Test Driving the Draft Curriculum:
Introducing the New BC Curriculum into High School Humanities Classes

by

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Abstract

British Columbia (BC) is undergoing a whole system educational reform using 21st century personalized learning principles. At the time of this study, implementation of the new curriculum at the high school level was two years away, and teachers were invited to try aspects of the new curriculum in their classrooms. This paper describes a narrative qualitative study in which six humanities teachers from BC high schools were interviewed about their experiences exploring the new BC draft curriculum for Grades 10 to 12. The purpose of the study was to learn what instructional strategies these teachers used to try out the draft high school curriculum, and whether, in their opinion, these practices and methods were helping students learn. Further, the study invited teacher observations of their interactions with the new curriculum, their reports of student responses, and teacher reflection on the process of this curriculum change. The data revealed three themes: students learning, teachers teaching, and managing change.

The interview responses indicated the participants not only embraced the coming changes, but saw their efforts to incorporate the deeper learning focus of the new curriculum as having a positive impact on student engagement and success. The teachers showed a willingness, and even an enthusiasm, toward test-driving the pedagogies of the new curriculum. They shared their belief that high school students were also becoming engaged with the experience. The students were not only willing to go along for the ride, but also to start gaining the skills to drive their learning themselves.

Keywords: educational reform, high school, British Columbia, curriculum change, personalized learning, inquiry, project-based, competencies, humanities, self-regulated learning, instructional strategies.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to discover what instructional strategies were used by British Columbia (BC) humanities teachers in senior high school grades (Grades 10, 11, and 12) to try out the new draft BC high school curriculum, and whether, in their opinion, these practices and methods were helping students learn. Further, the study invited teacher observations of their interactions with the new curriculum, their reports of student responses, and teacher reflection on the process of this curriculum change.

With the introduction to high schools of the new BC curriculum as a draft in 2016-2017, BC secondary school teachers were invited to develop their courses to fit the new goals of personalized, competency-driven, concept-based learning. In the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, using the new curriculum was optional. In 2018-2019, the new curriculum will be activated for Grade 10, and in 2019-2020, Grades 11 and 12 will officially begin using the new curriculum (BC Ministry of Education, 2018a).

The switch to a “concept-based and competency-driven” (BC Ministry of Education, 2018b, p. 2) curriculum is a significant educational reform which will change how students experience learning, how teachers teach, and could even change the structure of schooling and classrooms (BC Ministry of Education, 2018c) as the focus on personalized student goals leads to more inquiry and project-based interdisciplinary learning. The Ministry has stated that its goals for “modernizing” the BC education system is “to provide students with an education that is still rigorous, but also flexible and innovative, one from which they gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to succeed in today’s modern world.” A second goal is “making sure teachers can deliver the curriculum efficiently and effectively” (BC Ministry of Education, 2018a, paras. 7 and 8).
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The draft of the BC curriculum focused on core competencies of communication, thinking (critical and creative), as well as personal and social competencies around positive identity, awareness, and responsibility (BC Ministry of Education, 2018c). The curriculum is concept-based, inviting students to explore bigger ideas more deeply, rather than pushing through a wide catalogue of content. Because of this new focus, the curriculum is meant to encourage inquiry-based instructional strategies such as problem and project-based learning in order to personalize learning to match individual student goals.

To understand and explore high school teacher responses to these challenges in the infancy of BC’s curricular change, the author of the present study investigated the instructional strategies that humanities high school teachers were attempting after the introduction of the new draft curriculum. Further in the present study, teachers were asked to report whether they believed their strategies improved student learning and engagement. Finally, they were asked to reflect on their comfort and level of understanding in trialing the new curriculum.

**Justification of the Study**

How are BC teachers engaging with the new curriculum to meet student learning needs? Do they see advantages to the new curriculum for students and for their teaching? What are they trying out in their classrooms in these practice years leading up to full implementation, and what does it look like to them? Are they creating new teaching strategies and types of projects, and how are students responding? The answers to these questions can be informative to other teachers working through education reform, especially BC teachers. The narratives shared by these teachers can better inform educational leaders, from principals to district administrators, up to Ministry-level leaders, who are engaged in the current education reform. Outside of BC, this study may build on discussions of 21st century learning-style education reform in other
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jurisdictions, especially teacher-led discussions of their experiences, challenges, and ways that they are creatively resolving the experience of change.

As mentioned above, the new BC curriculum was introduced at the secondary level for trial in 2016-2017, and the trial period was later extended for senior grades toward a full roll-out in 2019-2020. Curriculum reform can be stressful for teachers, and teachers may respond with cynicism, realism, enthusiasm, or leadership (Dilkes, Cunningham, & Gray, 2014; Hargreaves, 2004). However, it can also provide an opportunity for teachers to improve their teaching, and for students to improve their learning. The concept-based BC curriculum encourages inquiry-based learning, with projects and inquiries that could personalize a student’s interests. If, as research suggests, classroom engagement is a useful measure of likelihood of success (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Fredricks, 2014), the more interested students are in their learning, the better their chances in improving their learning outcomes.

This study explored which instructional strategies BC humanities teachers at the Grade 10, 11 and 12 level explored while trialing the new draft educational curriculum, and how they felt these strategies helped student learning. The author of this study hoped the teacher responses would also present informative examples and strategies to other teachers. Humanities teachers were chosen because that was the specialist teaching area of the author. Because the study took place in the trial phase of the new curriculum, the author also hoped to offer insight into the initial experiences with the curriculum implementation which may be informative to education administrators.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

The research question for the present study was: As reported by humanities teachers in a BC high school, what instructional strategies were used while exploring the new BC draft
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curriculum for Grades 10 to 12, and how did these strategies help students learn? The author of the present study hypothesized that teachers who use competency-driven concept-based instructional strategies would see an improvement in student engagement and success in their high school humanities classrooms.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions provide guidance for terms used in this study.

**Humanities.** Humanities courses include English language arts courses such as English First Peoples 12, English 12, Creative Writing 10 and Focussed Literary Studies 11, and social studies courses such as 20th Century World History 11, BC First Peoples 11, or Social Justice 12 (BC Ministry of Education, 2018d). For the sake of this study (and to allow for a wider interview recruiting pool), the definition was stretched to include drama courses.

**New Curriculum.** “BC’s Education Plan” was the BC Ministry of Education’s title for reforms started in 2011. However, “BC’s New Curriculum” is the title now used on Ministry websites, and will be used in this paper. It is a 21st century learning-based education reform which was implemented first in Kindergarten to Grade 9 in 2016-2017, to be extended to Grade 10 in 2018-2019. Full implementation for all grades is planned for 2019-2020. The new curriculum is described as competency-driven and concept-based, with a focus on personalized learning goals which encourage the use of project and inquiry styles of learning. Inclusion of Aboriginal content and respect for First Nations ways of knowing are part of the new curriculum. There are also discussions of flexible learning environments, including multidisciplinary approaches and learning outside of the traditional classroom (BC Ministry of Education, 2018c).
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**Concept-based.** Learning organized around “big ideas” rather than catalogues of content, to encourage deeper learning, connections, and engagement instead of rote memorization.

**Competencies (core).** Skillsets determined to be foundational for lifelong learning for success and personal growth in the 21st century. These competencies in the BC new curriculum are communication, thinking (creative and critical), and personal/social, which includes positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility, and social responsibility.

**Competencies (curricular):** Included in the “Know, Do, and Understand” model of the new curriculum, curricular competencies are more specific skills such as, for example, historical thinking, or literary comprehension.

**Instructional strategies.** Classroom practices and teaching methods chosen to improve student learning, including lesson-planning, classroom structure, and learning interventions.

**Student engagement.** Student engagement refers to the level of student interest and motivation in a learning task. It is used here as a measure of positive student involvement in classroom learning as reported by the teacher.

**Inquiry Learning.** Inquiry learning is a range of instructional strategies which encourage students to use problems and projects to explore questions deeply. Critical thinking, research, experimentation, and communication can be used to create a product that demonstrates student understanding (BC Ministry of Education, 2018e).

**Brief Overview of Study**

The author of the present study asked humanities teachers at BC high schools to describe how well their use of instructional strategies, inspired by the new BC curriculum, helped students learn. In a 40 to 50-minute interview, the participants described their new teaching strategies
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and reported how effective they believed their strategies were in helping their students learn. Participants were also asked about their level of understanding and comfort with the new curriculum, and any thoughts they had around the curriculum or its implementation. The interviews were coded and analyzed to investigate themes uncovered in the interviews.

Outline of Thesis

This thesis is comprised of five chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 reviews literature relevant to this study. Following the literature review, Chapter 3 describes the methods used in the research, including the sampling, recruiting, interview and ethics review processes, followed by a discussion of validity. The findings of the study and data analysis are presented as a narrative in Chapter 4, and those findings are discussed and related to current knowledge. Chapter 5 contains conclusions, recommendations for further research, and implications for educational leadership.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The goal of the present study was to gather and analyze narratives from BC high school humanities teachers about their experiences while test-driving the new draft BC curriculum for implementation in their classrooms. It highlighted the important themes of how students, teachers and schools are adapting to the rapid change created by 21st century learning reform.

Research and writing around 21st century learning is widely available, but because this reform has only taken root in some parts of the world in recent years, research about how 21st century learning affects students and teachers in the classrooms is not common. Different countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Finland, and various provinces in Canada are approaching the introduction of competency-driven, concept-based education in different ways. Other jurisdictions, such as the United States and United Kingdom are moving towards elements of 21st century learning curriculum reform at various speeds, so the literature about those regions discusses local or regional experiments with inquiry learning, project-based learning, and personalized learning. Meanwhile, since the BC reform has only recently begun, relevant literature such as Boyer and Crippen (2014) was written about the province’s experience during the planning for the new changes. One survey by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF, 2017), completed after the first year of implementation in the lower grades, garnered a guarded response from teachers, and asked for further resources, support, training, and resources.

This literature review provides a sampling of research and commentary which helped to inform the author about some of the themes involving 21st century-learning educational reform. These themes can be used in exploring the responses given by the BC high school humanities teachers interviewed about their encounters and experiments with new curriculum ideas. The
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review begins with a look at literature from the BC context, and then explores three themes of change: 21st century learning and meeting changing student needs, teachers and change in the 21st century, and leadership for change in whole system reform. These themes follow the major themes discovered and organized during data analysis (See Chapter 4): Students Learning, Teachers Teaching, and Managing Change.

The BC Context

Two studies are helpful in setting the BC context for the present study: the first, a document previewing and championing the BC changes, and the second, a survey of teachers during the early years of the reform. The first article that stands out as directly relevant to this study is “Learning and Teaching in the 21st Century” by Boyer and Crippen (2014). Subtitled “An Education Plan for the New Millennium Developed in British Columbia, Canada,” it is perhaps the only article published in a scholarly journal which focusses on the new curriculum in BC. The article is a clarion call for wide-ranging educational change, reviewing and supporting the “paradigm shift” (p. 345) to a new curriculum in BC which will meet the needs of diverse learners in a global economy. The article reviews Ministry documents and looks at the research used to justify the province’s move to personalized learning. As a review of literature supporting the new curriculum reform, the article is informative although somewhat uncritical, and perhaps overly optimistic, including no research critical to its position. Many of the reforms are lauded as vitally required and are supported by research. However, beyond expressing hope for widespread stakeholder collaboration, the authors do not include practical explanations of how the reform should be implemented, or how the current school system and the way that teachers teach could be changed so dramatically. As a result, the article reads largely as a promotional document.
Some of the themes touched on in the Boyer and Crippen (2014) article are useful in portraying the original expectations about how the reform would change BC classrooms. For example, the authors discussed a vision of personalized learning which changes the role of teacher to a project manager, mentor, and content expert, while students would become independent learners, working at their own pace and on their own projects. A change in instructional strategies by teachers would also be required to meet the needs of personalized learning, and information technology is to have a major role in this change. The flexibility and choice demanded by personalized learning will also change schooling, challenging traditional scheduling structures, the authors suggested.

In their conclusion, Boyer and Crippen (2014) fell back on the efforts of individual teachers to drive this change in their own classrooms and to “start experimenting,” which the present study also explores. From a discussion in 2012 involving teachers from three BC school districts, they reported the teachers saying, “that teachers and all others connected with the plan need to be prepared to take risks, to make mistakes, and to learn from their mistakes” (p. 351). The teachers said this shouldn’t be a competition between teachers or schools, and “to minimize competition, varied success stories could be publicized and celebrated in order to support the premise that there are many ways to make learning meaningful and purposeful for students” (p. 352). While the present study does not attempt to present only ‘success stories,’ it does explore the narratives some teachers are telling about the new curriculum change.

The second relevant document is the “2017 BCTF Curriculum Change and Implementation Survey” (BCTF, 2017). The BCTF acts as the advocacy and labour association for all public school teachers (not including principals) in BC. Sampling came from all BCTF members resulting in 2,344 respondents, who answered an online survey. Most relevant to the
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The present study were the 42% of the respondents from Grades 10 to 12, who were in their first trial year. Because, as the BCTF document stated, “the process of curriculum change is about policy and practice,” the survey exposed some of the confusion around the process, where “public messaging about ‘curricular change’…was really about ‘pedagogical change’” (p. 7). Confusion also resulted from parallel education changes implemented by the BC government to assessment, graduation requirements, and technology use, which became conflated with the new curriculum in the minds of teachers.

The results of the BCTF (2017) surveys indicated different levels of readiness by teachers in engaging with the new curriculum. For example, 80% of respondents were somewhat or very ready to teach core competencies, and 76% were ready to teach through the “Know, Do, Understand” model. Over 60% stated they were ready to incorporate inquiry-based learning and felt it was relevant to their grades and subjects and would have a positive impact on their students. Resources and time were some of the challenges teachers faced, including a lack of technological resources for personalized learning, and too few resources for incorporating Aboriginal content. While teachers generally felt a high level of autonomy toward implementing changes (in the 80th percentile), they felt their workload had moderately or significantly increased due to the curriculum change, especially with the addition of new assessment and reporting practices. At the time of the survey, teacher support for the new curriculum was reported as split 50-50, though only 11% of the participants were against (“not at all supportive”) of the change.

In their recommendations, the authors of the BCTF (2017) survey report noted that “what is urgently needed is a shift from whether teachers are (“correctly”) implementing the curriculum, to whether the curriculum is providing space for the multiple knowledges,
experiences, and needs that make up teaching and learning in BC” (p. 6). For this to happen, they recommended time and space “for curriculum as ongoing conversation,” educational systems and structures that support the change (including a look at the structure of schooling), and “a flexible, adaptive, fully-resourced implementation process” (p. 6). The present study, while more modest in scope, includes teacher narratives around many of these discussions.

21st Century Learning

Meeting student needs. Much has been written and said about 21st century learning and how to meet changing student needs in a changing world. Examples ranged from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports which called for a focus on 21st century competencies and personalized learning (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 2008), to advocacy for more creative schools by author and Ted Talk star, Ken Robinson (2006). For the sake of the present study, which explored high school humanities teachers trying instructional strategies, a sampling of publications was taken around the topics of interdisciplinary course content, inquiry and project-based learning, and personalized learning. A few critiques of 21st century learning also were informative, providing a cautionary balance.

Kaser and Halbert (2009) described the needed changes in education from traditional teacher-centred classrooms to student-centred education as the shift from “sorting to learning” (p. 82). The changing roles of students and teachers in that shift are dramatic. When shifting to learning, students move from dependency to autonomy and teamwork, from task-oriented school “work” to deeper learning outcomes and visible learning intentions, and from covering content to engaging in inquiry. Students learn to accept challenge and develop intrinsic motivation by seeing and charting their own learning growth. Teachers no longer supply materials or teach from textbooks. Instead learners seek out their own resources and learn how to judge their value
and validity. Inquiry learning requires students to learn how to self-regulate. Teaching students how to learn and to lead their own learning becomes a key task of teachers. “Self-regulated learning is concerned with the development of independent, confident learners by providing teachers with a set of lenses to understand the conditions that promote successful learning” (p. 93). In this model, students are involved with the teachers in setting goals and building learning strategies. Focussing on “effort-based, self-regulated, and imaginative learning” (p. 96) helps to build students, and teachers into lifelong learners.

