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Colleen Kawalilak
University of Calgary

Jim Paul

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The Schools Ain't What They Used to Be and Never Was – 21st Century Schools, Learners, and Teachers¹

Colleen Kawalilak and Jim Paul
University of Calgary

Abstract

This writing presents our views, as university teacher educators and scholars, concerning some issues pertaining to the readiness of contemporary Canadian education to move forward, well, with confidence and competence, into the mid-21st Century. We posit that all which is possible, educationally, lives in the give and take between Canadian education's geo-political, economic and linguistic past, the current functioning of contemporary schools as contested learning and teaching sites, and the increasing impacts of globalisation. We draw from guiding adult education principles in support of an enriched and expanded commitment to teacher professional development as a pathway to sustainable education reform.

Introduction

Everything is the way it is because it got that way

– D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (Academic/Scholar)

As university teacher educators and scholars, we remain deeply committed to educating today for yesterday's tomorrow. Referring to the observations of legendary American entertainer Will Rogers, who said that *schools ain't what they use to be and never was*, Deal and Peterson (1990) argued that “nostalgia for the schools we remember, while important, may not produce the schools we need for the future” (p. 3). Our focus and commitment is to contribute to the successful navigation of an ever-changing educational landscape, fraught with challenges and uncertainty. We argue that for Canadian education / schooling to move forward into the mid-21st Century with confidence and competence, we need to hold that space of ‘possibility’ where within, resides great potential in the give and take between Canadian education's specific geo-political, economic and linguistic past, the current functioning of contemporary schools as contested learning and teaching sites, and the increasing impacts of globalisation.

Canada's Educational Heritage

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it

– George Santayana (Philosopher)

Canadians often self-acknowledge how wonderful it is living in a contemporary, civil, democratically developed nation. Most Canadians appear to believe the nation is well-positioned

¹ The title of this paper, *The Schools Ain't What They Use To Be And Never Was*, are words attributed to the legendary figure Will Rogers (cited in Deal & Peterson, 1990).

to embrace the mid-21st Century. How so? Again, Canadians seem to believe the nation possesses, more or less, an appropriate and relevant, effective and efficient, education system. It is this education system, generally well located, that is and will educate citizens to compete in an increasingly demanding globalising world. However, Canada is not a nation of one federal or national education system. Basic, primary, and secondary education in Canada, except for Aboriginal citizens, is a provincial and/or territorial constitutional right and responsibility.

Across Canada then, school systems – located in diverse local urban and rural municipalities – operate through statutes or laws determined by provincial and/or territorial governments. Respectively, provincial ministries of education delegate responsibilities to ministry divisions and branches such as: curriculum and instruction, programs, policy, operations, planning, teacher registration / certification, finance and budgeting, buildings and facilities, regional services and school board services, and so on. In some cases, there are further break downs into ministry prescriptions regarding curricular subject matters, programs of studies, guides, authorized textbooks and/or learning materials. In some provinces, mandated curriculums are linked to provincially mandated grade and/or subject specific learner examinations.

However, what schools have inherited within Canada's democratic confederation of provinces is a curricula, instructional and assessment flexibility, adaptability, and an independence to address evolving local needs and circumstances. Indeed, although a strength of a provincial system, it is also a weakness. Specifically, not all local circumstances are able to support the schooling needs for all its constituents with respect to adequate and appropriate capital, financial, and human resources.

Schools as Contested Sites of Social Change and Social Control

Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods

– Neil Postman (Author/Cultural critic)

Across the past fifty years, Hargreaves (1994, 1998, 2003, 2009) wrote that Canadian provincial school systems have sought to provide all learners with equal and equivalent learning opportunities. However, the achievement outcomes of learners are remarkably unequal. Hargreaves (1994, 1998, 2003) and Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) go on to suggest that school and ministry officers, in many attempts to foster reforms to ensure good learning and teaching outcomes, have not deeply understood the tensions evident between the school as both a site of societal social control and an opportunity space for educational reform.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted that institutions, such as schools, are quite resistant to societal change due to a process referred to as the *social dialectic*. Social dialectic refers to those at-work discourses – ways of being, knowing, speaking and doing – that make an institution 'that' institution. Indeed, educational history has shown that few institutional insiders have advanced novel, radical or transformational ideas / practices for the school. Most schools / school systems seem to simply react to outside change initiatives.

