The OECD and Education 2030: Defuturing the Role of Teachers in Curriculum Making[1]

J-C Couture[2]

Design is always future-making.
Susan Yelavich, Design as Future-Making

A wealth of pre-pandemic scholarship demonstrated how the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), through its Education 2030 initiative (OECD, 2015), was attempting to globally orchestrate the reform of education programs (Robertson 2021; Ydesen, 2021). This scholarship was built on a legacy of research that traced the growth of the OECD as a highly successful educational policy actor that mobilized the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to advance its particular view of the future (Sellar & Lingard, 2016; Auld & Morris, 2019; Sjøberg, 2019). Most recently in Canada, in the context of the COVID19 pandemic, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation has shown real leadership in engaging its membership in countering the OECD's conceptual tools, such as The Learning Compass, that attempt to 'make use of the future' as a mechanism of anticipatory governance (Gacoin, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that the following outlines

1. Key words: future-making, curriculum design, global competencies, organizational renewal.
2. J-C Couture is an Adjunct faculty member of the University of Alberta and an instructor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Email: jcouture@ualberta.ca

the experience of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) in attempting to navigate the growing influence of the OECD in the Canadian province of Alberta. The intent here is not to revisit established research on the rise of the OECD as a preeminent global educational policy actor. Instead, what follows hopes to signal the need for the teaching profession to critically consider and engage policymaking in key areas such as curriculum and assessment as a project of 'future-making.' This work can be informed by growing scholarship examining how influential policy actors such as the OECD use 'the future' as a construct to leverage both the production of particular privileged visions of human progress while at the same time cancelling or 'defuturing' divergent futures and possibilities (Fry, 1999).

The Case of the Frozen Future of Future Ready Albertans

When a system collapses, language is released from its moorings. Words meant to encapsulate reality hang empty in the air, no longer applicable to anything.

Andri Snaer Magnason, On Time and Water

Speaking at the launch of a two-year consultation process that began in 2008, Alberta's Education Minister Dave Hancock invoked a futures-making imperative echoed by ministers across the OECD including the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) in Canada: "We know the world is changing, and that education must change with it to prepare students for a future that none of us can predict." For the province's roughly 600,000 Kindergarten to Grade 12 students, the launch of the government's "transformational" policy framework Inspiring Education in Action (Alberta Education, 2010) heralded the intent to build a "competency based" curriculum.

From 2010 onward, a succession of five ministers enabled by a churn of senior ministry officials embraced the organizing principles of Education 2030, in particular 'competencies' as a conceptual scaffold for operationalizing curriculum renewal. Despite concerns raised by curricular experts in the field (Den Heyer, 2013) regarding their fluid and highly contested meaning, the 10 competencies continue to be positioned as definitive and foundational attributes of student learning. Successive provincial governments since 2010 continue to be drawn by the principles of Education 2030 to "support the development of a competencies-based, student-focused curriculum" that would "transcend subject areas" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 9). Currently, curriculum redesign continues to be driven by the guiding vision to "inspire and enable students to achieve success and fulfillment as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit within an inclusive education system" (p. 7).

As consultations with education partners unfolded, a pivotal moment came in Fall 2015 with the appointment of 10 "competency managers," with accompanying support staff, to scaffold the design of all the core subjects in each of the K-12 grades. The enterprise of curriculum blueprinting rapidly moved to developing elaborate matrices and flow charts illustrating the 10 competencies in each grade and subject accompanied by indicators of success. Predictably, this led to the development of volumes of spreadsheets with competency indicators to inform assessment, mapped into grade level progressions in an increasingly elaborate curricular architecture. The stated goal in these processes was to build a sense of legitimacy as an array of education partners, including teachers, continued to feed the infrastructure of the ministry's flagship New LearnAlberta [sic] digital platform[3] to support a six-year process of curriculum building (Alberta Education, 2016).

In the face of these developments, the ATA called for a reconsideration of the increasingly untenable work being undertaken, highlighting concerns, including how global competence as a linguistic and cultural construct, with historical roots in European colonial

3. See https://curriculum.learnalberta.ca/home/en

traditions, constructs and mobilizes a new order of 'deficits' for students (Grotluschen, 2017; Cobb and Couch, 2021). In place of the OECD's Education 2030 design principles grounded on global competencies, the ATA offered a conceptual scaffold for curriculum redesign based on Delors' four pillars of learning as outlined in UNESCO's Learning: The Treasure Within (UNESCO 1996): learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. This proposal was a key element of the ATA's plan for curriculum renewal, a strategic research initiative undertaken over the previous two years involving the province's teachers, curriculum scholars and policy experts that culminated in the publication of Renewing Alberta's Promise (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2015).