Teaching for 21st century learning is a challenge for educators. It requires creativity and a focus on competencies and big ideas to activate deeper learning, rather than having students passively receive content and regurgitate it for tests. Teacher-centred passive learning continues to dominate many North American high school humanities classrooms. Russell (2010) described the bleak landscape of American social studies teaching, canvassing 281 secondary social studies teachers from across the US with a 35-question Likert survey around instructional strategies. The survey results reported 90% relying on “listening to teacher lectures” for student learning, 87% included “take notes,” and 80% used reading the textbook and responding to questions as a learning method. At the other end of the active learning spectrum, 44% said they did “some kind of” critical thinking exercises, 36% said they used problem-solving, and 32% had their students explore primary sources. Only 27% had students participate in debates over controversial issues. “The results of this survey continue to demonstrate that teachers are more inclined to encourage passive learning, than engaged, active learning,” Russell concluded (p. 70).

Cross-curricular learning. Luckily, some creative educators are studying and sharing the results of their innovative instructional strategies, and the literature around 21st century high school humanities teaching revealed some exemplary models. Jolley and Ayala’s (2015)
example of crossing high school geography and cultural studies with volcano geoscience “highly engaged” students, who showed “positive learning gains” (p. 297). Creative teaching often crosses disciplinary lines, and it can widen the scope of classroom education. For example, it can connect the study of the past with current global issues, as is seen in Harshman (2015). Harshman used deep critical thinking about colonialism, racism, and ‘othering’ to investigate with students how locations on the world map are socially and historically constructed. Harshman described how “meta-geography” can help teach about global diversity, and how it can easily crosspollinate with English Language Arts (ELA) through study of regional literature and essays. History, and arts education are other fields that can be brought into the mix.

Inquiry and project-based learning. 21st century learning methods encourage more personally-relevant and hands-on learning for students through inquiry-based and project-based models. In a thorough overview of the research on inquiry, Saunders-Stewart, Gyles, and Shore (2012) described inquiry-based education as “a learner-centred form of teaching and learning that enables students to tailor at least some of their learning experiences to their own interests and curiosity” (p. 7). Students explore their own questions (or in guided inquiry, questions developed with a teacher) in a way which “diversifies” student and teacher roles, encouraging dialogue between them in more “horizontal” power relationship. The authors concluded that not all evidence of inquiry-based learning showed positive results in knowledge gain. However, when compared with students learning through traditional teaching methods, inquiry learners showed many other kinds of positive outcomes, including “cognitive, metacognitive, affective, personal, and societal” (p. 25). Students using inquiry were stronger when connecting concepts, which made them better problem-solvers. Because self-regulation and metacognition are embedded in inquiry learning, these key strategies improve student capacity for lifelong learning.
Inquiry-based learning also made students more curious, more positive toward learning, and more motivated, which improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. If the students were able to create authentic products, such as publishing a blog or filming newscasts, they were found to follow these interests into their post-secondary career choices. Further studies reported by the authors found collaborative inquiry (best with four or fewer members) helped students teach each other, even when the collaboration created conflicts.

Saunders-Stewart et al. (2012) reported that the change in student-teacher roles leads to students taking more ownership of their learning. “Rather than the teacher making all instructional and evaluative decisions, everyone in the classroom shares responsibility. Some of the roles that are classically seen as belonging to the teacher are adopted and carried out by the students. The teacher is also a co-learner” (p. 23-24).

Saunders-Stewart et al. (2012) cautioned that inquiry is not an all-purpose solution but something to be added to the teacher toolbox. “Although reform efforts favor inquiry, classroom implementation may be limited” (p. 6), perhaps due to the very different style of teaching needed from traditional methods. Some of these challenges can be seen in two studies which look at attempts at teaching inquiry in humanities courses. In a mixed-method longitudinal study, Chichekian, Shore, and Tabatabai (2016) saw how first-year teachers struggled with using inquiry in ELA teaching. Students in the six first-year teacher’s classes were engaged in the process of inquiry, but time constraints and a lack of teaching experience and training made it difficult for teachers to bring the projects to a full conclusion with students fully communicating their findings. This can lead to an “illusion of inquiry” (p. 5). Voet and De Wever (2016) interviewed 22 history teachers and concluded that inquiry was not well understood, and often limited to students to critically evaluating their sources, rather than fully investigating
problematic statements about the past. These simpler activities, the authors stated, “are generally not considering inquiry-based learning activities that draw on the range of historical reasoning skills” (p. 66).

Project-based learning, like inquiry learning in many ways, is another instructional strategy suggested by 21st century learning reform. In their literature review, Kokotsaki, Menzies, and Wiggens (2016) defined project-based learning as “an active student-centred form of instruction which is characterised by students’ autonomy, constructive investigations, goal-setting, collaboration, communication, and reflection within real-world practices” (p. 267). This hands-on, authentic learning is also similar to problem-based learning, except that its goal is to create a final product. Students learn to problem-solve, collaborate, and actively contribute to designing and building a “concrete artefact which presents students’ new understandings, knowledge and attitudes regarding the issue under investigation” (p. 268). The studies reviewed were not scientifically rigorous, so their outcomes were more informative than conclusive. The secondary school studies showed positive results for content-knowledge and skills. Creative and conceptual knowledge were stronger for project-based students than were traditional procedural knowledges, and higher learner motivation was common. The authors concluded that training students in high quality group-work processes was key to making project-based learning work in the classroom.

A BC study (Hoff, 2013) which took place in the planning years of the new curriculum investigated whether project-based learning was an effective delivery model of curriculum, particularly when it came to student engagement, self-efficacy, and even attendance. Hoff studied eight students attending a BC high school annex devoted to project-based learning. His
study found that these students showed positive attitudes toward their project-based schooling, improved their attendance, and were more effective as learners.

**Personalized learning.** Inquiry, project, and problem-based learning are all strategies that work well with the central 21st century learning focus of personalized learning. Basham, Hall, Carter, and Stahl (2016) defined personalized learning as “tailoring learning for each learner’s interests, strengths and needs. This approach encourages flexibility to support mastery and enables learners to influence how, what, when, and where they learn” (p. 127). Personalized learning could result in a change to the structure of schools by opening learning spaces where self-regulated students move fluidly throughout the day to support their learning, rather than stay in their chairs in traditional classrooms each block. In their study, Basham et al. observed students and teachers in schools designed for personalized learning and concluded that “well-designed personal learning environments can transform both teacher and student behavior and encourage students’ academic growth in ways that might not be possible without these advances” (p. 127). The consequences of personalized learning could be far-reaching. “If designed and implemented correctly, personalized learning is extremely disruptive to the traditional educational system” (p. 127).

The Basham et al. (2016) study took place across 12 schools in an Urban Reform District in the northern US, and the authors conducted monthly observations for a year and a half. What they saw were inclusive learning environments in a school structured for “open flow,” mixing traditional classes with working spaces for small groups of students working independently, and with teachers moving throughout as coaches and guides. Students progressed through individual curricula, with their competencies and skill completions tracked and published in weekly profiles to make the learning visible for students, teachers, and parents. Teachers helped to design and
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create learning spaces, such as the “learning village,” an open, creative space with beanbags, carpets, and tables. Each student had an education plan, leading one student to tell a researcher, “no one in this class is average” (p. 131). The authors found that personalized learning requires a high level of self-regulation in students and in the learning culture of the school. Transparent real-time data, continual feedback, learner voice, and students demonstrating their knowledge in multiple ways are other important factors in designing a personalized learning school system. Otherwise, they warn, “without guidance or research-based understanding, personalized learning will be haphazardly referenced, partially implemented, eventually demonized, and then viewed as an unrealistic fad in education” (p. 127).

Critiques of 21st century learning. Whether it is a fad or the future of education, personalized learning and 21st century learning are not without their critics. A brief sampling of critical literature shows concerns that 21st century learning undervalues the pivotal role of the teacher, loses an essential focus on knowledge disciplines, and may result in inequities in education, including class and culture-based inequalities.

Greenlaw (2015) asked about the reliance on technology in 21st century learning over in-person interactions with teachers and peers, especially how this type of learning affects moral development and cultural identity. He argued that “students’ futures as moral agents, responsible citizens and lifelong learners” (p. 902) depend on keeping some of the traditional elements of teaching along with the new. Greenlaw also warned that there is a global economic agenda behind 21st century learning that is backed by modern information and technology corporations. “Their vision of lifelong learning, however, seems to involve preparing people to be effective workers in the constantly evolving knowledge economy” (p. 901).
Mishra and Mehta (2017) made an argument that disciplinary knowledge is necessary for deep learning, and that learning requires guidance. The authors felt that the fight against factory-style learning has equated disciplinary knowledge with facts and memorization. While they did not dispute that problem-based learning can and often must use cross-disciplinary approaches, they argued that disciplines must exist, if they are going to be crossed. Inquiry requires a framework, they contend, and creativity needs the foundation of disciplines. “It is a mistake to think that creativity or collaboration or communication can happen in a vacuum. What will one be creative about? What is it that one seeks to communicate or collaborate on?” (p. 15).

Takayama’s (2013) study considered Japan’s use of competency-driven education as a new way of imposing a class-based “hyper-meritocracy” in schools. By having to achieve vague competencies often subjectively assessed by middle-classed teachers, students from marginalized backgrounds or outsider cultures are at a disadvantage. Students may not come from family situations where they have the kind of relationships that create the attitudes, motivations, and values being assessed by competencies. These new value-based assessments seem to be about social control through assessing children’s inner feelings and motivations, and these “diffused and personalized” assessments are now “more continuous and pervasive” (p. 72). As a result, assessing through competencies can widen inequities for students who come from family situations that either do not help them develop certain values or motivations, or perhaps are not supportive of their children developing those competencies because of class or cultural values. “It reinforces the existing cultural hierarchy that demonizes ‘other’ families and communities whose everyday social interactions with children differs from the desired social ‘norm’” (p. 77). This raises interesting questions in the BC context as it might apply to children from First Nations; poorer rural or working class; and traditional religious or cultural backgrounds who are
outside the social ‘norm’ of the middle class, mainly European-cultured teachers who assess their competency levels.

**Teachers and Change in the 21st Century**

What are the experiences of teachers going through curriculum changes similar to BC’s reform? A sampling of some of the literature of teachers on change connects to the themes and responses from this present study’s interviews. Teachers hold the key role in implementing successful and sustainable educational change. Hattie’s (2012) meta-analytical research showed that teachers are among the most powerful influences on student learning (for good or ill). However, this is an overly simplistic summary, said Hattie. Mindful, passionate teachers will have a positive impact when they keep asking themselves about the effect they are having on their students’ learning, and then use evidence-based reflection to continue to improve on these effects. “The remarkable feature of the evidence is that the greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers” (p. 14). Teacher choices of instructional strategies are key to this effect. “(W)hen teachers see learning occurring or not occurring, they intervene in calculated and meaningful ways to alter the direction of learning…in particular, they provide students with multiple opportunities and alternatives for developing learning strategies…” (p. 15).

How do teachers experience change, and what steps do they take to change their classroom teaching in the face of reforms? One model that has been used to describe teacher experiences of change is the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM). It provides a catalogue of developmental stages which teachers tend to move through as they implement new instructional strategies (Anderson, 1997). First, CBAM describes “Stages of Concern”, a 7-step process where teachers first become aware of the new ideas, then become curious. They evaluate
the personal effects of then change and experiment with them. At this point, according to CBAM, teachers start to evaluate the impacts on student learning and may try to improve that impact by collaborating with other teachers and refocusing their efforts. A second descriptive list in CBAM rates the “Levels of Use.” Teachers implement new curricular ideas through stages. They move from non-use, to orientation, and then prepare to put the change into practice. This is followed by the mechanical phase, when teachers are “struggling with the logistics of implementation…and with the acquisition of new teaching skills” (p. 335). After this, the implementation becomes more routine, and then is fully integrated, and regularly renewed with practice and growing experience.

CBAM provides a step-by-step descriptor, or a clinical inventory, that can place teachers on a readily understandable scale of attitude towards change and implementation. However, it doesn’t seem to consider the teachers who are moving fluidly backwards and forwards through the categories in a less-predictable manner. For example, CBAM suggests that teachers at the “personal” (stage 2) and “management” (stage 3) stages of concern are more focussed on their own needs about how the implementation will affect the logistics of their teaching. In contrast to this model, the teachers interviewed for the current study often came to the changes from a student-centred perspective, with their own personal needs as teachers coming later.

If teachers are the key to successful educational reform, their feelings of involvement or alienation in the reform, and how these feelings influence their reactions to reform, are of significant interest. Perhaps the most relevant study comes from Hargreaves (2004), who wrote a variety of articles following a study which interviewed 50 Ontario teachers from 15 diverse schools across the province. The interviews asked teachers about their experiences with educational change, including their emotional responses. The interviews came at a time when
teachers had weathered the austerity-focussed reforms of a neoliberal government and were undergoing new reforms under a social democratic government. In his own review of the literature, Hargreaves noted widespread reform often leads to emotional disappointment for teachers, “not just because of unwanted imposition of reform demands, but also because of the cumulative effects of their repetitive, contradictory, and evanescent nature” (p. 289). This is similar to later results found by Dilkes et al. (2014) when they explored “change fatigue” and the dangers of a “continual cycle of change and disappointment” (p. 57).

One of the more interesting responses in Hargreaves’ (2004) interviews revealed the differences in emotions teachers expressed when dealing with government-mandated change, which they viewed mostly negatively. Educational changes that had come from personal or local initiatives were experienced as empowering and were sources of pride. However, almost 40% of the self-initiated changes turned out to be taken in connection with elements of the mandated change. Hargreaves suggested this could be an example of how teachers can “make change their own” (p. 301) while coming to terms with whole system reform. Their response to self-initiated changes are even more positive when they are given sufficient resources, time, and support for the change through pilot projects, grants, or involvement in decision-making. “External change can lead to positive and productive teacher emotions if it is inclusive of teachers’ purposes, respectful of their priorities and sensitive to their working and implementation conditions” (p. 301). If teachers feel they are “driving the change themselves” (p. 302), they will more likely feel a sense of accomplishment when overcoming challenges within the reform.

Hargreaves (2004) found that high school teachers often resented a reform “because it is experienced as alien, imposed, overpressurized, and unsupported” (p. 303), but they can come to value the change if it is seen to be helpful to students and to teachers. Teachers working with
more challenged student populations responded more positively because they felt the reforms
gave their students “more of a chance” (p. 303).

Several other studies explored teacher responses to curriculum change with similar
results to Hargreaves (2004). Adoniou (2016) discussed how new teachers starting their career
amidst new reforms are more likely to quit teaching when the educational changes go against
their ideals or frustrate their belief in themselves as effective teachers. This study is of interest to
BC, as a host of new teachers are currently being hired just as the reform is underway.

Priestley (2011) looked at how high school humanities teachers in Scotland responded to
the integration of their separate disciplines of geography, history, and modern studies into a
social studies program, particularly for junior grades. The teaching culture at the time of the
study seemed to value subject specialists in a more formal way than is apparent in BC high
schools. However, the Priestley study gives an interesting description of high school challenges
in changing educational cultures from teacher-centred, with a “philosophy of education rooted in
the primacy of the subject” (p. 11), to student-centred cultures focusing on student learning.

