REFEREED ARTICLE

Curricula Reform for Student Preparedness

Nicole McIntyre-Garbutt

Abstract

Curricula reform that sets students' future success, as the main objective requires insights into the demands of our society. These demands include economic and social needs. The fast-paced changing nature of our society makes it difficult to clearly define content necessary for students' post-graduate success, so curricula reform should focus on skills essential for content mastery, personal growth, and self-management. This article discusses moving Manitoba's "patch-work" curricula updating to a global reform that includes changing roles for teachers, restructuring priority subject areas, and placing students' needs in the central role of curricula design.

Preparing our students for an uncertain, but demanding, future should be the goal of most educational curricula. Curricula reform in Manitoba is a slow, piece-meal process of reviewing, piloting, and implementing subject curricula in isolation of other areas. Modifying content to meet the current trends or standardized testing does not prepare students to deal with the complex, changing nature of our future society. Literacy and numeracy proficiency remains an important skill for learners, but research indicates that lifelong learning skills and emotional literacy need equal attention in our educational curricula for citizens of our future (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015; Schleicher, 2018). Though the obstacles for curricula reform are great, student preparedness needs to be a priority in our educational system.

The Current State

Creating appropriate curricula becomes more daunting as we personally experience obstacles and issues that we could never have forecasted, and we need to prepare students for careers and obstacles that we cannot predict (Fahnert, 2019). Identifying curricular objectives that will benefit students "to achieve their full potential, to contribute to an increasingly interconnected world, and to convert better skills into better lives" (Schliecher, 2018, p. 2) goes beyond traditional, content mastery. Most of the current core curricula do not include socio-emotional training, skills training, ethics, community connections, and appropriate individualized programming outside of an IEP (Individualize education program). Some streams of elective curricula, such as social studies (Manitoba Government, 2007), English language arts (Manitoba Government, 2020), and visual arts (Manitoba Government, 2015), are moving toward including competencies that recognize the impact of the individual, the family, and the community on learning. The social studies curriculum specifies that "citizenship is a fluid concept" (p. 6), recognizing that interpretation and guidance are required to maintain relevance. With the exception of English language arts, standardized testing does not assess curricula with an emphasis on personal awareness and self-development. The concepts are not easily evaluated quantitatively or reported statistically, and cannot be held up and compared with other provinces. They are labeled "electives," and students may opt out of the experiences presented in the arts, humanities, and vocational streams.

Well-being and socialization are bubbling to the surface as issues that need to be addressed in the education of our young people. However, as in Australia most Manitoba curricula do not currently address developing resiliency in students "to manage uncertainty and complexity" (Wyn, 2007, p. 36). Special programs, optional seminars, or guest speakers address topics in mental health and making good choices. Physical education classes include a

health unit to teach some topics formally. These efforts skim the surface of socio-emotional awareness, but fall short of becoming a useful tool for them to integrate in their lives.

Skills training for students to become functioning members of our global economy and to make ethical decisions about how they wish to function in society (Guyotte, 2020) is marginally touched on in the current curricula. Critical-thinking, problem solving, creative innovation, and collaboration are desired competencies being included in new curricula reform in Canada (Government of Alberta, 2016). These skills rely on open-ended, collaborative, integrative processes with multiple solutions, such as in Manitoba's English language arts curriculum (Government of Manitoba, 2020), which is "conceived as a learning landscape" that enables learning to occur "in the dynamic, complex, living field of English language arts" (p. 31). Professional development in the area of skills based learning and authentic assessment is optional and with limited resources for structural change. Current curricula, geared toward standardized testing, have prescriptive content, time frame, and delivery methods to cover all content required for success. Incorporating valuable, lifelong learning skills need to be a priority to for students to be competent members of a constantly changing society.

Learning about citizenship needs a place in curricula reflective of future demands on students, but vastly different from how it is currently integrated. Opportunities for students to function as productive members of society through community or technology connections are not part of the core curricula training. Educational systems can be quick to incorporate technology with the best intentions of providing opportunities for students, but "these tools must be evaluated soberly and critically" (Anderson & Keehn, 2019, p. 146). There must be purposeful learning surrounding ethics and curating information (Spencer, 2020) for all students, not just those who choose the optional courses.

Programming for students is currently a "one-size-fits-all," with individualization available for students who struggle or have been identified with a need. There is limited room for choice that authentically connects students to learning. Dewey (1938) identified the role of familial, cultural, and regional identities to build learning on established understandings. Mason (2013) indicated that the loss of community places for interactions, discussion, and observation is an obstacle to students developing a healthy sense of self and belonging. Student timetables currently cannot afford the flexibility needed to customize a student's program to accommodate this type of individualized learning.

Manitoba teachers, policy makers, and curricula designers need to work together to address the discrepancy between current curricular outcomes and the needs for students to participate effectively in their future economies and societies. Students are being filled with content and knowledge. However, they are missing the essential skills, socio-emotional awareness, cultural and societal awareness, and individualized programming needed to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society. Curricula based on government policy, funding, and traditional structures do not prepare our students, nor do they acknowledge the need for our communities to have confident, resilient community members.