As such, Eisner (1998) noted that educational reforms are difficult to achieve and sustain. Several factors creating this difficulty include: a) many teachers conform to normalizing institutional roles and practices; b) many teachers, as societal representatives, rigidly adhere to deeply conservative, community-sanctioned values and behaviours; and c) many teachers become jaded over time with experiences of repeatedly failed reform attempts. The result is that,

at the institutional *and* teacher levels, schools and teachers, invited or forced into reforms, often retreat to passive or active resistance.

Eisner (1998), along with Hargreaves (1998, 2003), Fullan (1993) and Goodlad (1991) suggested that if meaningful school reform is to take hold, schools and school systems must begin with a significant and honest understanding of the school itself, the often contradictory culture as a social control, and the potential of schools and school systems as social reform sites. Equally important is the need to understand teacher identity and how teachers hold and represent, personally and professionally, the tensions between change and control. Only when these intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions of schooling and teaching are collectively understood as a kind of cultural geo-ecology, might educational reform achieve true and successful realization.

Certainly, there are schools and school systems that have and do change – often dramatically – and often for the better. According to Gadamer (1989), Caputo (2000), Bernasconi (1995), Derrida and Vattimo (1996) and Vaterling (2003), the human and institutional tendency to seek change is itself, deeply embedded in the reflexive concept called *alterity*. Alterity is that moment of self-awareness, evident in one's individual and collective experiences, when one / we realize that when 'this' is happening and in this moment, alternatively, something different could have happened. That is, everything we do ultimately is defined in contrast to what it is not. Does a teacher or a school as a collective know, for example, when the learning and teaching practices at hand are not learner nourishing? So, the argument is: In every institution, such as schools, in the processes of normalizing members, there lives the possibility to be and become – alternatively – otherwise, or not of that institution. Choices made or not and, more importantly, consciousness of choice made or not depend on that process. However, the measures of institutional control seem to systemically and systematically overwhelm the alteric possibility of individual teachers engaging in reform. The question is: How might some schools and teachers tap into this alteric possibility of becoming re-formed or changed and, thus, pedagogically otherwise?

Canadian Schools are Learning Organizations

How do we create structures that move with change, that are flexible and adaptive, that enable rather than constrain?

– Margaret Wheatley (Writer/Management consultant)

In the 1960s, North Americans experienced several societal / cultural revolutions. These revolutions refocused citizen awareness regarding civic responsibilities, global awareness, popular culture / media, the fine arts, race, gender, institutional values, fashion, science, technology, economics and politics, demographic and social structures, as well as on ecology, war, justice, capitalism, legal systems, religion, spirituality, sexuality, and public-private property. As political, business and corporate establishments struggled to address these revolutions, school systems also became sites of contested value and application.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, schools came to feel the full effects of a newly emergent, largely urban and suburban, middle-class, populist neo-liberal movement. In schools and colleges, student-activist movements launched protests against war and against racial, gender, and personal discrimination. As a response to these changes, significant questions emerged about what should / ought to count as schooling and, indeed, what the purpose of

schools should / ought to be. Some citizens felt schools must advance academic-scholastic intellectualism. Others focused on social adjustment. Still, others argued for the delivery of career and skill's training? As with most debates, many citizens seemed to locate themselves in a middle position; schooling outcomes should feature literacy-numeracy competency, problem-solving and critical thinking, good citizenship, social competence, and employability skills.

It was then that the debate shifted to the degree of emphasis with respect to each outcome. However, as this conversation about schooling progressed in the late 1970s and into the early 80s, there emerged a social, economic, and political push-back against the neo-liberal agenda of advancing individual freedoms. This push-back response became known as neo-conservatism. Whereas 1960s-70s neo-liberalism was based on individual freedom and choice, 1970s-80s neo-conservatism was based on a political ideology of preservation. That is, neo-conservatism called for a return to traditional values that would enable an individual the freedom to be capitalistically successful. Simply, social control and social reform were playing themselves out on a societal stage; the schools and schooling became a flashpoint.

It was the neo-conservatives that came to form many Western governments in the 1980s and 90s. This is still evident in the early 21st Century. Neo-conservative governments claimed a need to protect the privileges associated with traditional – capitalist / parochial / patriarchal – social orders. Thus, the neoconservatives focused on the importance of returning to and preserving traditional family values, the Church, the military, the legal system, private property, the producer-consumer driven marketplace, and unconditional patriotism. Neo-conservatives, then, sought to prioritise the privatisation of national assets while forcing deregulation of the various marketplaces and industries in order to encourage business and corporate growth. Neo-conservative governments also sought to reduce anything that might be seen as impediments to free market-based corporate / business growth.