Mellegard and Petterson’s (2016) focus group study on teachers and curriculum change
in Norway discovered that extending freedom to teachers to develop curriculum did not lead to
the expected teacher enthusiasm and engagement in the change process. Instead, it resulted in
feelings of being overburdened by unasked-for levels and types of responsibility. The
Norwegian reforms were intended to promote increased teacher autonomy, and to show teachers
high regard and trust in their pivotal roles as educational professionals. However, teachers saw
themselves as curriculum practitioners, not developers, and as respondents to change, rather than
change-agents. As a result, they were overwhelmed by trying to understand what was being
required of them in the classroom, rather than enjoying the wider freedom they had been given to
create and transform their practice. “Teachers find the curriculum far too ambitious and distanced from their experienced world” (p. 190). They felt burdened and did not see themselves as knowledgeable enough to be the ones responsible to create new curriculum.

The importance of the Mellegard and Petterson’s (2016) report to the present study is that the Norwegian implementation of curriculum bears close similarities to the BC model, where teachers have been given the role in the reform of “the internal change force” (p. 192). Among the differences in the two jurisdictions are the cultural differences of Norwegian teachers, and the support and comfort teachers felt they received from new textbook resources designed with the new curriculum in mind. In the BC reform, textbooks have largely been jettisoned in favour of online and other resources. At this point in the BC reform, Mellegard and Pettersen’s question concluding their paper should also be noted: were teachers given “too extensive freedom and responsibility in the implementation process of the new curriculum” (p. 195)?

However, the Norwegian experience provides an example of a type of whole system reform BC is undergoing and shows that even when education is changed in a way that includes teacher agencies, there are no clean and clear answers. A sample of recent and relevant literature on whole system reform can offer useful suggestions toward successful reform, even if clear-cut solutions are not as easy to find.

**Leadership for Change in 21st Century Educational Reform**

The literature on whole system reform over the last two decades seems to be dominated largely by Hargreaves and Fullan, and their work will be relied on here to position the present study into the bigger picture of effective models of reform. While this present study focuses on a few teachers trying out elements of the new curriculum, the impact of BC’s particular reform
process is implied in their experiences and responses. Some of the models presented in this survey of the literature will help inform later discussion in this thesis.

Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2012) book, *The Global Fourth Way* provides a useful timeline of the waves of educational reform that have rolled through schools around the developed world. The authors describe the strong investment in education of the 60s and 70s (First Way), which was followed by the first round of neoliberal austerity in the 80s (Second Way). In the 1990s, educational reforms relying on standardization and top-down accountability structures (Third Way) took hold. The Fourth Way, from which the BC model seems to have been inspired, was described by the authors as ‘innovation with improvement’.

Fourth Way educational reform involves deeper learning opportunities for students in place of an education system focussed on producing high results from standardized-testing. Teachers are directly involved in curricular decision-making, rather than simply being the receivers of policy directives. Educational change is evidence-based, fueled by school inquiry, rather than on data-driven diktats from districts and government.

Examples of Fourth Way-styled reforms can be quite informative for the BC context, such as the Alberta example of a mixing mandated improvement with teacher-driven curriculum change. Alberta’s reforms supported “a culture of risk in an environment of trust” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, p. 103) resulting in continuous improvement throughout the province’s schools and districts. The story of Ontario’s reform provides an example of how wide-spread educational reform can sometimes benefit from “leading from the middle.” In the Ontario case, the authors describe an ambitious province-wide special educational focus which was energized by school district leaders networking together throughout the province, while the government provided project funding and support.
Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) concluded their book with an overview of their principles for Fourth Way change, and suggestions for leadership and teachers within reform. Fourth Way teachers are advised to teach less and learn more, and yet become more balanced with technology use. The authors also want teachers to work collaboratively, rather than in isolation. Teachers should embrace a collective responsibility for all students. This kind of collective accountability goes hand-in-hand with ensuring that their professional association or teachers’ union works toward positive change for students. Finally, they exhort teachers to be dynamic. “Teachers are, or should always be, the real dynamos of educational change. In high-achieving environments, they supply learning and change with energy” (p. 200).

The challenge of sustainable and successful whole system reform is to find a way to overcome the overload and fragmentation which result from using the wrong drivers of change, say Fullan and Quinn (2015) in their comprehensive book on reform, Coherence. These wrong drivers include carrot-and-stick accountability to motivate teacher and school improvement, promoting individualism instead of seeking group solutions, too much reliance on technology to improve learning, and piece-meal ad-hoc reforms. Fullan and Quinn researched models of successful educational change to describe four “right drivers” of successful change: focusing on one direction for change, developing collaborative cultures, making deep learning for students the foundational goal for change, and creating an ethic of group accountability that works in tandem with external demands or mandates.

Change for teachers needs a variety of supports and good leadership practices which involve capacity building, said Fullan and Quinn (2015). The role of leaders is to help teachers build confidence to make the leap from the familiar to the unknown. Leaders can support the “early leapers” while learning from these teachers’ attempts (their test-driving). Meanwhile,
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leaders should build capacity for other teachers to encourage and empower more leaping. By developing a culture of collaboration “where leaping can be nurtured” and recognizing success “at all points in the journey” (p. 28), a culture of improvement can grow in a school. With enough teachers leaping into change, strong networks of learning and leadership between schools and districts can help spread the best ideas. “Building capacity is a key lever for change. It needs a clear focus connected to student learning, effective practices, and sustained cycles of learning” (p. 29). The focus should be on building capacity collectively, not just building up individual teachers. Finally, all these actions can only support sustainable change if they have deep learning as their central goal.

Building on the work of Hattie (2012) and echoing the themes of Kaser and Halbert (2009), Fullan and Quinn (2015) called for student learning that is “authentic, rigorous, and meaningful” (p. 79). Deeper learning is “the ability to understand concepts, think critically, solve problems, and apply learning in authentic ways” (p. 92). Instructional strategies supportive of deeper learning can include inquiry, and problem-based learning. In their model for deep learning, Fullan and Quinn engaged deep learning competencies (Communication, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Creativity, Character, and Citizenship) which parallel the new BC curriculum competencies. They echoed Hattie’s (2012) call for teachers to seek to teach in evidence-based ways that have measurable impact on student learning. By working collaboratively to study best teaching practices, teachers and educational leaders can continuously improve the teaching they are doing and the learning they are seeing in the classroom.

Also interesting are Fullan and Quinn’s (2015) description of the way these deep learning pedagogies can change classrooms. Teachers’ roles change “from explicitly structuring the
learning task, toward providing feedback, activating the next learning challenge, and continuously developing the learning environment” (p. 95). Student roles also change, as they learn how to develop their own learning goals and how to monitor their own progress. They become co-designers and teachers become co-learners. Classrooms and schools can become networks of “learning partnerships…that emerge student to student, student to teacher, and student to the external goals” (p. 93). Those changes can reach out beyond the classroom to parents, and into the community.

In deeper learning, Fullan and Quinn (2015) indicated six common characteristics: students asking the questions (inquiry), questions valued above answers (discovery), varied models for learning (personalized), explicit connections to real-world applications (authentic), collaboration, and assessment for learning that is student-led (p. 97). Each of these characteristics are revealed in various ways through the stories told by teachers in the present study, as they try out the new curriculum in their roles as “early leapers.”
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Description of the Research Design

The present study used narrative research and qualitative methods of interviewing and coding to explore the teacher-reported degree of learning by humanities students in BC high schools based on instructional strategies informed by the trial implementation of a new competency-driven, concepts-based 21st century learning curriculum. The research question for the present study was: As reported by humanities teachers in a BC high school, what instructional strategies were used while exploring the new BC draft curriculum for Grades 10 to 12, and how did these strategies help students learn?

Participants took part in a 40 to 50-minute standardized open-ended interview (Fraenkal, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. Participants were asked several introductory questions, and two prepared questions (see Appendix A) to allow them to describe any changes they were making in their teaching based on the new curriculum, and how these changes are helping their students learn. Prompts were also prepared in case participants needed clarification or if further elaboration was needed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to discover themes arising from the conversations around new curriculum teaching and learning.

Description of the Sample

The population for this study consisted of six humanities teachers in Grades 10 through 12 at BC high schools in a single school district. The teachers, three men and three women, were aged 30 to 55, and with varying levels of teaching experience from newly-hired to long-service educators. Teachers were all on full-time contracts, with one teacher on a temporary and the remainder on continuing contracts. Two of the teachers were relatively new, with one beginning
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her first contract, and the other just starting her second year. One teacher has been teaching for eight years. The three veteran teachers ranged from 15 years, to 20 and 30 years’ experience.

The sampling criteria required the participants to be: 1) a BC certified teacher hired by a school district, and 2) teaching at least a .5 contract of humanities in a BC high school. Originally this study used a two-staged random sample, starting with a convenience sample which was then to be randomized, but because of the difficulty of finding recruits, snowball sampling was also used, whereby teachers suggested other teachers who might participate in the study. Permission was obtained from principals for the author of the present study to be allowed to speak at a staff meeting and give contact information to teachers. Teachers attending were offered a brief explanation of the study and given the researcher’s email contact, so that they could connect individually. Recruiting emails were sent to those teachers, until at least six participants agreed to be interviewed. The sample was not randomized as only six teachers agreed to the interviews. These participants were contacted to make appointments for their interview, and consent forms were distributed by email.

Description of the Instruments Used

Participants were given a 40 to 50-minute standardized open-ended interview (Fraenkel et al., 2015) by the author of the present study, where they were asked two structured open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Prompts were also prepared, in case elaboration from the participants was needed. The interviews took place in a location and time selected by the participants, and the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. The interviews took place in November, 2017.

As mentioned above, consent forms were sent out through email as part of the application process for choosing participants and were collected at the start of the interview.
participants had not brought their own, a paper copy was provided for signature at the start of each interview. Each interview began with a statement by the interviewer affirming the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, and a verbal reminder that the participants could choose to withdraw from the study at any point.

Data was recorded digitally (with a digital audio recorder) and stored on a password-protected computer.

**Ethics Review Process**

Ethics approval for this study was received from Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board on August 28, 2017. In addition, the school district gave ethics approval for the study on September 19, 2017.

**Discussion of Validity and Threats**

Because the study explored student learning as reported by teachers, and sought examples of strategies of instruction, the answers were only as valid as the participant’s honesty, self-awareness, and ability to reflect on and accurately gauge student learning. The attitude of the participants could have affected the validity of the study, as could recent personal history (for example, something happening in school that week, or in the participant’s personal life) (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Locations for the interviews were sometimes not as private as hoped. Though it did not seem to affect the validity of the answers given, at one point a respected peer teacher came into an interview and sat down for the last five minutes, which may have influenced the interviewee’s answers. In a separate interview that took place in a small office adjoining an afterschool drama program with students painting sets, student questions interrupted the interviewee several times. Again, this did not seem to affect the answers in the interview, because the teacher seemed to be
very good at keeping a train of thought throughout any interruption. Data collector characteristics could have affected the validity as well, in that the researcher’s enthusiasm for the topic might have had an impact on the attitude of the participant and biased the response. Some improvised prompts may have biased the discussion towards certain themes.

Sampling may have also affected the results. Teachers who agreed to be in the study likely had an interest in the new curriculum in the first place, and perhaps were more likely to view it positively, or to expect to see positive results from their classroom experiences.

Whether the instructional strategies led to student learning in a quantitatively provable way was not tested in this study. Instead, teachers reported their opinions of the learning in their classrooms, based on their descriptions of what they saw and heard students doing that pointed to learning.

The role of the researcher in interpreting the narratives also had a major role when considering validity. The researcher’s own biases toward student-centred learning should be taken into account by the reader. These biases were controlled through reviews of literature and empirical studies investigating the evidence around 21st century learning, and by presenting the “voices” of the interviewees telling their own stories throughout the data analysis.

**Description of Data Analysis**

The author of the study transcribed the interviews. Content analysis of the transcriptions was used to code and collect information in such a way that it could be collected under common headings (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Concepts discussed in the responses were coded into categories and analyzed by frequency to discover common themes. These themes may help suggest effective strategies for teaching secondary school humanities and may help explore creative
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instructional responses to the new BC curriculum, as well as describe teacher and student experiences with educational change.
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to learn what instructional strategies BC humanities teachers in senior high school grades (Grades 10, 11, and 12) were using to try out the new draft BC high school curriculum, and whether, in their opinion, these practices and methods were helping students learn. Further, the study invited teacher observations of their interactions with the new curriculum, their reports of student responses, and teacher reflection on the process of this curriculum change. The data revealed three major themes: students learning, teachers teaching, and managing change, with change being the common thread throughout.

Although teachers and their opinions and reflections were the source of the data, the focus of the new BC curriculum is on students and their learning, so students learning has been chosen for the first major theme for discussion and data analysis. The students learning theme involved several subthemes that will be explored further, including ways that the new curriculum addresses meeting student needs through competencies, concepts over content, and choice and connection. It also addresses the focus on students owning their learning. Finally, this theme considers some of the challenges for learning for students under the new curriculum.

While many of the participants’ reflections on teaching are included in the first theme, the second theme, teachers teaching, reports the instructional strategies and practices tried during the new curriculum trial period. This theme explores the following sub-themes: teachers discussed their understanding and level of comfort with the new curriculum, and the instructional strategies and practices they have used to address the new curriculum. Teachers also reported the evidence of learning during their work with new curriculum ideas and discussed some challenges to teaching in the new curriculum.
The third theme, managing change, includes the teachers’ reflections on current BC school system reform, especially at the high school level. The teachers discussed their views on several subthemes: they described changing student needs in the 21st century, and explored two models of school system change: paradigm break, and incremental process.

In the following data analysis, the teachers have been designated P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 to maintain anonymity. Genders may also have been altered in the discussion for the same reason. Each theme will be followed with a discussion with reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

**Theme One: Students Learning**

**Meeting student needs.**

“What would it look like in my classroom if we started with each child, instead of starting with the curriculum, instead of starting with a set of expectations?” (P2).

The new BC curriculum focuses on student learning and student needs. Meeting student needs is at the forefront of the push for personalized learning (Boyer & Crippen, 2014). The importance of focussing on student learning appeared often in the interviews. Three of the six teachers spoke directly about meeting student needs in their classroom, and a fourth teacher discussed how the new curriculum can help teachers understand how each individual student learns.

One teacher (P6) described her students as a “very diverse” set of learners. “We’ve got some kids in Grade 10 that can barely read and write, and you know what, we can do reading powers in Grade 10, 11 and 12, if that’s what they need.” When students in her Focussed Literature 11 course (one of the new BC ELA course offerings) reacted with confusion and anxiety to the complexly-worded learning outcomes on the course syllabus taken directly from
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Ministry documents, she chose to adapt her course. “I definitely had to change what I was going to teach this year to meet their needs…I’m going to do what’s best for students, and I think it depends on each class.”

One teacher (P3) appreciated how the ongoing communication with students, required by the district’s competency-driven assessment, allowed her to tailor her teaching to individual learning styles. She explained:

> when you have a class of 24 teenaged students, to quickly identify (that) this person learns kinaesthetically, this person’s more visual, this person’s more reading comprehension: to try and do this as quickly as possible at the beginning of the semester, it’s not easy, but when you’re actually communicating with those students, whether it’s via reflection papers or conversations, you can tell pretty quick.

She also approved of how the new curriculum invites students to make more choices about how they want to show what they have learned. “Even that decision of what they chose and how they chose to be assessed illustrated to me what type of learner they are as well as how they feel within themselves. So with this curriculum, you can definitely learn a lot about students.”

One teacher (P2) seeks to “take a student-centred approach, (with) individualized assessment and timelines.” He talks about being more aware of what students are going through in their lives and “connecting them with things they might need to help them move forward.”