Reforms To Meet Students' Needs

The focus of education in Manitoba and elsewhere in the world needs to reflect the future values of the society and the future economy. No one can predict the future, so curricula makers need continually to refocus the priorities or create a flexible, fluid curricula structure to accommodate for change. Today's students need to have a strong set of skills more than they need content mastery. Our current educational structure therefore needs to focus on a more student-focused system, rather than subject-focused. There is a demand for people who are adaptable in their thinking and can make ethical connections. Individualization, technology, and communities are all essential tools for learning by making strong connections, but this needs to be done safely and with guidance. The uncertain, ever-changing future that we are preparing

our students to enter should be recognized and accounted for in the curricula we use to teach our students.

There is no way to develop a concrete set of knowledge objectives that will carry a student successfully into the future, so the focus needs to be on developing the student's skill set to master any required knowledge. Curricula must move from "the product towards the process of education" (Lynch & McGarr, 2016, p. 730). Every curriculum needs to give attention to the skills "to interrogate knowledge, to find it for oneself, and to respond to rapidly changing situations" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015, p. 21). These skills overlap traditional curricula areas, both core and optional. A developed skill set will lead to blurring the boundaries of traditional subject areas (Lynch & McGarr, 2016), which will then lead to connected and integrated learning. New curricula should focus to engage students' "learning muscles" (Claxton, 2009, p. 97) and take the focus off what was previously considered mastery learning. Business and technology, drama, graphic and visual arts, and practical arts currently offer skill-based, community, and cultural connections that are missing in core subject areas. The opportunities offered in the optional courses will facilitate essential skill-based learning that moves students into deeper connections between subject areas and relationships within a real-world context. Focusing on "how" to learn instead of "what" to learn is necessary to develop lifelong learners.

A new framework is needed to integrate the traditional subject area curricula. The traditional view of teaching content areas in isolation of each other has been replaced with the realization that "the world is rarely experienced in disciplinary silos" (Molebash et al., 2019, p. 20). The STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) movement has highlighted common skills that are in demand. Further consideration of essential future skills has recognized skills like creativity and design from the arts discipline, in order to rename the group as STEAM skills. The emerging importance of common skills and integration of content areas calls for a restructure of how we are currently teaching, evaluating, and reporting on students' learning. Communication and sharing between subject areas should be structured for efficiency and to ensure a student has experiences and demonstrates learning in all areas. Teachers working as teams, sharing, and communication will also encourage appropriate planning for individual student growth. Creating a new framework with subject integration and sharing of students' abilities and needs will focus effective, student-centered programming.

Restructuring curricula would have to include teaching professionals and para-professionals to take on the demands of praxis in individualized, future ready curricula. This includes a wide scope of related concerns, including the increasing demand on teachers. The training of para-professionals may take some of the strain off teachers. For example, Krause et al. (2019) presented the success of Emotional Literacy Support Assistance in schools in the United Kingdom in supporting the well-being of students. Pre-professional training programs for teachers may take on more of a management role to include training in team teaching and collaboration and managing para-professionals, as well as mastery of content and teaching skills. From my personal experience, I feel the largest obstacle would be the professional development of current teachers who may be resistant to large-scale change. Re-envisioning training in the educational realm to restructure curricula is a daunting task, but it is a necessary endeavor to restructure the curricula in order to ready our students for a future that is every changing, integrated, and demanding.

Educational systems should build responsible connections to enhance student experiences and learning. Connections start with community, family, and culture being integrated in curricula, and also taking the curricula out of the schools to enhance a student's experience. This will require special attention to the individualization of programming for students. Technology could be used as an essential tool to help with connecting students locally and globally, but only if there is essential instruction related to the digital citizenship (Hollandsworth, 2011). Currently, most programs involving career development, community awareness, and technology are not required for graduation, yet contain, or could contain, valuable essential learning for students.

Individualized connections outside of the educational system, which examine the student's roles in society, should be an essential consideration in school curricula.

Reviewing curricula and their current structure is an intimidating process, but necessary to set students up in a society that is constantly changing and is demanding skills from young people to adapt. Attention needs to be given to the structure, the content, and methods of our current curricula. Further attention needs to be given to individualizing programs in order to ensure that connected and essential learning is being taught to every student in Manitoba. Professional and para-professional training in ethics, team management, and communication will facilitate the change of focus from the subject to the student. Reform is an overwhelming task, but it is an essential task in student preparedness.

Conclusion

Our curricula in Manitoba currently focus on student literacy and numeracy by making them core subjects and instituting provincial assessments in these areas, but there is some essential learning missing because of these established priorities. This essential learning is related to preparing students for the dynamic, unpredictable future. Restructuring the curricula to include skill, socio-emotional, and ethics-based learning would promote independence and resiliency in our students to be able to support themselves in their economic and cultural future. With restructuring, support for educational leaders and communication with concerned groups must be addressed, then overcoming these obstacles will lead to a stronger program in the end. Preparing our students is the focus of our educational system, so, just like the future our students are moving into, change must be a norm.

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About the Author

Nicole McIntyre-Garbutt teaches graphic communications and serves as registrar at Vincent Massey High School in Brandon, Manitoba. Nicole's classroom experience includes teaching multiple subject areas and grade levels, allowing her to focus on project-based learning and curriculum integration. She spends her personal time with her four boys and their multiple pets.