The impact of the tensions between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism on education in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, the United States of America, and Canada has shaped today's early 21st Century school (Apple, 2004, 2006). For example, within Canada, the Albertan 'Progressive' Conservatives, in the 1980s and 90s and into the 21st Century through Premiers Peter Lougheed (Premier – 1971-1985), Don Getty (Premier – 1985-1992), and Ralph Klein (Premier – 1992 – 2006), legislated a series of systemically ideological and fiscal correctives targeting learners, teachers, schools, school boards, and the provincial education system. Using deficit and debt reduction and through the elimination of statutes and laws, these Albertan premiers declared that any monies spent on education would be declared as wasteful if schools could not show, empathetically and measurably, that their learners were able to compete, competently and confidently, in provincial, national, and international academic and market places.

During this time of out-of-the-closet neo-conservatism, for example, in most Alberta schools, parents emerged as educational consumers, learners were quantified as resources, teachers became knowledge / skill and attribute dispensing workers, and businesses / corporations were education's primary and true stakeholders. As well, schools were mandated to be more technocratic, managerial, and performance driven as results-based management sites for teaching and learning. Another example of this economic-managerial-business to education connectivity in Alberta may be seen in the re-working of the K-12 English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum in the mid-to-late 1990s, . In 1990, the Conference Board of Canada named employability knowledge and skills for the then pending 21st Century citizen. In re-structuring

Alberta's ELA curriculum, the Conference Board *Academic, Personal Management and Teamwork Skills* document became the required framework for creating the new K-12 ELA curriculum. The outcomes-based, standardization-framed ELA curriculum design then became the prototype used across all the subject matter program of studies in Alberta. As such, all the literacy, numeracy, and sciences and information computer technologies curricular areas were connected to career employability and/or professional academic standards. The required outcomes of every curriculum were to elevate standards of learning and teaching, thus ensuring competent citizen preparation for 21st Century globalisation.

Fullan (1993) and Hargreaves (1994) suggested that if any educational reforms were to become sustainable, there had to be understandings advanced about 'systemic organizational reform' and 'teacher readiness' to engage in reform. Systemic reform begins with governments making across-the-board reform educational legislation. Then, school systems and schools must adhere, by law, to the government's requirements for demonstrable outcomes in local schools. At the local levels of schooling, teachers must become active agents in reforming the school. Fullan (1993) and Hargreaves (1994) further suggested that if educational reforms are to succeed at all and on any level, reform requires collaborative interactions between educators and the local school / community, the district / region boards, and the provincial governments. Again, in many Canadian provinces from 1990 to the present, legitimation defining curriculum outcomes and standardization, resource allocations, accountability management regimes, business model budgeting, efficiency ratings and so on have become the school as institutional norm.

21st Century Learners, Teachers, and Schools

No question is so difficult to answer as that to which the answer is obvious.

– George Bernard Shaw (Playwright)

On January 1st, 1980, a remarkable human race event occurred; the first member of the Millennial Generation, or the Digital Native Generation, or Generation Y was born! That first birth meant that eighteen to twenty years later (eighteen to twenty years equals a generation) the world would be different from anything human beings had experienced previously. How so? For the first time in human history, four generations – *Traditionalists*, *Baby-Boomers*, *Generation X* and *Generation Y* – existed within the same society. *Generation Y* (or, at times, referred to as Gen M or Millennials or Digital Natives or Echo Boomers or 21st Century Learners or the Net Generation) are those persons born between 1980 and 1995. These 21st Century learners, in North America, have never known life without electronics and digitization such as: computers, the Internet / World Wide Web, electronic and digital toys, GPS systems, personal communication devices, cell phones, social networking sites, and so on.

Whereas a few teachers are *Traditionalists*, most teachers are *Boomer Generations* (born 1943 to 1960). Many teachers are of *Generation X* (born 1961 to 1983). In addition, some teachers are of the Millennial Generation. However, the vast majority of students in public schools in Canada are of the 21st Century generation. Although it is impossible to generalize accurately and describe characteristics of generations, some eleven years into the 21st Century, governments, schools, and teachers themselves are beginning to recognize how these changing demographics, within the current state of affairs / tensions in schools, are affecting the school's learning-teaching-assessment reform possibilities.