Student needs are central to his pedagogy. “Wherever you are, people need to feel safe. They need to feel they matter, that they have agency, that they can affect their lives through their own actions. All of them have hopes and dreams and fears.” He hoped the language and philosophy of the new curriculum was moving towards having teachers listening and including the story of each child in their classroom, saying:
in the new paradigm, teachers are starting…to say, okay, what is strong in this child? How can I support that, how can I have these young people feel valued in this community? So teachers are starting to ask these questions. We’ve talked about ways to adapt curriculum, ways to differentiate instruction. Those kinds of things have been in our vocabulary for a while. I think people are starting to really think about how that would look. What would it look like in my classroom if we started with each child, instead of starting with the curriculum, instead of starting with a set of expectations?

**Competencies and students learning.** To meet those individual needs, the new BC curriculum has focussed on competency-based learning using three core competencies: communication, thinking (creative and critical) and personal/social competencies including positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility, and social responsibility. There is also a secondary curricular model structured around the terms “Know, Do, and Understand.” “Know” contains the essential learning required at each grade level along the lines of the traditional content descriptions of past curricula. “Do” includes the “curricular competencies” such as reading comprehension for English, or historical and geographical thinking concepts for social studies courses. The third focus, “Understand,” is the most significant shift, replacing content-driven course planning with a deeper and wider focus on concepts and “big ideas.”

From the interview responses, it seems that these two models (competency, and “know/do/understand) within the new BC curriculum have led to some confusion for teachers. The teachers also may have mistakenly mixed elements of various parts of the two new models in their discussions. If the two models need to be differentiated, they will be described here as core competencies and curricular competencies.
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The teachers interviewed described how learning in their high school classrooms is beginning to shift from proving content knowledge to demonstrating the skillsets described by new curriculum competencies. Of the six teachers, five mentioned competencies as an important part of student learning in the new curriculum, and the sixth referred to some of the competency themes (such as “deeper thinking” and “big ideas”) as a goal of her teaching and of student learning. Although the competencies of communication, thinking and personal/social are described as the core of the new curriculum, only one teacher referred explicitly to these three cores. The rest of the teachers seemed to be engaging with the core competencies in their classrooms mainly through the lens of the secondary curricular competencies, though there were several references to how core competencies were tied into report card assessments. This was a new district requirement for report cards up to and including Grade 10.

One English teacher (P5) referred several times to a list of curricular competencies which were disseminated to staff by school administration. “It was approved by the administration so here it is, and it’s all very specific,” he said, pointing to the page of instructions. One example given from the directive was making a “text-to-world” connection, which helped him to design a project connecting a short story which students were reading to a project on protests around the world.

A socials teacher (P1) was happy about how some of the social studies curriculum was redesigned using skills around historical thinking perspectives (a curricular competency). “It just makes sense to me…I like teaching those skills, and I like that I can wrap my head around it,” he said, adding that these were skills that would help his students outside of his social studies class. “If kids can take those into their lives and into university, and apply them, then that’s going to benefit them down the road.”
P2 defined the new competencies through the “Know, Do and Understand” model, adding that it supports First Nations ways of knowing, another key focus of the new BC curriculum. “The new curriculum is based on that. It goes beyond encouraging. The new curriculum at its heart contains an Indigenous model of education. Know. Do. And Understand. That’s a being/becoming, that’s a transformational model.”

Two socials teachers and one English teacher said that critical thinking and perspective were key competencies for their classrooms. “As well as the communication and the thinking and those skills, it was learning from a different perspective, and that really came through,” said P3, who had students argue the opposite side of their climate change beliefs in a debate project. She asked students to include two critical thinking questions to ask the class during their project presentations, which would often lead to further discussion. With a whole class, “you got some different student opinions and some feedback. You’ve got evidence of that new curriculum working through that communication, and critical thinking skills. Those two core competencies, through that one assignment, (we were) able to cover both of those.” While referencing critical thinking, both the social studies teachers were looking ahead to the lifelong learning aspect of the new curriculum. As P3 observed, “teaching the skills of perspective and critical thinking, those are skills that are going to apply beyond university and beyond post-secondary and beyond secondary school.”

The personal/social competency was only referred to directly by one teacher (P3), who used it when she worked with students to create a learning community, with rules for respectful discussion. She stated:

Another aspect of that new curriculum is personal and social responsibility. When we set up our classroom, we set up class rules, kind of like a bill of rights for the classroom,
what the expectations were of each other…so that everyone would feel safe in that environment, and that really comes up with that personal/social responsibility. You are being a good person in that community.

When students self-assess, they are asked to describe how they are being personally responsible, “and that comes from their work habits, coming in on time, not missing classes, not being late. They’re recognizing it and it’s just a little bit more objective, because they are putting it on paper now.”

One aspect of personal/social competence, as described by the BC Curriculum is the ability to work in groups effectively. Four teachers talked about group work in their class, including full group discussions, debates and Socratic seminar, (“Everybody’s discussing, everybody’s getting it, we’re good, we’re moving forward as a whole with our knowledge. We are increasing our knowledge collectively” (P6)). They also described particular group projects. P3, who incorporates group work throughout her course, has students reflect on the experience each time. “One of the questions was, you’re going to be working in groups again throughout the year, how did you find that group dynamic?” Her work with her class on critical thinking, perspective, and respecting others’ views is all about the key building block of successful group work, empathy:

Those are the skills that are going to create empathy. They’re going to realize they are going to be able to see something from someone else’s perspective, whether they agree with it or whether they don’t…And only from that empathy are you going to get people collaborating together to solve a problem. That’s the only way it’s going to happen.

One teacher told about how he incorporates group involvement in all aspects his drama classes, starting with a check-in “where we listen to everybody in our group, in a circle. We’re
all sitting at the same level (on the floor) telling stories to each other about how we’re doing, and teaching kids to appreciate each others’ lives and who they are and what they’re about and what they bring.” He explained that the importance of group work was to show students they had something meaningful to share, to show that they mattered. “Then, give them opportunities to share their strengths with the group. Create project work that does that.”

**Concepts over content.** For four of the participants, an important improvement brought about by the new curriculum in the senior grades is the change in focus from content-driven courses to “big idea” concepts. As one socials teacher (P1) explained, student engagement in learning is more important than covering material:

> I don’t feel bad about not balancing content at all. I think we’re going to touch on everything, we’re going to learn stuff, but my goal is to teach those competencies, and to make sure we’re doing all those things. We’re going to touch on every piece of content but if we get into something and students are interested in it and I’m interested in it, then we’re going to run with that ‘cause what’s more important to me is that these kids, they’re engaged and that they want to do this work and they want to do this learning.

The three social studies teachers were particularly happy to see these changes in courses, which allowed students to move away from being overwhelmed by the small facts and details, the “what” of history, and now invites them to engage with the “why.” As P3 noted,

> I don’t care if a kid knows in 1609, Quebec City was founded. What does that tell anybody, that you can remember a date? I want the students to know why it was founded, what was going on in France that they had to send people to the New World? What was the impact on First Nations that were already here?
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The four teachers especially appreciated removal of a provincial exam requirement for social studies and English (English will be replaced by a skills-based literacy exam). “We’re not teaching to tests anymore,” said P4. The Social Studies 11 course was “content-driven and you had to make your way through all that curriculum” (P1). The course covered a timeline from Laurier to Trudeau to the latest Trudeau, with brief asides to discuss the structure of Canadian government and the creation of laws. “(I)t was still teaching towards the final exam,” said P4. “(T)here’s so much that happened in Canadian history, but when you have to blaze through everything to get to the end of the course and make sure you’ve covered all the material, you can’t pay due attention to certain things.” The provincial exam was worth 20% of the student mark. “The exam really dictated that, how you had to teach it,” said P1, noting that if students received a high classroom mark, but then did poorly on the provincial exam, “no one’s going to be happy about that.” P3, who did her practicum seven years ago in the U.S. where standardized testing was state-wide, observed “they put an unfair emphasis on these standardized tests. A lot of it was rote material. You didn’t have that open-ended questioning. It was a lot of memorization.” She described this as “kind of the old-school way of teaching.”

“I think we’re looking more at processes rather than remembering facts,” said P6, who is using the new curriculum to justify skill-building in her students. “It’s not that I would ignore the curriculum, but with looking at big ideas, and just looking at literacy, you’re going to focus on comprehension strategies that are going to help that.” Because of the permission given by the new curriculum, she is beginning to replace a content focus in English such as learning literary devices and elements, with concepts like reading comprehension and writing strategies, especially because the provincial English 12 exam is being phased out. “I’m interested to see
what the new (literacy) exam looks like, because… I don’t know if (the provincial English 12 exam) necessarily focusses on what it is to be a literate person.”

**Choice and connection.** Personalized learning within the new curriculum encourages students to access more choices, with the hope that choosing more relevant topics, assignments and projects which are connected to their lives will result in more engaged learning. Five of the participants spoke to this theme, while the sixth participant noted that he had incorporated choice and connected learning long before the new curriculum encouraged it. At one end of the spectrum of choice, one teacher involves students in planning the course topics, a narrative which will be described further in the discussion of students owning their learning. Three other teachers described projects where students chose the way they wanted to show evidence of their learning, whether it was as performance, presentation, PowerPoint, paper, poster, or other possibilities. At the other end of the spectrum, teachers are narrowing the choices. Students might be directed to choose sub-topics in a bigger theme, or to be allowed to choose their books for in-class reading and study. If the class was studying protests, each student chose a different protest in the world; if they were studying BC ghost-towns to create a group booklet on ghost-towns, they each picked a town from a long list.

“Instead of pushing and prodding, we’re just opening the door and saying, where are you going to go, what’s your choice here, and trying to get them to decide what they want their education to look like, and I think that’s really cool because then they engage in it more,” said P4. On a project about John A. MacDonald, she told her social studies class, “the world is your oyster,” and let them choose freely how they would demonstrate their knowledge. “I had one kid rewrite a song from (the Broadway musical) Rent and perform it complete with throwing herself on the ground, singing her heart out…Some of the most amazing art, it was just beautiful,
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stunning art work. I had kids do an epic rap battle. They had a rap between MacDonald and Cartier.” Students in her class rose to the opportunity for self-expression. “Tying into the new curriculum, one of the things that’s fabulous is that ‘let them express themselves’ part…when they just take the bit in their teeth and run with it, it’s just so cool.” Her students are noticing the change towards personalized learning, compared with past learning experiences, and they tell her about it. “I like your English classes,” one student told her, “because you don’t assume we all will have the same things to say about something. I really like that you assume we might have something different to say or a different way of showing our understanding.”

P6 created a passion project for students, where students could explain who they were and what they loved, which encouraged writing and self-expression. “It could be paper, it could be multimedia, it could be a blog or on twitter. Lots of them made Google Docs…just to get them writing about something they really cared about.” Students created posters, power points, and used personal photos. “I think they seemed to really like it…that’s a big thing, including more choice in assignments. I’m trying to do that more and more often.”

Choice has been part of P2’s pedagogy for years. In his drama classes where students create their own projects, whether it’s performance, scene-writing or technical (lighting/sound), the language of choice is built into self-assessment in a workshop approach. “When we talk about how to improve, we talk about ‘what if?’; we talk about, why did you make that choice…what would you have chosen to make this a better situation for you?” Showing confidence in students’ ability to choose builds their confidence, he said. “I value their storytelling. I value their choices.” His English classes are also modelled on workshopping. Students learn the processes of becoming a writer and a reader, and then they work on writing projects of their choice. “Where they start is up to them. How they proceed, at what pace, is up
to them, so these are all imbedded concepts in the new curriculum. I’ve just been doing them for a long time.” In his English classes, journal writing forms the foundations of each student’s personal development as a writer, and the teacher doesn’t give the young writers journal prompts, or topics. He explained:

Everything you need is in you, it’s just fear that blocks you. It’s fear that what you have to say isn’t good enough, so even giving someone a writing prompt is kind of giving them a little bit of a pass out of coming up with their own ideas. So I’m very careful when we start with the journals…whatever goes in there is their idea.

Student choice is one part of improving engagement in their learning, and a second related theme is how students connect their learning to their lives and interests. Five teachers addressed this theme, describing how they linked the learning to current affairs (P1, P2, P3, P5), to students lives (P6), made it relatable (P3), functional and helpful (P6), real-world (P2), and in one particular project, made it local (P1).

P1’s place-based project involved a geography class exploring an Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) decision around a community right-of-way which passed through land that, though designated as a trail, was being used by local hay farmers for their crop. It was an ongoing issue in the community, and one of the goals was to have students research positions on whether the right-of-way should be allowed through local farmland, so that community members and students had access to a walking path and bridge between nearby neighbourhoods and the school. Students would be encouraged to submit those position papers to the ALR. What made the project exciting for students was its relevance, P1 explained:

We have a couple of kids who live on farms, but irregardless of that, it’s a topic that’s really accessible to kids. They all understand that they get food from farms and it
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branches off into a lot of other topics, so we did a big project on the ALR, which was great because we had a local perspective on it.

For the project, students learned to navigate government websites and research information from submissions on the site. They found evidence, assessed bias, and brought their research together to form an argument. One student group was so motivated on their side of the issue that when they considered doing a survey in the school, they expected it wouldn’t go their way, so they “twisted” the survey questions, which, while it may not have been the kind of learning the teacher expected, certainly was a teachable moment. “I thought that was really interesting that they were already manipulating surveys. They’re in Grade 11 or whatever. It was pretty funny.”

Another student connected his research to his life on a farm. “It made it into a pretty strong argument as well about family survival and ‘this is our livelihood’ and that kind of stuff.”

Connecting learning to current events also engaged students, said three participants (P1, P3, P5). In a presentation on the politics of the 1920s, a student asked the class a critical thinking question about how the politics of the 1930s were similar to what is going on today in the United States, so they were able to link what was happening in the past to what is happening now, and then we had a class discussion about it. It wasn’t like a half-hour debate or anything, but a whole class, you got some different students opinions and some feedback. You’ve got evidence of that new curriculum working through (those) communication and critical thinking skills: those two core competencies, through that one assignment, was able to cover both of those (P3).

**Owning their learning.** Because there is more choice built into the new curriculum, and learning is expected to be personalized, some teachers observed that students are being asked to take ownership (P3, P4) and responsibility for their learning, and even to care about their
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learning, value their learning (P6), and truly want to learn (P1, P2, P4, P6). By taking responsibility for their learning (P1, P2, P4), students may gain “empowerment” (P2, P4), and develop “learner agency” (P6). The new curriculum’s focus on self-assessment and self-reflection (P2, P3, P4, P6) allows students to “see themselves growing” (P3) and think critically about their learning (P4) through metacognition (P4, P6).

“To me, one of the main goals is that they want kids to take ownership of their learning,” said P4. She explained further:

(T)he good thing for me is it allows us to ask how are you going to demonstrate your learning. It gives the ownership back to the kids…(because) you have that chance to say: there’s no final exam, show me: what do you know? And just lob the ball back in their court. For me, the ownership piece, the piece about self-reflection, the piece about the students having to self-assess and think critically about their own learning, the metacognition they are trying to embed in the curriculum, to me all that speaks to making the kids be responsible for, or feeling empowered about, their own learning.

“I think they’re also focussing now on the learner agency and the learner responsibility and being able to communicate what they’re learning and being more metacognitive about their learning,” said P6, who approves of this change, because it is close to her own teaching methods using formative assessment and literacy strategies.