Based on extensive consultations with the field, including 20 subject area specialist councils and a curriculum symposium in May 2014, the UNESCO pillars were seen to offer possibilities for establishing a curriculum framework to facilitate the renewal process. In a pivotal meeting with senior officials following the symposium, ATA staff were informed that Delors' pillars were presented as a possible set of organizing principles to a committee of senior government officials and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). As reported by ministry staff at this meeting, included in the outright rejection of this proposal was a dismissive observation from one MLA who, in referring to the learning to be pillar, opined "we don't do existentialism here."

Space limitations do not allow for a more detailed description or analysis of the internal discussions that unfolded within the ATA leadership, or further unsuccessful efforts to advocate for changes in policy direction. Suffice it to indicate that following several education ministry refusals to shift direction, the curriculum renewal process in the province has remained mired in controversy and contestation.

What the ATA did not appreciate was the pervasiveness of OECD policy frames, including 'competencies' and how they had been taken up within both the political and bureaucratic functions of successive Alberta governments. For example, despite the hope that the newly elected 'progressive' New Democratic Party (NDP, a Canadian social democratic party) would consider a new direction in 2016, NDP Education Minister David Eggen reiterated the role of competencies as part of a broader government commitment to create a province that is "Future Ready" – all supported by an

ambitious six-year $64 million curriculum initiative where additional "material will be developed to teach students financial literacy, climate change, the history of Indigenous people and residential schools, and gender identity" (CBC News, 2018).

Now, in 2022, the promise of creating Future Ready students in Alberta certainly remains as ambiguous as it was compelling. After all, the students who were in kindergarten when Inspiring Action in Education was launched twelve years ago are graduating this year – having been denied the ephemeral promise of 'transformation.' Despite the efforts of five subsequent ministers of education and their governments, 'transformation' of Alberta's curriculum remains unrealized (Couture, 2021; Peck, 2022).

A call to action

The noted British sociologist Basil Bernstein reminds us that curriculum is one of three key message systems in education alongside pedagogy and assessment (Bernstein, 2000, in Sellar, 2020, para. 2). As a process of futures-making, curriculum continues as one of the fundamental conditions of practice and the teaching profession and its organizations are deeply implicated in the work of its redesign and renewal. The inability of the profession in Alberta to substantially influence the curriculum redesign process is an example of a larger short-coming: the inability to see how the power and ability to 'name the future' positions schools, including students and their teachers, as a policy problem (Biesta, 2016, p. 83).

While it might be tempting for teachers and their organizations to focus primarily on their particular system-level or jurisdictional leaders as the focus for advocacy and member mobilization, the Alberta case suggests the need to better understand the global and provincial level dynamics of how policy guardrails assembled by influential policy actors in the OECD and the education ministry directed curriculum redesign. In these respects, the OECD's global influence in mobilizing 'the future' through a "human capital theory of growth" remains pervasive (Zhao & Gearin, 2017, p. 9). Yet, while the OECD's work in education has been the subject of much "scholarly attention" there remains

little understanding concerning how its educational programs and activities rose "to the forefront of the OECD's agenda – at least as seen in terms of publicity and internal growth" (Centeno, 2021, p. 11).

It is important to acknowledge the substantial efforts by the global teachers' allaince Educational International and its affiliates to navigate and influence the policies of the OECD and how these are mobilized in the name of equity, innovation and educational development (BCTF, 2019; Rogers, 2020; Sellar, 2020; Sorenson, 2020). To give these words material meaning in schools, there are numerous examples of teacher organizations continuing to engage neoliberal global education reforms by building member agency at all levels (Carr and Beckett, 2020; Weiner, 2020). Yet, this work needs to be expanded and integrated into building capacity for strategic foresight and democratizing 'uses of the future' (Urry, 2016; Couture, Gottrick & Sellar, 2021). One immediate opportunity is to engage the work of UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative and its invitation to mobilize responses to its resulting report, Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education (UNESCO, 2021), in our schools and teacher organizations.

A pre-pandemic study commissioned by Education International (Bascia & Stevenson, 2021) concluded that "organizing around ideas" (p. 2) could be a catalyst of organizational renewal that would also build the capacity of profession. In the context of the post-pandemic after-shocks of our current global crises, perhaps a sustained and strategic effort - to organize around a compelling idea – would be to engage the profession in sustained programs of futures-making initiatives focussed on 'democratizing the future' thereby offering alternatives to the OECD's Education 2030 that will acknowledge the centrality of curriculum as a fundamental condition of teachers' practice.

References

Auld, E. & Morris, P. (2019). Science by streetlight and the OECD's measure of global competence: A new yardstick for internationalisation? Policy Futures in Education, 17(6), 677–698. doi:10.1177/1478210318819246.