So, what is possible regarding 21st Century teachers and schools?

With respect to local school jurisdictions, each school holds the possibility of being an organizationally adaptive site. Most schools are living examples of the Canadian disposition to attempt to balance social control and social reform. For the most part, many schools have been moving towards becoming 21st Century ‘learning organizations’. Schon (1983) and Senge et.al. (1994) wrote about generative sustainable institutions. They suggested that, across and throughout history, such institutions have succeeded because they remained open, in an alteric sense, to a continuous dialogue between tradition, change, and transformation.

The key to transformational sustainability in schools seems to live in the school as a local and international dialogical learning site. As well, the adaptively sustainable school must have internal champions who can shape and manage pending and actual transformations. School level agency, then, is dependent on member awareness of and commitments to capacity development within critical, reflexive audits of the school’s heritage, including its appreciative history as an already existing adaptive learning organization. It is here, in this constitutionally framed, adaptive disposition, where a typical Canadian school’s evolutionary synergy must live, survive, and thrive. It is here where the local school has been constitutionally defined by contextual boundaries as a local public place alive as yesterday’s historical enterprise. However, the same site is also capable of being today’s socially constructed, relevant, and adaptable learning and teaching organization. When the global – through globalization; rightly or wrongly – is unavoidably now understood as local, then this global-as-local context plays to the organizational and pedagogic strengths of the Canadian public school system. This is a system that is highly responsive – that is, quick to respond even if still constrained by resource availability. But even those issues ‘of lack’ add to the innovative resiliency of many local schools that regularly, facing changing landscapes, transcend their local circumstances and move learning and teaching forward into remarkable achievements. As such, Canadian schools have, in their lifeblood, the resilient abilities to adapt, change, and reconstitute themselves accordingly to any number of changing social, economic, or politically emergent trends. Also, it is here where mid 21st Century teachers, all adult learners themselves, have the potential to play a critical role in student learning success and in sustainable school reform.

Adult Education and Teacher Professional Development

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

– John Dewey (Educational reformer)

Adult education, a field of scholarship and practice with roots deeply steeped in personal growth and development, community development, and societal change, has more recently come to include professional development across a broad range of disciplines and, more specifically, within workplace learning contexts. Most significant is that, historically, adult education and ‘the political’ cannot be separated. Beyond diversity of discipline and our individual roles and responsibilities, adult educators stand together, on common ground, in support of a more unified, just, and democratic society (Kawalilak, 2004).

Grassroots adult education has always been concerned with notions and practices pertaining to whose knowledge counts and to who holds the power. For this reason, social justice work and the promotion of a deepened and expanded social consciousness significantly informs

the field and practice of adult education. Simply put, adult educators work closely together with an aim to create conditions in support of an equitable world. Sound education for all informs adult education praxis. Adult education philosophy also advocates that education is power and those with roles and responsibilities related to the education of others need to also address their own lifelong learning needs. So then, what does adult education have to do with teachers and sustainable reform?

Teachers as Lifelong Learners

First and foremost, teachers, whether working with children or adults, are also lifelong adult learners. Another way to frame this, then, is to understand and appreciate teacher professional development within a lifelong learning context. Bateson (1994) reminded us that within our own lifelong learning experiences that we gather ‘along the way’, there is tremendous potential for knowledge construction, co-creation, and knowledge sharing.

The discourse continues on the connection between experience and learning and to *why*, *when*, *where*, and *how* adult learns. Regardless of what theoretical lens educators align to, there is general consensus that: adults learn and construct knowledge in a variety of ways; lived experiences provides rich fodder for learning and knowledge construction; and that lifelong learning serves as the foundational, guiding principle for meaningful, thoughtful, and intentional practice (Dewey, 1997; Fenwick, 2003; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996; Heimstra, 1993; Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1989; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2006; Mezirow, 1998).

To extend adult education philosophy to the lifework of teachers, John Dewey (1859-1952), an educator, pragmatist philosopher, and psychologist, referred to education as the process of living – to life itself, and to learning as an active, experiential and organic, never-ending process. Barnes (1953) referred to “teaching [as] lifework” (p. 357) and maintained that learners have the right to experience teachers who are well-prepared, deeply committed, and who express a passion and sincere liking for their chosen vocation / lifework.