P3 invited student ownership and engagement by having students plan the course outline. “It wasn’t just me developing this course. I made sure the students had input on what we were learning…We worked together, everyone building this whole curriculum.” At the start of the year, she asked her students, “What do you guys want to learn?” and they expressed areas of interests within the bigger content areas such as World War 2. “So, one student said, I’d really
like to look specifically at the Holocaust. Obviously, that’s something you teach anyway, but having some student input, ‘I would like to learn that,’ so I said okay, why not put that in.” Other students chimed in with their interests, and “all these things came in, and I was able to implement that into the overall course outline so that they have some ownership as well. It’s not just, this is what the teacher says we’re learning, this is what we’re learning.” History can be dry, she said, “but when the students have ownership of the material, then they are likely to be more engaged with the material.” Later, when they started to learn about their chosen areas, students would remember they had asked for that piece. “Then there’s that engagement, that what they said…was actually listened to.”

One of the keys to building student ownership of their learning can be found in the move to self-assessment, and self-reflection, according to four of the teachers interviewed (P2, P3, P4, P6). One teacher (P6) who has worked with formative assessment for years, noted that student self-assessment is about “students identifying where they are and what they had to do to move forward.” In the district studies, a new four-point grading system (Beginning, Developing, Applying, Extending) is being used in lower grades, and is having some influence in senior grades. P6 believes the four-point scale, used as a marking rubric, helps students to see the learning process in a way that the 100-point grade scale did not:

They had their rubric and we had the conferences about how can you move from developing to applying, or from applying to extending, (which has) more of a focus on that rather than just a 7 out of 15, or a 9 out of 15, because I think that they need to know how to move their learning forward, and their performance forward, rather than just look at a mark.
P3 is enthusiastic about the way self-assessment and ongoing communication of learning is helping her students grow, especially when she uses the new four-point system, which she described as a “more fluid dynamic.” “It’s not just, okay, you’re getting a mark of ten and that’s it, a percentage. They can see themselves growing from a beginning, a developing, applying, extending: those are now the catch phrases of their learning development, where in the past, it was just “here’s your mark.” In her school district, a reporting initiative called Ongoing Communication of Student Learning replaces mid-term reports with email or online communications with parents showing actual evidence of student learning. The student attaches an assignment, such as a test or a climate change paper or a research project, and they write what they believe to be the evidence of their competencies, such as communication, thinking, and personal/social, displayed in the assignment. The teacher writes a further competency-based assessment, and the report is transmitted or sent home to parents. “I like the holistic aspect of it. It’s not just, here’s your percentage, here’s you’re A, here’s your B, here’s your C. The students and the teachers and the parents can all see how the student is developing and where that evidence of learning is.”

Five of the six teachers interviewed described how students benefitted from many of these ideas put forward by the new curriculum. They expressed opinions that competency-driven learning and assessment in concept-based courses which invite choice and make relevant connections can engage students to take responsibility for their learning. While active learners will be able to “take the bit and run with it” (P4), even students who struggle may benefit. In senior social studies, for example, students of all achievement levels were required to pass the same course, which was very difficult for some when it was a content-heavy, provincially-examined course. “I guess that now we have a little bit more freedom on that in some ways,
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because when you are not so content-heavy, it’s easier for kids to run with it and do something spectacular, and you also have a little bit more leeway to pull those other kids along” (P1). The advantage to the new curriculum, said P3, was how it helped teachers build relationships with each student, even with the challenged students who used to be able to stay invisible. She further explained:

I think we should do this (new curriculum) because students don’t slip through the cracks anymore, and I think that is the biggest thing…Now that there’s an ongoing communication with the student and a relation with the students, and you get to learn, how is that student really learning? What is their learning style?

This kind of learning environment can result in empowered learners and stronger people, said P2. “They’re more confident in their own abilities. They don’t wait to be told what to do. They can try their own ideas and know that if they fail, they can try another idea. They know that they have agency in the world, that they can create their own story within the work environment.” Such empowerment may become more visible as students who have encountered it in elementary, intermediate, and junior grades, move into senior courses, observed P4, adding:

I think it’ll be interesting when you have kids who have been embedded with this way of taking ownership of their education all the way up. Hopefully, we’ll see a generation of students that are empowered and asking to have their needs met and are willing to put up their hands and say, I’m sorry, I don’t understand, or, what’s the expectation here, so that you have that dialogue opening, which is great.

**Challenges for learning.** The advantages the new curriculum brings to student learning comes with challenges, especially for those students that are in the “bridge years”, a kind of
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generation gap between students up until Grade 9 who have had some experience with concepts like self-assessment, four-point grades, group work, and project or inquiry learning (P4, P6). As senior teachers start to incorporate some of the new curriculum ideas, university-bound students who have grown up with the percentage grade scale express anxiety (P2, P3, P4, P6). Finally, some of the teachers (P1, P2, P3, P4) worried that students who have not chosen to be self-motivated, may see the new curriculum as a justification to not do any of the work of learning.

P4 indicated:

I think it’s still a long road to go, especially (for) those kids who are in this middle section of Grade 9, 10, and they’re kind of in the bridge years of the curriculum, because they haven’t grown up with that. I’m really interested in seeing those kids that start in kindergarten or Grade 1 and come up, how they will feel, because I’m really starting to notice it with my Grade 8s.

Her younger students are “pretty candid” with self-assessment, and “they automatically expect that they have to address where their learning is, and a lot of them are pretty savvy about where they’re at.” However, her Grade 11s are new to self-assessment. “I give them self-assessment, and they’re like, does this count for marks? Do you have to put down whatever I say? If I put down an A, do I get an A?”

“Grade 9s, they’re kind of used to it because they’ve had that recently,” said P6. “But I think this is fairly new to secondary school, and they’re very much more into ‘what’s my mark?’, and I’m saying, how can you move your learning forward?” She took a position at secondary school after teaching intermediate and junior, partly to engage with older students in this new way of learning. “I think it’s important for kids to focus on their learning rather than just jumping through hoops.” She also found that the project-based learning she introduced into her
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English classes was greeted more positively by Grade 9s, especially when it came to sharing within groups and having peers assess them. Grade 10s, 11s, and 12s felt this was “too personal.”

“The students? I don’t know if they’ve all bought into it yet,” said P3, adding:

(I)t’s a paradigm shift. I can understand some of their concerns, especially the Grade 12 students, because they’re wondering, if there’s no letter grades, how is this ‘applying and extending’ – if I’m applying to York University or U of T – what the hell does that mean to them as a university entrance.

Because students are used to “objective, static” marking systems, “what’s my mark” is a question she hears, especially from older students. “The easy answer is to tell them well, that’s how it is, that’s the way it’s going and you’ve got to get used to it, but that doesn’t really help them in their sense of anxiety. Because that’s what I see: there’s a lot of anxiety out there, of ‘what does this mean’?”

Two teachers (P3, P4) were particularly concerned with how to encourage passive learners to take responsibility for their learning. “The downside to self-assessment, that ownership piece, is the part where, if the student chooses not to engage and chooses to be the passenger in his own learning, rather than the driver, you’re left in a very difficult spot, because we are discouraged from ‘give me a task, give me a thing’, said P4. P3 believes the new curriculum has created some confusion, giving less motivated students a reason to justify not doing work. “I know they are in Grade 10 and they need a little bit of guidance, but I’m feeling the responsibility is a little bit on them. They can very easily duck out of doing the assignments and doing what I need for assessment, because the ownership is not put on the student.”
The challenge for older students when it comes to changing their learning is that they have been trained deeply in a learning system that promotes obedience and dependence, rather than choice and empowerment, suggested P2, stating:

And that’s one that we encouraged people for quite a long time because we wanted them to be able to work at soul-destroying work in factories. We didn’t want them to think that they could invent or become, or have authority, so our system is built to deny them those things. So when you ask me to give a specific example of how my theory and practice encourages people to be strong and to really be powerful in their agency as creators, that takes a long time, depending on the kid. Over five years, I might be able to encourage them to take on different understandings and different habits of being in the world that allow them to truly understand and appreciate their own power.

Student learning may take time to adapt to new curriculum goals, observed two teachers. “We’re just starting. It’ll take years before we see those changes. Ask me again, when the kids who have started in K to 1 come here. Then I’ll know the answer,” said P2. P4 said that it was hard to see the change now, because of the older students who are in the bridge years of the change. “I’m interested to see the evolution…where they’ve been through the implementation of it, because we’re talking about changing the ideology and kids aren’t always on board.”

**Discussion of Theme One: Changing Students**

*I think it’ll be interesting when you have kids who have been embedded with this way of taking ownership of their education all the way up. Hopefully, we’ll see a generation of students that are empowered and asking to have their needs met…*(P4)*

When reviewing the literature, the ongoing concern given by researchers of how to best meet student needs is reiterated through the concepts of student-centered and personalized
learning, as well as the changing role of the student in 21st century learning. Boyer and Crippen
(2014) provide a revealing display of the early intentions and guiding principles of the BC
curriculum change, which had personalized learning and each individual student’s needs and
goals at its centre. The student-centred considerations described by the teachers in the present
study are in line with the original intentions of the new BC curriculum. Boyer and Crippen
(2014) stressed that the new BC curriculum was focussed on personalized learning “to help
students personally develop and meet goals that are closely aligned with their needs, strengths,
interests and aspirations” (p. 345-346), which echoes the words of P2, who talks about “what is
strong in this child? How can I support that?”

One of the ways that teachers have tried to help students build on their strengths is by
using the competencies defined by the new curriculum. Fullan (2015) advised that working with
competencies is a powerful tool towards deeper learning and toward building the skills needed
for lifelong learning. In the current study, P3 and P1 also repeated the long-term values of
learning through competencies (especially when it came to critical thinking), and P3 found the
social competencies useful in creating guidelines for effective student group work and
discussion. P4 taught students to use a Socratic forum to do the same, while P2 used check-in
sharing circles to start class, and believed in creating meaningful project work where students
could share their strengths with others. Kokotsaki et al. (2016) point out that successful project-
based and problem-based learning depends on developing “group processes of high quality” (p.
267) and Fullan and Quinn (2015) point to a sense of belonging as a key element to deeper
learning, using interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. “Managing collaborative relationships and
being self-monitoring are skills for life” (Fullan & Quinn, p. 96).
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The new BC curriculum is competency-driven, but it is also concept-based, and four of the teachers in the current study expressed enthusiasm towards a change from teaching catalogues of content to exploring big ideas and themes. Kaser and Halbert (2009) include this goal as one of the steps that moves schools from institutions that sort students, to places that support learning. Deeper learning requires moving from teaching that covers the material, to learning that inquires about meaning. Assessment for learning (and as learning) also moves schools and classrooms away from places of sorting to places of learning, noted Kaser and Halbert.

The teachers in the current study expressed similar feelings about the role of assessment, and they were relieved they would no longer have to teach to a provincial exam. Because of the content-based curriculum, P4 said her students would be able to take more time on important topics, P1 talked about how his students could explore areas of interest more deeply, and P3, who had seen the test-driven U.S. system first-hand, was happy that her students could explore open-ended questions instead of having to memorize facts. P6 saw the concept focus as permission to make her English teaching more about processes (or reading, writing, thinking, research) and building skills towards becoming “a literate person,” than about facts.

Through its goal of personalized learning, the new curriculum has also freed students to follow their interests both in what they study, as well as how they demonstrate their knowledge. Full implementation of personalized learning as described by Boyer and Crippen (2014) or Basham et al. (2016) is not yet in sight in the classrooms of the teachers interviewed, but the teachers are already seeing positive results and more engaged students from some of their attempts to incorporate choice into their assignments and in their assessments. P3 saw her students become more engaged when she invited them to plan their course outline and pick
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topics of interest. P4 was amazed at how much effort and energy students put into demonstrating learning from a social studies project in their own way, from rap battles to art. P2 saw student choice as a necessity to build empowerment, confidence, and self-value.

Teachers observed that connecting the content of assignments to student interest or to local topics further increased engagement. P1 noted how local problems energized student learning in an agricultural land-use study, and P6 tried out a “passion project” which engaged her students in writing and producing material about their favourite subject, themselves. The reviewed literature, especially on project and inquiry learning, agreed on the importance of choice in promoting student learning and empowerment (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Saunders-Stewart et al., 2012). Hoff (2013) noted “student input on the choice, variety, and level of difficulty of the required task as part of its design, allows students to maximize their orientation towards learning and mastery. This also has the added effect of promoting students’ interest and perceived value in the task” (p. 35). Basham et al. (2016) noted that in personalized learning, their research “found that encouraging learners to demonstrate mastery in multiple ways, especially if they have some choice, provides for higher levels of engagement and more authentic and meaningful learning” (p. 134).

As they saw their students try out projects that had more choice and personal meaning, the teachers observed their students taking ownership and responsibility for their learning. They credited the new curriculum’s focus on formative and self-assessment, and the move away from summative testing such as provincial exams. As P4 said:

the ownership piece, the piece about self-reflection, the piece about students having to self-assess and think critically about their own learning, the metacognition to embed in
the curriculum, to me all that speaks to making the kids be responsible, or feeling empowered about, their own learning.

This speaks to one of the more interesting results described by the teachers, which was the way in which students were changing to take ownership of their learning, even at these early stages of trialing the curriculum.

In Kaser and Halbert’s (2009) model, the role of students needs to change (as will the role of teachers, which will be discussed later): from dependency to greater autonomy and teamwork, and from accepting tasks to doing worthwhile learning with deeper outcomes. This deeper learning moves away from cataloguing and memorizing content, and into exploration, inquiry, and research. Perhaps the more challenging changes students will have to face is a move from “extrinsic motivation and rewards for performing” (such as marks and perhaps even grade advancement) to “intrinsic motivation and recognition of learning growth” (p. 82).

Other authors echo this need for students to develop a new learning identity. Hattie (2012) described students becoming their own teachers, and Fullan and Quinn (2015) foresaw students seeking “active learning partnerships” with students, with teachers, with members of the community, and even with people around the world. These partnerships require “students to take greater charge of their own and each other’s learning inside and outside the classroom” (p. 93). A key element, say Fullan and Quinn, is student ownership and responsibility of their learning. This means students will have to learn how to learn, and to develop their agency to the point where they are actively “codeveloping learning tasks and assessing results” (p. 93).

The teachers in the current study only saw the beginnings of this changing student identity but were quite interested in what was revealed by some of the student responses to their test-drives. P2, who has taught for years using what is considered now as new curriculum ideas,
said he sees students who are more confident in their abilities, who do not have to wait to be told what to do. P3 and P6 said that self-assessment and descriptive grading are getting their students thinking and talking about their learning, not just their percentile mark. P4 was told by her students that they liked how she didn’t assume they all had the same things to say or the same way to say it. Students openly stated their appreciation for project-based learning over lectures and seat-work.

But for personalized learning to succeed, students need to learn to self-regulate, and the current crop of high school students have not been given the tools. The teachers interviewed were particularly worried about passive students who have been trained by years of teacher-directed tasks. The teachers described students choosing to “duck out of assignments” and demanding to be given traditional assessment tasks, rather than engage with the new freedoms and responsibilities to choose learning through projects and inquiry. The literature reviewed suggests that teaching students to learn how to learn (or reteaching, in the case of older students who grew up in a traditional school model) must happen first for this kind of change toward deeper learning to be successful in schools. Students need to learn “setting goals, monitoring, and controlling their own learning, (and) paying attention to their own motivations and actions in learning” (Kaser & Halbert, p. 91). If a complete shift to personalized learning is the goal of the new BC curriculum, self-regulation is the vital ingredient. “(I)t is critical that culture, design, tools, strategies and interactions within the learning environment support a self-regulated learning process” (Basham et al., 2016). If inquiry learning is an important element of personalized learning in BC, “self-regulative, including metacognitive, strategies are critical to inquiry” (Saunders-Stewart et al., 2012).
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And yet, the changes by students to a culture of self-regulation and learning ownership may be coming faster than expected, noted the teachers. Younger students entering high school, who were only introduced to competencies in the last two years (since the curriculum began implementation in 2016 for K-9), seem to show a fluency with this new kind of learning style while the older students struggle, resulting in the “generation gap” described by teachers. As several of the participants commented, it will be interesting to see how these changes might affect students who begin the new curriculum in Kindergarten and are trained in the new pedagogy all the way through to high school.