Alberta Education. (2010). Inspiring action in education. Government of Alberta.

https://www.oecd.org/site/eduilebanff/48763522.pdf

Alberta Education. (2016). The Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Provincial Curriculum (Programs of Study). Government of Alberta. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460130971

Bascia, N. & Stevenson, H. (2017). Organising teaching: Developing the power of the profession.

Education International.

https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Research_institute_mobilising_final.pdf

Bernstein, B. (2000). Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Biesta, G. (2019). What kind of society does the school need? Redefining the democratic work of education in impatient times. Studies in Philosophy and Education, 38, 657-668. doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09675-y

British Columbia Teachers' Federation. (2019). Navigating transformation: Education 2030,

teachers' unions, and spaces of resistance. BCTF Research.

https://www.bctf.ca/docs/default-source/default-document-library/navigatingtransformation_2019_oecd_report.pdf?sfvrsn=494eb685_0

Carr, J. & Beckett, L. (2020). Teachers and teacher unions in a globalised world: History, theory and policy in Ireland. Routledge.

CBC News. (2018, June 15). Alberta begins six-year overhaul of education curriculum.

https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/aberta-begins-six-year-overhaul-of-education-curriculum-1.3636519

Centeno, V.G. (2021). The OECD: actor, arena, instrument. Globalisation, Societies and Education, 19(2), 108-121. doi:10.1080/14767724.2021.1882958

Cobb, D. & Couch, D. (2022). Locating inclusion within the OECD's assessment of global competence: An inclusive future through PISA 2018? Policy Futures in Education, 20(1), 56-72. doi:10.1177/14782103211006636

Couture, J.-C., Grøttvik, R., and Sellar, S. (2020). A profession learning to become: the promise of collaboration between teacher organizations and academia. Paper commissioned for the

UNESCO Futures of Education report. Retrieved from: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374156

Couture, J-C. (2021). Alberta's Design Challenge: Engaging Some Legacy Issues. Alberta

Curriculum Analysis.

https://alberta-curriculum-analysis.ca/albertas-design-challenge-engaging-some-legacy-

issues/den Heyer, K. (2013, June). Competencies: Promises and pitfalls. ATA Magazine.

Fry, T. (1999). A new design philosophy: An introduction to defuturing. UNSW Press.

Gacoin, A. (2021). Transforming education in a pandemic: Global trends and spaces of resistance. Intercambio. 11(17), 19-24. http://idea-network.ca/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/Intercambio-17_english.pdf

Grotluschen, A. (2017). Global competence: Does the new OECD competence domain ignore the global South? Studies in the Education of Adults, 50(2), 185–202. doi:10.1080/02660830.2018.1523100.

Magnason, A.S. (2019). On time and water. Biblioasis.

OECD. (2015). OECD Learning Compass 2030. OECD. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/

Peck, C. (2022, January 1). The absurd UCP curriculum: Ideologically driven and lacking basic understanding of how children learn. Alberta Views. https://albertaviews.ca/the-absurd-ucp-curriculum/

Robertson, S.L. (2021). Provincializing the OECD-PISA global competences project.

Globalisation, Societies and Education. 19(2), 167-182. doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1887725

Rogers, P. (2020). Are we there yet? Neoliberal education and never-ending reform.

Our Schools/Our Selves. Summer/Fall, 5-8. https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2020/06/OSOS-Summer2020.pdf

Sellar, S., & Lingard, B. (2013). The OECD and global governance in education. Journal of Education Policy, 28(5), 710–725.

Sellar, S. (2020). Reimagining the futures of assessment with teacher professional autonomy. Education International. https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/23573:reimagining-the-futures-of-assessment-with-teacher-professional-autonomy-by-sam-sellar

Sjøberg, S. (2019). The PISA syndrome: How the OECD has hijacked the way we perceive pupils, schools and education. Confero, 7(1), 12-65. doi:10.3384/confero.2001-4562.190125

Sorensen, T.B. (2020). The space for challenge in transnational education governance: The case of Education International and the OECD TALIS programme. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 42(4), 572-589. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1718611

UNESCO. (1996). Learning: The treasure within. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000109590

UNESCO. (2021). Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707

Urry, J. (2016). What is the future?. Polity Press.

Weiner, L. (2020). Teachers unions and the pandemic: Fighting for life and facing neoliberalism's new bipartisan push. New Politics.

Yelavich, S. (2014). Introduction. In S. Yelavich & B. Adams (Eds.), Design as future-making. Bloomsbury Academic. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474293907

Ydesen, C. (Ed). (2021). The OECD's historical rise in education: The formation of a global governing complex. Springer Nature.

Zhao, Y. & Gearin, B. 2018. Imagining the future of global education: Dreams and nightmares. Routledge.