Teachers play a critical role in the shaping of a learner’s world-view. Kawalilak (2008) elaborated:

A shifting, global landscape continues to impact those who have chosen the privileged vocation of teaching. If teacher education hopes to live well in our changing world, the values that support this intention need to be deeply and visibly embedded throughout teacher education curriculum [and professional development initiatives]. These values include: inquiry and knowledge; social consciousness; equity and social justice; respect and concern for others of difference; diversity; community building; and ultimately, [aspiring to] teacher excellence.

To open takes courage; this requires a loosening of grip on tightly held perceptions, assumptions, and agendas. To open... is a type of surrender, to make room for that which has yet to be discovered or experienced. Teacher education programs [and teacher professional development] that ‘live well’ commit to the creation of a space to receive and explore the unknown. Openness is an active, inclusive response. It communicates a willingness to participate and engage.... (p. 308)

Thoughtful and purposeful engagement connects us with other like-minded souls. Collectively, through meaningful dialogue, intention, and a unified focus, there is potential to co-

create community. In community, we unite to influence situations, political agendas, and events that compete with providing education that supports inquiry and critical thinking, an increased social consciousness, and an unwavering commitment to promoting social justice and equity. Lindeman (1989) embraced adult education as the heartbeat of social reformation and change and understood lifelong learning to be continual and potentially life illuminating. In his book titled *The Meaning of Adult Education* (originally published in 1926), Lindeman referred to the critical need for the development of an individual and for collective social intelligence.

A deepened commitment to teacher professional development benefits the teacher, students, education system, and the greater community. By embracing the lifelong learner within us, we continue to challenge ourselves to achieve excellence in our chosen vocation and are better equipped to meet the many challenges of an ever-changing and evolving landscape. Keller (2002) added to the discourse and stated:

It is crucial that schools and communities recognize the importance of developing teachers as lifelong learners. It seems foolish to hope to engender life-long learning skills and attitudes in children without paying attention to those same skills and attitudes in developing the teachers of those children. (p. 5)

Keller (2002) also maintained that “new approaches to teacher learning must develop in parallel to new conceptions of schools and student learning” (p. 8) and that “just as student learning increases when attention is paid to their individual needs, so teachers will improve their practice given the support and opportunities to do so” (p. 10). Providing ‘space’ that includes a visible commitment, time, access, organizational support, and other resources to advance and enrich teacher professional development will contribute significantly to educating learners and teachers today, for yesterday’s tomorrow in 21st Century Schools.

In Summary

*Never doubt that a small committed group of citizens can change the world.
Indeed it is the only that ever has.*

– Margaret Mead (Cultural anthropologist)

Most Canadians have a confidence in Canadian schooling / education. Canadian schools will take a greater and more responsive lead in hosting the lifelong learning and teaching needs of diverse Canadian citizens as we move towards the mid-21st Century. We believe the Canadian school will do as it always has – it will change and adapt. Why? Canadians, at a pedagogic level, know that no matter what the latest trends are – for example, today some educational experts are calling for virtual schools where learning is private, autonomous, connected, and on demand (any time and any place) – that without a ‘public’ learning, teaching and schooling space for people to gather and engage within their similarities and diversities, then 21st Century Canada will be a significantly reduced democratic nation of identifiable citizens. Without teachers teaching children and youth, in a public pedagogic space, how and why to engage individually and collaboratively with the developments and challenges of today’s and tomorrow’s social, commercial, political, and technological movements, the heart and soul of what it means to be an educated local-global citizen seems lessened. If the world is becoming increasingly complex, we, as adults, parents and educators cannot, and must not, abandon a single child to that

complexity without direct, present, and publically open teaching and learning being evident.

Finally, it will be, the public school teacher's 21st Century pedagogic practices that will, as always, ensure the best opportunities for all our diverse learners learning and living successfully in a constantly changing world. We cannot work backwards from our adult visions of frozen futures, never to be realized, for our children. We must be committed to doing good educational work with our children today; only then will their tomorrow look after itself. Hannah Arendt (1961) in an essay titled, *The Crisis in Education* in a text, *Between Past and Future*, wrote that the essential task of a contemporary educator / teacher is to philosophically, pragmatically, and pedagogically recognize that education / schooling has become, more so today than ever before, a paradoxically riddled social control-social reform game. Arendt (1991) maintained:

The problem is simply to educate in such a way that seeing-right remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured. Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control that new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. (p. 243)

Teachers must somehow bring children, without abandoning or victimizing or enabling them, into what is currently at stake in *their* education.

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