Theme Two: Teachers Teaching

Since students learning are at the heart of the new curriculum, that theme has been the focus of the data analysis so far, and rightly subsumes much of the discussion around teachers and their teaching. This is especially true for teachers who see themselves as student-centred in their methods. The theme of Teachers Teaching uncovers the teacher’s perspective as they explore new instructional strategies in an effort to incorporate the new BC draft curriculum for Grades 10 to 12. The subthemes organizing this data are teacher level of comfort around the new curriculum, instructional strategies, and the evidence of learning they have observed while using these strategies. The last subtheme presents the challenges these teachers are seeing with the new curriculum in this trial stage.

Teacher level of comfort with the new curriculum. Teachers were asked to describe their level of comfort with the new curriculum and to explain their understanding of its ideas. As noted previously, two of the teachers were relatively new, with one beginning her first contract, and the other just starting her second year. One teacher has been teaching for eight years. The three veteran teachers ranged from 15 years, to 20 and 30 years’ experience. Four out of six of
the teachers reacted positively to the changes with words like “good” (P1), “great” (P6), “fabulous” (P4), or by stating they liked them (P3). One teacher (P5) was neutral about the new curriculum (“I don’t have any objection to them”) and one (P6) supported the “intentions” of the new curriculum, but was worried there would not be committed follow-through.

The three newest teachers expressed the most comfort with the new curriculum, while the veterans were all relatively comfortable, or said they had been teaching in this way for some time. The newest teacher called herself “self-taught” about the new curriculum, because working as a TOC the previous year she “didn’t get the memo,” or receive the kind of information around curriculum that teachers with contracts may have received. “Most of the things that we’re doing in this new curriculum were things that I was doing in my practicum,” she said, describing herself as comfortable teaching the new curriculum. However, she has some discomfort because she feels she missed district-level direction from previous years. “For what I know, for what I’ve kinda self-taught, I feel good about it, I feel good in the classroom setting, but all the information that’s come down, I don’t feel like I’m an expert on it. It’s a bit of a fly-by-night.”

The second new teacher noted she had not known much else in her career, because she started teaching during the trial years for the new curriculum. She ran into difficulty as she moved into a Grade 10 socials studies class because the Grade 11 senior socials studies teacher did not want her to teach the new curriculum’s Grade 10 material (which was modern Canadian history, traditionally Socials Studies 11 territory). As a result, she improvised. “I just kinda taught old Grade 10 curriculum with the big ideas focus and tried to mesh it, but that’s not the curriculum’s fault, that’s just sort of where the drafting process was at.” The teacher with eight years experience is so respected in his project-based teaching, that he is consulted by district
learning leaders. “I feel pretty good. I feel confident diving into that stuff,” he said about his comfort level.

Two of the three veteran teachers said that much of the new curriculum fit the ways they were teaching already. “I think they’re also focussing now on the learner agency and the learner responsibility and being able to communicate what they’re learning and being more metacognitive about their learning, and that’s kind of been my journey anyways, so this new curriculum isn’t scaring me,” said one veteran. She felt that she was a beginner using some of these strategies at high school, “but I do feel comfortable using formative assessment strategies and looking at the core competencies and having the students report on themselves.” A second veteran said he had been “working this way for years now” and described his teaching involving student choice, individual pace, and individualized assessment. “So, these are all embedded concepts in the new curriculum. I’ve just been doing them for a long time,” he said. The third and most veteran teacher said that while he was a beginner at the new curriculum, he felt it was “doable.” “I’ve tried out a couple of new things and it’s been fine. I don’t think it’s affected me adversely,” he observed.

**Instructional strategies.** Many of the instructional strategies used by the interviewed teachers while test-driving the new curriculum have been described in students learning. This section will briefly review some further teacher comments on assessment, and freedom and choice. It will also explore their views on classroom structure and Aboriginal inclusion.

**Assessment.** From some of the interviewed teachers’ perspectives (P2, P3, P4, P6), new assessment practices go hand-in-hand with the new curriculum. One teacher (P5) considered this as a potential challenge (discussed under challenges below). Two of the teachers (P4, P6) talked about the importance of formative assessment and “assessment for learning” (P6), and one
described his use of “individualized” assessment (P2). “We need to change the way we assess and label and judge kids,” said P2, adding, “(i)n the past, teachers were oriented to say, okay I’m going to take this kid, measure how they’re doing in my area, give them the instruction, measure how well they do with that instruction, and then, on they go. But in the new paradigm, teachers are starting to move away from that.” He described his use of feedback for formative assessment, and student self-assessment. The word “feedback” was used by the same four teachers, both in describing the “back and forth” communication between teacher and student (P3), or in descriptive feedback used in formative assessment with students (P2, P4, P6).

Changing assessment practices were also mentioned, such as a requirement to connect competencies to report card assessment (P3, P5, P6), and the increasing use of the four-point assessment (P3, P6) scale of “beginning, developing, applying, extending,” as that scale begins to be used in formative or self-assessments, informally, with senior grades. For example, P3 called the new assessment “a more fluid dynamic,” while P6 approved of the use of the four-point scale in high school: “Hopefully, people will have more formative (assessment), so more as learning and for learning, because definitely in secondary (school), we focus on the summative,” she said.

*Freedom and choice.* Throughout the interviews, several teachers (P1, P4, P5, P6) referred to the freedom given by the new curriculum’s focus on concepts and competencies rather than content, especially when it came to planning courses and learning experiences.

P1 appreciated the loosening up of directives in the new curriculum away from the content-driven social studies courses of the previous curriculum. “Now you have a lot more freedom to do what you want to do, and I like that a lot. I think I’m a pretty creative teacher and I always like to pull things from the news when I can and try to make things relevant that way.”
By choosing topics that are relevant and interesting to students, P1 also notes it’s important for him to be interested as well: “…but if we get into something and students are interested in it and I’m interested in it, then we’re going to run with that.” Similarly, when P4 says that things are “fun” in her classroom, she makes it clear that it’s fun for her, especially when the students are enjoying their self-expression in their learning. “They just go wild. They throw it out there, and it’s so fun to teach.” She also expresses how using the big idea/concept approach helped her socials studies course planning and teaching. “I really enjoy the space and freedom it gives.” P5 agreed that the curriculum allows freedom, but added that it had both a positive and a negative aspect, saying:

I think it’s wonderful to have the freedom and ability to bring in whatever resources we want, but it also puts more pressure on you, because you’re left without a safety net. You don’t have a list that you can go to, when you’ve exhausted your own searching…There is no fallback plan because there’s no resource list.

Classroom structure. One interesting topic mentioned by three teachers (P1, P2, P3) was how they structured their classroom to improve learning. P1’s geography and social studies classes are generally found in the library or learning centre, working independently on projects around tables, or at the computers, and explained:

We’ll all start together and have a conversation about what our goal is for that day or that week. If it’s a big goal, then they’ll basically go to work on it. They use the computers a lot, and we work in here, so they have space, and often, I’ll sit at the table or I’ll just talk and try to check in with each one of them everyday on their progress, or if they’re working in a group, with each group.

P3 sets her classroom into a horseshoe which she described as a “sharing circle”: 
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There’s no rows of desks. It’s just one big horseshoe, so that everybody can see everybody. There’s some accountability that way, and especially for social studies, there’s a lot of group discussion, and having a set-up like this where everyone can see everyone…it’s a much more welcoming environment for a whole class discussion.

P2 will also begin each drama class with a sharing circle, sitting on the floor together at the same level and doing a check-in. In his English classes, he encourages a workshop environment where students work independently and move around the room, or sometimes move around the school. Sometimes they are at desks, sometimes perched on desks or grouped in a corner, sometimes working at computers in a nearby writing lab, and other times attending school activities to develop writing topics.

**Aboriginal inclusion.** Part of BC’s new curriculum directly addresses the disparity of outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations students. By mobilizing recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), and in consultation with First Nations leaders throughout the province, the curriculum attempts to address these disparities through the inclusion of First Nations “ways of knowing” (BC Ministry of Education, 2018f).

Three teachers talked about including Aboriginal materials in their courses (P4, P5, P6), but only two teachers addressed the deeper concept of engaging Aboriginal ways of knowing in their teaching (P2, P4). “First Nations content is not difficult (to find),” said P2, explaining:

There’s fabulous First Nations authors. For English class, there’s tonnes of material. Social studies, that’s a no-brainer. I don’t care if you’re looking at world history, or whatever, there’s always First Nations in every part of the world. That’s always a consideration, and something that should be talked about.
“I’ve always included Aboriginal content, so that piece wasn’t difficult for me,” said P6. P5 said he is working on including First Peoples content but felt “we don’t have a lot of resources for that. We have little dribs and drabs, but we don’t have a lot.” He was in the process of creating a writing project that linked the treatment of children from the Madeleine homes for unwed mothers in Ireland and the abuses and neglect suffered by First Nations residential school students.

Changing teaching to support First Nations ways of learning is a bigger challenge, said P4. “It’s a bit harder to nail down what exactly they mean,” she explained. She said she was trying to move in that direction for all her students, especially by giving more time and chances for students to succeed. She explained:

They can make as many mistakes (as they need). As far as First Nations (ways of learning), you’re not penalized for your mistakes, and it’s a learning that has to be voluntary and without pressure as much as possible. And you choose it because you see value in it…if you choose, there’s an unending opportunity to keep trying and to be successful.

More than just being a part of the new curriculum, First Nations ways of knowing are the foundation and a blueprint for deep change in our educational system, says P2. He has been working alongside First Nations teachers and elders to create a course that brings First Nations and non-First Nations students together in cultural, multidisciplinary learning experiences. “The new curriculum at its heart contains an Indigenous model of education: know, do and understand. That’s a being/becoming, that’s a transformational model of education,” he said. “It changes how we see knowledge, it changes how we see kids interact with knowledge, because knowledge is created iteratively in that loop and that’s different from ‘attaining outcomes’, and that’s how
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we used to talk about it.” People need to be able to switch from one worldview to another worldview, embracing “Aboriginal ways of understanding and knowing,” and the new curriculum encourages this, he said.

Evidence of learning. In the early days of trialing new curriculum concepts in the classroom, how are these instructional strategies and new curriculum-style projects helping students learn? The evidence of student learning gathered from the interviews, is, of course, subjective, a report by teachers of what they are experiencing in their classrooms. Asked what they saw, or heard students doing that told them students were learning, teachers described a wide variety of observations.

For some teachers, energetic group discussion (P2, P3, P4, P6) appeared to show active learning. When P2 began using a workshop environment for his English classes which included peer conferencing in a collaborative setting, “it was noisier than other classrooms. It didn’t look like other classrooms and sometimes I would say (to the principal)...I’m so sorry, my room is so noisy and everyone else’s room is so quiet, and he would say ‘yeah, that’s a good thing.’” His principal noted that “you’re creating this passion in an environment where the students can express themselves, so keep doing what you’re doing.” In classroom discussions around critical thinking questions raised by students as part of their presentations, P3’s students often connect history to current events. “It wasn’t like a half-hour debate or anything, but a whole class. You got some different student opinions and some feedback. You’ve got evidence of that new curriculum working through (those) communication and critical thinking skills, those two core competencies, through that one assignment.” P4 noted a few examples of what she called “engaged discussions” around English topics, where students would describe their learning, such as when several girls finally “got” Romeo and Juliet, and then explained it to the class: “And just
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seeing them get the layers of what was happening, and that moment where they realized it was
not just this fluffy little romance, that there was a whole lot going on.” She also described some
of the “unique ideas” which came up in literary group discussions, as evidence of student
learning.

In P6’s class, discussions between students doing their passion project showed engaged
learning for some, but perhaps not as much for others: “The Grade 12s mostly talked about their
prom dresses and they’re still doing that, but the other grades were very, very into it and having
discussions with each other about what their passions were.” For others (P3, P5), individual
questions by students to teachers to clarify their learning or engage feedback, or answers to direct
questions by teachers (P2, P3), provided evidence of student understanding.

Student writing provided another piece of evidence for student learning for some teachers
(P2, P3, P4, P6). Student writing showed visible improvement during a single course, noted P6.
“From the first piece of writing…my class-wide write, I could definitely see improvement in
their writing.” P4 described student improvement year over year. “Some of my Grade 10s are
now in my Grade 11 English, and seeing their essay writing improving from when I first got
them in Grade 10…that’s a good moment. That’s the first time I’ve had a chance to see my kids
progress, and having some kind of concrete example, which is cool.” Other writing evidence
came from reflection papers in social studies (P3), and from observing increased “fluency” in
writing throughout P2’s writing workshop-style English course.

Students independently trying out skills in their projects was another way teachers P1 and
P2 reported learning. Because P1’s students were writing proposals for a government agency
(the ALR) about an ongoing issue, they were showing evidence of learning in a practical way.
As described earlier, P1’s students navigated government websites to find information and
evidence for their own reports. They assessed the biases of other people’s submissions, and eventually created their own arguments meant to be submitted to the ALR. One group of students showed evidence of real-life learning, perhaps not entirely in a way expected by the teacher, by creating a survey so that they could manipulate the answers they received.

P2’s hands-off style of teaching involves working beside students and guiding them with questions about the choices they are making, waiting for students to come up with the answers themselves. When asked about evidence of student learning, he answered “you’re witnessing it right now in this room with what you saw as you walked in,” referring to the scene-painting for an upcoming drama show which was ongoing around us during the interview, involving cheerful, self-directed students working together with little or no adult supervision. When asked how he knows students are learning, he answered:

they’re more confident in their own abilities. They don’t wait to be told what to do. They can try their own ideas and know that if they fail, they can try another idea. They know that they have agency in the world, that they can create their own story within the work environment…That’s all you need to do. Give people more time or ask a question that helps them figure it out. I don’t tell people what to do.

He laughed. “I guess that’s the best way to teach them to become confident learners. Don’t give them the answers!”

Challenges to teaching. While the teachers interviewed were generally (five were positive and one was neutral) interested and engaged with the new curriculum in a positive way, they offered several challenges they have encountered or may become issues in the future from a teacher’s perspective. Course structure, resources, and teacher attitudes were the challenges raised in the interviews.
**Course structure.** For social studies, there were two different course structure challenges. For P3 and P4, the issue was around trying out the new Grade 10 curriculum, which has content trespassing on the current Grade 11 curriculum. Because the trial period will continue for a further year for Grade 11 and 12, there will be overlap in content in 2018-2019 for the incoming Grade 11s. “Why prolong the inevitable?” stated P3. Since she was a new teacher, “I thought, why not dive into this new curriculum rather than go back to something that’s going to change anyway,” especially with Grade 8s and 9s already using new curriculum courses. P4, on the other hand, was asked by another Grade 11 teacher not to step into the 20th century content, making it tougher to improvise a new curriculum Grade 10 socials class. “But all of the Grade 10s material was being covered in Grade 9, so they were in a gap, and I didn’t know what to cover.”

The second social studies issue is around the course list being created at the Ministry level. According to P1, every socials studies course was given a Grade 12 designation, except for a course called Social Studies Explorations 11. He explained:

> It allows teachers to combine up to three courses and take big ideas from each…which I think is a terrible idea because what’s going to happen, I think, is that every school is going to offer that course and they’ll tailor it to whatever the teacher wants to do…and 90% of the students, that’s the course they’re going to take for their social studies 11/12 requirement.

