the other. A recent statement by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Federation (2012, p. 12) provides a characterization of the existing tension:

Ontario has already invested a great deal of time and money in the creation of a comprehensive accountability framework from which EQAO would monitor and improve school and board compliance with the government's educational policies. Any expectation that teachers, school administrators and board officials would welcome another layer of accreditation surveillance is unrealistic and poorly advised.

One example that highlights this tension occurred seven years ago as the provincial government undertook the first steps of a three-phase, \$1.3 billion, Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy (SS/L18) (Ministry of Education, 2007). The goals of this reform were simple:

Increase the graduation rate to 85 per cent (from 68 per cent in 2003), change pedagogy and culture through strong, focused leadership in schools and district school boards, provide new and relevant learning opportunities for *all* students, build on student interests and strengths, support effective transitions: from elementary to secondary, and from secondary to postsecondary (Ontario Ministry of Education , 2010a, p. 12).

These steps followed and blended with the earlier introduction of the new Ontario Secondary school (OSS) curriculum which was to be phased in over a period of years with full implementation in place by 2003. The changes within both initiatives were equal in their breadth and width, as they required not only curricular change, but also required a different perspective, which teachers and students would have to assume in order to achieve success. The reason for these desired changes are addressed by Duigan (2006), who suggested that, the high public pressure for accountability in schools in terms of definite outcomes, means that there is constant pressure to improve performance outcomes. The economic rationalist philosophy and managerialist practices that have influenced governments since the mid-1980's are now driving many educational organizations. (p. 34)

Indeed, the aim of the new Ontario initiatives embracing grades 7 to 12 were to increase high school graduation rates and engage the youth of Ontario in structured learning until age 18, or graduation, whichever came first (Zegarac & Franz, 2007, p. 2). Researchers (e.g., Earl, 2003; Majhanovich, 2002; Ryan & Joong, 2005) studying Ontario secondary reforms have noted that many of the outcomes remained unexamined. This purported lack of scrutiny was curious as the numbers were large in every way. For instance, at the secondary level in Ontario the publicly funded education system has over 700,000 secondary students in over 800 secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). There are 72 school boards, and 33 school authorities that serve remote communities. Ontario school boards employ over 40,000 secondary teachers and funding for public education in Ontario during 2007-08 was approximately \$6.3 billion for secondary alone (Zegarac & Franz, 2007, p. 3).

Within this context, arguably large, the initial steps to restructure, change, and improve may be quite necessary since most countries, “among them those at the top of the international educational rankings, are reforming their education systems to provide their citizens with knowledge and skills that enable them to engage actively in democratic societies and dynamic, knowledge-based economies”(Sahlberg, 2009, p. 1).

The largest province in Canada (Ontario) therefore embarked on major educational reforms during the last decade of the 20th century. The “standards-based reform” caused Ontario to



introduce a common curriculum for provincially publicly-funded schools which extended from kindergarten through to secondary school. The curricula contained specific expectations for each subject and grade as well as provincial standards for student performance, and created an arm's length agency (EQAO) to carry out province-wide testing and report on whether these standards were being met (Zegarac & Franz, 2007).

### **Recent Ontario (Canada) History:**

Within the last decade, Ontario secondary reform involved the reduction of the secondary program from five years to four years, leaving only grades 9 to 12 and eliminating grade 13. The cohort entering in 1999-2000 was the first class graduating from the four-year program. It was also the first secondary school class to receive the new Ontario curriculum each year. The 2002-03 school year saw the graduation of a double cohort of students, the last year of the five year program and the first year of the four-year program (Zegarac & Franz, 2007). We discovered through this study that the province has financially supported reforms by adding personnel such as student achievement officers, student success leaders, school effectiveness leads, student success teachers, and additional primary and specialist teachers. The province also put in place resources such as, professional learning institutes, webinars, and instructional guides. The Ontario government developed finely tuned strategies like the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnerships (OFIP), Schools in the Middle, Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Strategy, Credit Recovery, and Student Voice-Speak Up, to help improve teaching and learning in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b).

Nearly a decade ago in a study completed by King (2002) it was revealed that, approximately three-quarters of the new cohort students taking academic courses (high-streamed) in Grade 10 were planning to attend university. The mark distributions for students taking Grade 10 Academic courses in the new and old cohorts respectively were similar. However, OSS (new curriculum) students were obtaining lower marks than OSIS (old curriculum) students. A substantial decline in graduation rates for OSS students, especially for students taking applied courses (low-streamed). Failure rates and low marks were quite prominent in applied courses in Grades 9 and 10, especially in Math. Ironically, one of the reasons for the current reform was the lack of success in terms of graduation rates for students taking General level courses under OSIS. (Ryan & Joong, 2005, p. 6)

Our own earlier study, situated within a year of striking teachers, examined, in a limited manner, how the Ontario secondary reform has unfolded in Ontario classrooms, and revealed to what extent secondary teachers were implementing the many educational reforms that had direct impact on students, including curriculum planning, teaching strategies, student evaluation reporting and the delivery of special education programs. Results point out that all of the reforms

had direct impact on students, including curriculum planning, teaching strategies, student evaluation, reporting and the delivery of special education programs. “However, the extent of this impact is buffered by the fact that more than half of the students do not discuss the new curriculum with their parents/guardians” (Ryan & Joong, 2005, p. 15).

In recent times, Zegarac and Franz (2007), two Ontario government officials suggested that the “commitment to ongoing research, evaluation and monitoring of student success indicators [reform] promises to be an increasingly valued component of the Ministry’s work, and that of educators across the province, in future years” (p. 23). Therefore, it is believed that this ongoing research will be valued by various stakeholders. Indeed, the current investigation which has revisited these changes and reforms to once again capture the voices and perceptions of teachers and students has provided constructive data. These new data present a view of the impact that secondary school changes have had in the province of Ontario, in recent years.

### **Conclusion:**

Some might argue that during the last decade educational reforms have damaged trust, as test-based accountability cultures and competition-driven educational environments were struggling to teach creativity, social justice, and ecological sustainability (Sahlberg, 2009). The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) provided another view suggesting, efforts have typically moved through pendulum-like cycles, swinging back and forth between different ideologies. As a result, critics have argued that reforms are based on educational trends rather than evidence, are implemented too hastily, and are without effective assessment systems. As well, reform attempts are often criticized for excluding teachers from the decision-making process. (p. 6)

The reforms have provided a multifaceted ‘imagined’ horizon rather than a single standard of success it seems.

Success in the imagined school is determined individually and based on individuals’ progress over time. Students set individual goals and work toward them throughout the year. The goals and determinants of success are much broader than academics in the imagined school. Growth and success in the areas of personal happiness, social well-being, physical health, communication skills, character, extra-curricular activities, confidence, and community service are also considered. (Winton, 2010, p. 22)

Traditional issues, more a feature of adolescence, surfaced in both educator and student data as the maladaptive behaviour in the classroom is not appreciated by teachers nor the majority of students. There is still a need to take what was found in this study and work to help individual

students improve attendance and help teachers enhance class discipline via professional development in classroom management. The shift is occurring and is palpable in various studies as we have reported to ensure that all like school and demonstrate willingness to learn as we continue to increase the number of students graduating year after year. We want to circumvent the dropout option. We can do this by watching for behavioural signs in schools.

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