Many of the other 15 social studies courses created in the new curriculum, “are going to die because no one’s going to offer them because all the kids are going to be geared into that Explorations 11.”
For English, some of the course structure issues are around the differences between courses like Creative Writing 10, Composition 10, and Structured Literacy 11. “What I don’t agree with is you can’t have reading without writing,” noted P6. The reverse is also true. Creative Writing 10 students said they were told it was the course to take “if I don’t like reading,” she said. “Well, you can’t be a good writer without reading models, so we’ve been doing lots of reading and lots of writing, but I’m not just focusing on creative writing.” She believes that this separation between the courses is going to be “confusing for students.” P4, explained that a challenge was to distinguish English Composition from Creative Writing, because both are essentially about storytelling. She has approached the issue by teaching essay writing, but also branching out into non-fiction storytelling such as journalism and podcasting.

**Resources.** Part of the new curriculum includes replacing text books and traditional resources with online or other learning tools. P5 suggested a few challenges around the open sourcing approach. He noted that the freedom to bring in resources is balanced by the pressure for teachers to provide their own. “You don’t have a list that you can go to. When you’ve exhausted your own searching…there is no fallback plan, because there’s no resource list.” He also worries about duplicating materials that are used elsewhere in the school. “You don’t want to have this resource that’s going to show up in six other classrooms. You want to be a little distinctive, a little bit fresh and original. You don’t want the kids to be bombarded with the same thing.” Also, as mentioned earlier, P5 expressed some challenges incorporating Aboriginal content “because we don’t have a lot of resources for that,” adding that, while it would be a task to come up with materials he could use, he thought it was “do-able.”

**Teacher attitude.** How teachers use the new curriculum, or perhaps don’t use it, was a concern for some of the teachers. “It gives the ownership back to the kids, or at least if a teacher
takes that opportunity, it could,” said one teacher. The old approach, which relied heavily on
summative grading and teacher-directed tasks would “make them demonstrate their knowledge
in the way that we wanted them to,” and was tidy and easy to mark. It “didn’t have a lot of
complications for teachers,” she said. “But now, when you open it up,” and allow students the
freedom to choose how they will show what they’ve learned, “it makes it a little more tricky for
teachers.” Teachers will have to begin to adapt their expectations to what the students are
demonstrating, she notes. “I think it’s all dependent upon what people do with the new
curriculum and how they focus on student learning,” said another teacher, and a third noted,
“People don’t like change, and if people can avoid it, they will.”

Discussion of Theme Two: Changing Teachers

“(T)he greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their
own teaching, and when students become their own teachers” (Hattie, 2012).

While the responses of the teachers in this study sometimes fit expectations drawn from
the literature reviewed, their enthusiasm toward the ongoing changes was a marked exception.
As described in Chapter 3, teachers who agreed to be in the study likely had an interest in the
new curriculum in the first place, and perhaps were more likely to view it positively. But even
with that proviso, most of the teachers seemed more engaged with the new curriculum than could
have been predicted by the literature. When compared with the BCTF (2017) survey, the
interviewed teachers responded similarly to the BCTF survey concerning their comfort with the
new curriculum, and similar to the survey, they had few classroom autonomy concerns. Some
even felt greater freedom under the new curriculum. There were some differences in their
responses from the survey results about workload issues, teaching materials, and Aboriginal
resources. The teachers in the current study did not produce anywhere near the level of concern
expressed by surveyed BC teachers. Only one teacher expressed concern about these issues. This may be because there were no direct questions on these topics asked in the interview, and it also could be because the interviewees were teaching high school humanities courses and more used to developing their own materials or encouraging their students to research online. However, as noted, the most significant difference was that five out of six of the interviewed teachers were positive about the new curriculum changes compared with only a 50% approval rate for BC teachers in the BCTF survey.

Teachers facing whole system change such as the BC curricular shift can often experience a sense of loss, or frustration, or even a kind of change exhaustion when the innovations come rapidly, only to be tossed aside for yet another (Dilkes et al., 2014; Hargreaves, 2004). Teachers’ feelings of being overwhelmed or overworked can come at various levels of change, whether it is just from trying to introduce inquiry learning for the first time to their classrooms (Chichekian et al., 2016), from dealing with a shift to interdisciplinary teaching (especially for high school teachers who consider themselves subject-specialists) (Priestley, 2011), or from being given the freedom to design the curriculum itself (Mellegard & Pettersen, 2016). New teachers, such as those now filling the schools during BC’s educational hiring boom, may also experience a feeling of career dissonance when they enter their new classrooms during a whole system shift to a kind of teaching for which they may not have envisioned when first entering the career (Adoniou, 2016). What is interesting about the teachers interviewed for the present study is that they did not express the kind of strain or stress which may have been predicted. In the interviews, the teachers embraced and sometimes were encouraged by the new curriculum, noting that it paralleled their teaching goals and aspirations. This might be explained by Hargreaves (2004) which found that during an Ontario whole system
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reform, teachers were more apt to embrace change if they felt that it fit their teaching philosophy, that it improved learning for their students, and if they were initiating it. Even if the overall change was mandated by the government, teachers seemed to respond more positively when they could “make change their own in the adaptability phase of dealing with it…In all this, the importance of teachers feeling that, whatever the obstacles or the difficulties, they are still driving the change themselves, cannot be overstated if change is to secure positive emotional engagement from them” (Hargreaves, p. 301-302).

Similar to Hargreaves’ (2004) results, the teachers interviewed for the present study supported the changes because they had already embraced the ideas behind the changes, and generally shared a student-centred educational philosophy. For example, they were already practicing formative assessment and using feedback with students. Previously, they had been working with Aboriginal inclusion in their courses. Even the curricular changes towards concepts over content, met with their approval, as it was a change they had wanted for years. As long as the change supported student learning, they were positive about it and were willing to consider it. For example, they generally appreciated the competency model as helpful to student growth, and several teachers expressed support for using the four-point descriptive assessment scale (beginning, developing, applying, extending) to move away from marks-focussed anxiety, so that students would focus on their learning.

By embracing the changes in the new curriculum (and sometimes interpreting those changes from incomplete knowledge and guesses due to “missing the memo” as one participant described), these teachers are embracing a change in their own role that is only starting to make itself apparent in their classrooms, and perhaps in classrooms around the province. The changing roles of teachers in 21st century learning (or deeper learning) have been described by Boyer and
Crippen (2014), Fullan and Quinn (2015), Hargreaves and Shirley (2012), Hattie (2012), and Kaser and Halbert (2009). Fullan and Quinn (2015), for example, indicated that teachers’ roles need to change “from explicitly structuring the learning task, toward providing feedback, activating the next learning challenge, and continuously developing the learning environment” (p. 95). Several of the interviewed teachers focussed on providing feedback as a key part of their teaching style.

Their willingness to test-drive some of the new curriculum ideas at an early date shows that the teachers were always seeking ways to develop and improve the learning environment of their students. In Fullan and Quinn’s version of the new classroom, students ask the questions, questions are valued above answers, students can learn in different ways, there are real-world connections to learning, students collaborate, and students self-monitor and self-assess. Teachers are being asked to move towards being co-learners, or as Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) noted, to “teach less, learn more” (p. 193).

In the current study, the participants described classrooms that are nudging towards these kinds of changes, and perhaps changing the teachers as well. The teachers described how the new curriculum’s change from content to concept has allowed them the freedom to incorporate more choice in the assignments and more choice in the ways students could demonstrate their knowledge. They also described several examples of project-based learning. Perhaps the most exciting example was both a place-based and problem-based learning project. The Agricultural Land Reserve geography project engaged students because it was authentic and concerned a real problem in their home community that had an impact on students and their families.

The participants did not describe any interdisciplinary projects, but several did discuss the first steps towards trying out guided inquiry learning. These steps toward inquiry were
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tentative and it should be noted that one concern in the literature reviewed is that without further training for teachers in inquiry methods, this could lead to the “illusion of inquiry” (Chichenkian et al., 2016) or false inquiry (Voet & De Wever, 2016). Students responded with interest and engagement to the project and inquiry-styled learning, the teachers reported, which was also reflected in the literature (Hoff, 2013; Kokotsaki et al. 2016; Saunders et al. 2012).

The teachers themselves expressed interest in teaching this way, and were often excited by the results, both for their students and in their own growth as a teacher. A teacher who had been encouraging student agency and choice for years along the lines of the new curriculum, supported the “intention of change,” and called it potentially “transformational,” but was concerned that the change would not be completely supported by the government and the educational system, resulting in the failure and cancellation of the reform.

If teachers need to adapt to meet the needs of the changing BC curriculum, it seems from the interviews that the interest, and even the enthusiasm, is there. Unlike the Norwegian teachers (Mellegard & Pettersen, 2016), the teachers in the present study did not see themselves only as curriculum practitioners, but also seemed interested to be given the chance to be curriculum developers.

At this point in the BC curriculum trial period, the majority of the participants were neither frustrated, nor overwhelmed by the responsibility of their role in curricular change. Instead, they saw it as an extension of their own desires to improve their students’ successes by trying out instructional strategies that engaged and deepened learning. Whether they saw themselves as change agents can be interpreted only from their words of support for the changes they had experienced, and the hopes they expressed that these changes continued, or their worries that it wouldn’t.
Theme Three: Managing Change

“Everything out here is changing,” said one teacher, and each of the teachers interviewed described a similar viewpoint. Some of the teachers (P2, P3) were looking at the bigger change beyond the new curriculum, the change in the world, in technology, in future employment, and in student learning needs in the 21st century.

Others (P2, P3, P4, P5) spoke about the new curriculum reform, and how they saw it moving forward. While change has been the norm in our world and in education throughout the last few generations, there was a sense from the interviews that most of the teachers saw the new curriculum as the beginning of an entirely new way of thinking, a new set of worldviews concerning employment and learning. Two teachers (P2, P3) saw the new curriculum as a necessary response to a world leaving behind old industrial models of work and of education. P3 observed:

Everything out here is changing, outside of academia and schools…The reality is right now, we’re training high school students for jobs that don’t even exist yet. We don’t know what these jobs are going to be, but we need to give them the skills to be ready for these new jobs as the world changes exponentially, and that doesn’t work in the old style, it just doesn’t.

“We’re changing from an industrial model to a non-industrial model,” said P2. “Everybody understands the industrial model, because it is what we’ve been running for 80 to 100 years, so people are pretty clear what that looks like, and people understand the world has changed and we need to change how we educate.”

For P2, the change was hinted at in BC during the “Year 2000” education reform plan, the result of the 1988 Sullivan Commission. However, the reform did not take hold. “We tried
to say, okay, we can do this in different ways. We don’t have to group by age, we don’t have to group by discipline. We can free things up.” In his view, the reform did not move forward, because the system was too rooted in the past to incorporate an entirely new way of seeing things. “(T)he system wasn’t able to change to support the new understandings of the curriculum, so instead of changing, instead of breaking out of the mold of industrialized education, they tried to bring these understandings into an industrial system and it just doesn’t fit, so it failed.” It wasn’t a failure of ideas, but “a failure of understanding how much the system dictates the kind of education that happens within the system.”

For the new curriculum to succeed, P2 believes that change must be a complete break from what schools do now. Other teachers did not express as firm a view on the change process, but offered observations that generally fell into two categories, paradigm break, and process.

**All change: educational change as a paradigm break.** Is the new curriculum of value only if it changes education completely? Many of those changes may be expensive and seem radical. Do we open up the grade levels, knock down the walls of classrooms, and mix and match disciplines in multidisciplinary projects? How do we go from the cost-efficient industrial classrooms that treat students as an undifferentiated group of 30 sitting in rows, to personalized learning and differentiation for each student in the school? Can some of these changes be done in steps, or is a clean break more effective? These are some of the questions that education theorists, and school district administrations, wrestle with during this period of 21st century educational reform.

For P2, the way to create “real systemic change” is to make a clean break with past models. When he has attempted, as a teacher leader, to initiate change such as team-teaching, he was told “you’ve got to learn to walk before you run.” “But when you do a paradigmatic change,
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you don’t take baby steps,” he explained. “You go from one paradigm, boom! And then you switch it.” However, such a shift, he believes, would require a bigger effort both inside the school system and in society than he is seeing. “Because the school system is so entrenched, it will take quite a movement in society before enough energy is generated to break the system and reform it.” For now, he believes nothing has changed:

We have the idea of change, but nothing will change until our industrial model of scheduling kids’ time changes, of a building that has little square boxes changes, of hierarchical accountability structures: we need to change those. We need to change the way we assess and label and judge kids. We’re trying to change. I guess the ways things have changed is that people have a new intention.

Just changing teaching and learning in the classrooms can be a big shift for teachers, but some have embraced a quicker process. “Why prolong the inevitable,” P3 said. “I thought, why not dive into this new curriculum rather than go back to something that’s going to change anyway.”

P4 sees the change as a change in “ideology” from “the carrot and stick approach we had before” which made students “jump through hoops” to demonstrate learning in only one way.

“But the ideological shift is that instead of us pushing and prodding, we’re just opening the door and saying, where are you going to go, what’s your choice here, and trying to get them to decide what they want their education to look like.” She noted she was already seeing the change happening in her classroom, with students understanding they were able to present their learning individually, and to choose their own way to show it.

Tweaking: educational change as a process. As P3 observed, the new curriculum is “definitely a work in progress,” and since it is in a trial period, it is understandable that teachers
were responding to the smaller steps they and others were taking, with an eye to the future. “I’m interested to see the evolution,” noted P4.

Some teachers may find comfort in an incremental approach to change. P5, a veteran of 30 years of changing education in BC, did not foresee a complete overturn of the system. “I think things are changing and they’re not changing, which is typical with whatever change we get. Pretty hard to throw out the baby with the bathwater. You have to retain something that you’ve done in the past.” He believes the people planning the curriculum are “retaining something that has been happening in the past,” and sees the change process as “tweaking” and adding some new things. “That’s what change is, right?”

He noted that the directions (he described it as a “checklist”) given to him from school leadership which explained some of the new curriculum requirements made the changes “doable.” “We are here in the trenches. We need to have specific things we can do with the students to get them through the course and make sure they’re being assessed correctly and prepared for the next year. Theoretical doesn’t cut it. We need to have things we can use.” He feels the new curriculum, as he understands it, is more effective and practical compared with more philosophical or “idealistic” English curricula in the past that might have been easier to ignore for some teachers. “But now, if they are getting more specific, and of course the key thing, tying it into assessment, people have to sit up and pay more attention to it, I think.” When asked if using the new curriculum would change his teaching styles, he answered “the teaching styles aren’t part of the curriculum. They’re just suggested methodologies, so I think you have to use what works. There’s no point in trying to use a method that doesn’t suit what you’re trying to accomplish.”
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The impact of the new curriculum on teaching methods is a concern for three of the teachers. P2 is worried that the new curriculum may be smoke and mirrors, rather than real change. “My discomfort comes when I see the new methods not being embraced in an authentic way. They’re being spoken of as if being done, and we’re taking old approaches, renaming them with the new language and thinking we’re doing the new curriculum and we’re not.” P4 notes that personalized learning and assessment will be “a little more tricky for teachers.” The new curriculum may help these changes happen in the senior grades, suggests P6, especially moving to more formative assessment. “I think that secondary school has needed a push of better teaching practices, so I think that’s a really good thing with the new curriculum, and hopefully it will.”

Hopes for change. Finally, the data would be incomplete without including teachers’ words on why they hope to see change. The idealism and enthusiasm of the teachers interviewed was often made obvious by their body language and voice tones, which are hard to communicate in text. For the teachers that imagine change, what do they hope to see?

P3 hoped that the focus on competencies will help her students make a difference in the world. “Those are life-skills, those aren’t Social Studies 10 skills. Those are skills that will carry on and make people better human beings. And then, if you get enough better human beings, you get a better world.” P4 wants her students to love learning of itself and for itself. She explained:

That idea that they care about their learning, and it feels valuable to them, I think that’s important, rather than they’re doing it because this is the hoop they have to jump through before they get to the university hoop that they have to jump through to get a job that they
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have to jump through. That they have some intrinsic value to their education. I think is very important.

P2 hoped that the Aboriginal ways of learning and knowing will become a significant part of the new curriculum changes, and stated:

I would appreciate it if more people said, Yeah, I’m open to those ways of knowing and being. The more ways of knowing and being, the more choices we have, the richer our understanding will be, and I just think the more open-minded and open-hearted we are, the more closely we can work with our fellow human beings in the world. That’s going to make us all stronger, and the new curriculum can help us get there, if we really do it. If we’re able to.

Discussion of Theme Three: Changing schools

Several of the teachers interviewed for this study explained they felt the new curriculum was necessary because the world is changing for their students. Students need to learn differently, and these teachers are test-driving some of the changes that are expected to change learning and change their classrooms. Some believed that the curriculum should be part of a more thorough shift in education that should happen all at once, and others saw it as a step-by-step process. While it was hard to plumb the depths of these teachers’ response to whole system educational change in a short interview that covered so much ground, the fact that they chose to include their concerns about the bigger picture is instructive to this study. This is especially useful, as the BC curriculum change is part of a wider-ranging global shift that has only been written about recently. In many ways, the BC educational reform plan is following some recent patterns, and in other ways, it is breaking new ground.
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Around the world, schools and school systems are wrestling with changing learning needs that could also dramatically restructure the cultures of schools, classrooms, and even the location, times, and calendar schedules of schooling (Robinson, 2010). If the BC new curriculum is hoping to create a truly personalized learning environment (BC Ministry of Education, 2015; Boyer and Crippen, 2014), the change could be significant and far-reaching. BC’s new curriculum contains the seeds of this kind of paradigmatic and tectonic shift, when it explores the flexible learning environments that may be needed to make it work (BC Ministry of Education, 2018g). Paradigm change is at the heart of P2’s hopes for the new curriculum: “But when you do a paradigmatic change, you don’t take baby steps. You go from one paradigm, boom! And then you switch it.” P2’s concern is that “it will take quite a movement in society before enough energy is generated to break the system and reform it.”

How fast and how complete does this change need to be? Is this an “evolution”, as one teacher suggests, or a “shift in ideology”, as another suggested? Is it a complete paradigm break, requiring an all-or-nothing leap, as a third teacher stated? Will the BC new curriculum die in the cradle, as did BC’s Year 2000 educational reforms of the late 1980s and early 90s, taking the dreams of enthusiastic and engaged teachers and learners with it? Or can a series of test-driven, experimentation and intentional trial-and-error lead the way to long-term whole system change over time?

The most comparable curricular change to the BC experience is the recent educational reform process in Alberta (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012). While both provinces invited teachers to lead the change, in Alberta the government explicitly supported the experimentation. This included teacher-led pilot projects funded by the province. The teachers in the current study did
Fullan and Quinn (2015) provide another framework to compare with the BC reform. The authors seek to counter the fragmentation and sense of overload that reforms of the past have brought to school systems. Their framework for effective educational change involves active leadership which focuses direction with clarity and purpose, and the building of collaborative cultures and capacity (such as professional capital) to support everyone involved in the change. Their goal is to deepen learning by focussing on competencies, and by using evidence and inquiry to improve instruction.

How does the BC reform measure up, at least according to the experiences reported by the participants of this current study? The impetus toward deepening learning is readily apparent, as the teachers described ways they were improving their practices. However, the teachers did not seem to see a focussed direction of clarity and purpose in the wider curricular change process. They also did not describe much collaboration with peers beyond a few discussions, and certainly not a school-wide new curriculum-engaged team among teachers, as advised by Fullan and Quinn (2015). They also did not discuss any determined capacity-building in their schools around the new curriculum. This does not mean those experiences were not happening, but just that they didn’t appear in the interviews.

Alternatively, the teachers did not express a sense of being mandated or directed in any heavy-handed way, beyond a memo describing some of the curricular changes. It is possible that all these things were occurring in the teachers’ schools. However, it seems unlikely that enthusiastic leadership support would be not be mentioned in some way by the interviewees, if it had been an important part of the test-driving experience. If this support did not happen, it could
be inferred that “hands-off” is very much the order of the day for the new BC curriculum, at least for these teachers.

What is interesting is that in this hands-off environment, the teachers of the present study did not react to the curriculum shift by stalling. Instead, they took the opportunity to test out the changes at their own pace. If this experience of quiet, paced, self-directed change by teachers succeeds in carrying the new curriculum through into the high school grades, it could provide a fascinating new model of laissez-faire, teacher-led whole system educational change. However, the literature reviewed for the current study suggests that without adequate support from leadership (through resources, collaboration, funding, and encouragement), all that might occur is a partial drift which will only influence some teachers and classrooms, without improving learning for all BC students.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of the Study

BC is undergoing a whole system educational reform following 21st century personalized learning principles. At the time of this study, implementation of the new curriculum at the high school level was two years away, and teachers were invited to try aspects of the new curriculum in their classrooms. This paper describes a narrative qualitative study in which six humanities teachers from BC high schools were interviewed about their experiences exploring the new BC draft curriculum for Grades 10 to 12. The purpose of the study was to learn what instructional strategies these teachers used to try out the draft high school curriculum, and whether, in their opinion, these practices and methods were helping students learn. Further, the study invited teacher observations of their interactions with the new curriculum, their reports of student responses, and teacher reflection on the process of this curriculum change. The data revealed three themes: students learning, teachers teaching, and managing change.

The interview responses indicated the participants not only embraced the coming changes but saw their efforts to incorporate the deeper learning focus of the new curriculum as having a positive impact on student engagement and success. The teachers showed a willingness, and
even an enthusiasm, toward test-driving the pedagogies of the new curriculum. They shared their belief that high school students were also becoming engaged with the experience. The students were not only willing to go along for the ride, but also to start gaining the skills to drive their learning themselves.

Conclusions

As a narrative inquiry, the current study follows the advice of Kaser and Halbert (2009) that “respectful deep listening, combined with thoughtful storytelling about new possibilities” can help teachers and other members of the learning community to “provide an increasingly open space for new, more positive stories to emerge” (p. 65). Many of the stories that were heard in this current study were admittedly positive. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the teachers interviewed were a small sample and volunteered to be part of the study to describe their experiences trying out the new BC curriculum. Their choice suggested they felt interested or at least comfortable discussing the new changes and that they were likely engaged in exploring it actively in their classrooms, so some positive bias could be inferred on the part of the interviewees. From the six teachers, there were no dissenting voices, and most were interested and positive, though one interviewee was neutral or at least guardedly accepting of the changes as he understood them. Because of this, the study should be seen to be less of a generalizable survey of BC high school humanities teacher attitudes, and more an insight into the mindsets of what Fullan and Quinn (2015) call “the early leapers” (p. 28), or the early adopters who are willing to take the risks.

When Boyer and Crippen (2014) took an early look at the BC reform, they recognized that teachers taking risks and experimenting would be pivotal to seeing the reform succeed. They called for teachers to celebrate and publicize their success stories. In Alberta, which has experienced the closest model to the BC reform, the education minister at the outset of the
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reform hoped that teachers and schools would celebrate and share their innovations. He also felt that they should be willing to accept failed experiments as an important part of the process (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). If the Alberta model of having teachers test-drive reforms in phased implementations has become a pattern to be followed, the participants of the current study, whether by design or by accident, were willing to go down that road, with or without enthusiastic leadership support.

The interviewed teachers' reason for incorporating new pedagogies and trying new instructional strategies always came back to student learning. Most of the teachers interviewed appeared to be passionately student-centred, as they were more interested in how their changing classrooms would help their students, than whether the changes would be convenient for their teaching workday. As one teacher noted, being open to students choosing how to show their learning means having to develop a variety of assessment practices. This means more work and more flexibility on the part of teachers willing to explore and activate the ideas in the new curriculum.

Did instructional strategies suggested by the new BC curriculum help students learn? The teachers not only saw the new curricular goals as being supportive of better student learning, but believed they were a needed improvement to make learning meaningful, engaging, and deep for students. By focussing on concepts over content, these humanities teachers felt free to go deeper, and to take more time and resources to explore important themes, including those that connected to local issues. Giving students more choice in their topics and in demonstrating their knowledge was seen to engage interest and even to empower students. Students were finding individual voice, enjoying their projects, gaining confidence, and becoming engaged in learning. Several teachers believed the new curriculum would help students from falling through the
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cracks because teachers had to improve their ongoing discussions of learning with each student in their class, as well as the parents. Assessing through competencies also personalized this communication, turning it into an ongoing discussion around learning progress, rather than just a tally of marks in a report card every semester.

The new impetus towards students owning their own learning was both exciting to teachers, because it improved student confidence and self-worth, and a source of concern. Teachers worried that, in these early stages of the reform, some high school students were already pushing back by refusing to take an active role in their learning and were not willing to alter their traditional expectations of learning. The teachers saw this as a puzzle worth solving and hoped the upcoming generation of students would be trained in self-assessment and competencies, so they would have the self-regulation needed to be empowered learners.

At these early stages in their test-driving, teaches were focussed on their own classrooms, and did not discuss any school-wide change they were seeing due to the new curriculum. One teacher noted that high school learning culture had long needed a push toward better teaching practices and assessment practices. The teachers shared worries that other teachers’ negative attitudes toward the new curriculum, or an inability for the education system to manage and embrace the change, would block meaningful reform.

Change was the thread that ran through all three themes of students learning, teachers teaching and managing change. Expectations of students are changing as they were being trained in self-regulation and metacognition on their way to becoming new kinds of learners within an environment of personalized learning. The roles of teachers are changing from stand-and-deliver lecturers, and worksheet and test-givers, to coaches and guides offering feedback through formative assessment. Teachers are offering more choices for students to explore their
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interests and show their learning through projects and inquiry. Schools are changing as students follow their interests out of the classroom and into flexible learning environments, including the outdoors and the community. These changes may be accelerating because of the new needs of learners in the 21st century, and perhaps because of the student-centred and student-empowering reforms embedded in the new curriculum.

Students are changing. For more personalized learning to succeed, the context for student learning will need to change to acculturate students into understanding learning as less rote and more reasoning. In the past, students have been asked to think of themselves as receivers of knowledge rather than as active researchers or even creators of knowledge. For the new curriculum goals of deeper and more personalized learning to succeed, students need to develop new identities of what it means to be a learner. The teachers interviewed suggested that students were responding energetically even to the first new freedoms on offer. The teachers were surprised and delighted by students who created a survey and then manipulated it, or the students who sang and performed their understanding of 19th century Canadian history.

Perhaps the new curriculum’s inferred criticism of rote learning through the push for competencies such as critical and creative thinking is allowing students to take stock of their own learning and realize they have the right to learn differently. The teachers interviewed heard students respond with surprise and appreciation to being able to make learning and assessment choices, being able to have their own voice, and being able to follow their own interests. For these high school students and teachers, this reaction was still at the test-driving stage before the new curriculum “goes live.” Should ideas of learner agency become widespread in the BC education system, one can imagine how quickly students may move to engage these changes in themselves and their classrooms, and to demand more freedom in how they learn.
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But not all students are ready to change their identity as learners, especially high school students who have been taught with traditional methods and expectations for years. The teachers expressed concerns over passive learning attitudes in some of their students. As the literature reviewed, students who are engaged in personalized, project and inquiry education first need to learn how to learn before they can be successful as lifelong learners ready to adapt to an uncertain and rapidly-evolving society and workplace. Self-regulation, developed through competencies and strengthened through self-assessment, is the key to empowering students to make meaningful choices about their learning.

It has been more difficult for some older high school students to accept these new responsibilities and this new learning identity, but the teachers interviewed believe they see their younger students, who have had two years of elementary experience with the new curriculum, making the transition with growing confidence. These younger students seem to be quickly incorporating the competency-driven, concept-based model and embracing the freedom and relevance of project and inquiry learning. They are responding positively and skillfully to self-assessment, and rapidly embracing self-regulation as they learn how to learn.

Teachers are changing. Prior to the introduction of the new curriculum, the teachers interviewed had already been working with formative assessment, with project-based learning, and with the use of self-assessment to help students track their own learning goals. They had already begun to investigate inclusion of Aboriginal materials. Because they had embraced student-centered classrooms as a given, even some of the newer ideas such as competencies did not phase them. In the interviews, they talked about how they were incorporating these ideas smoothly into their ways of teaching, assessing, and communicating with students and parents.
The new curriculum is giving these teachers an official licence to drive the way they had wanted to all along. Swept along by their own hopes for improving student learning, encouraged by the growing engagement and interest of their students, and excited by how fun and relevant their classrooms are becoming, the “early leapers” were already planning new ideas to test-drive for the coming semester. Students are helping to change teachers as well. As students become more skilled and confident with inquiry and project or problem-based learning, teachers will be asked to step aside more often, and act as supporters of learning, as mentors, coaches, guides and even as co-learners. These changes are not immediately affecting all high school teachers in the system, but the teachers interviewed are some of the ‘early leapers.’ Their efforts and successes will be watched by others. If the BC curriculum reform is largely teacher-led, as was hinted at by the data, the stories of teachers like these will be important to convince other educators and educational leaders who may be uncertain about the reform.

Schools are changing. Personalized learning means students can learn anytime and anywhere, especially with the use of information and communication technology. The structures of schooling, including everything from the design of the buildings, to timetables, calendars, contracts, and community involvement, face deep challenges if the 21st century learning curriculum moves forward to full implementation. The disruptive nature of personalized learning has the potential to open schools into learning communities, rather than just learning institutions.

While observed data was not part of the study, the researcher, who worked as a teacher teaching on-call in these schools while writing this thesis, noted more students using learning commons and open learning spaces, or taking their projects to computer labs, drama rooms and tech labs, rather than staying in their assigned classrooms. Another example observed a few
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months after the interviews was a powerful community project that brought First Nations and non-First Nations students together to interview First Nations elders at community locations to create a book of poetry about the elders’ life experiences. In a third example, he observed Grade 8’s presenting inquiry projects to each other during an afternoon. They showed an independence and engagement in their projects, and a support for each other’s presentations, that was encouraging for the future of this style of learning. Even though the new BC curriculum is still in its early phases for high schools, these many changes, and the successful deep learning they are bringing to classrooms, continue apace, and the test-driving by individual teachers seems to be accelerating it down the road.

Critical Reflections and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has changed greatly in intent and in expected outcome from when it started. At that time, it was meant to be a collection of inspiring teaching stories about interesting ideas teachers were creating with respect to the new curriculum, and how students in the classroom were responding. At the time, the author had most recently been teaching adult education, and was fascinated by the new curriculum ideas and how they could change teaching in both the public and post-secondary environment. This began a learning process around evidence-based learning and teaching; 21st century learning; project, problem, and inquiry learning; and an ever-widening list of other connected topics. As the author’s understanding of the new curriculum and educational reform grew, and as the context of the study expanded to encompass teacher explorations of curricular change, some limitations became apparent, especially around the original questions asked of the interviewees.

In retrospect, this study would have been improved by more focussed questions such as those used by the 2017 BCTF survey. More specific questions could have explored how well the
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high school teachers understood or were incorporating new curriculum ideas such as personalized learning, inquiry, and core competencies. Another area that would have been important to investigate would be how much support teachers were receiving from school and district leadership. Further questions concerning collaboration within the school would have shown whether the teachers saw their test-drives as part of a wider journey they were having alongside other teachers, or trailblazing alone in their classroom.

Because of its phased progress, the BC reform provides a fascinating opportunity for researching whole system educational change as it happens. An extension of the current study to interview high school teachers across the province and in all disciplines about their changing practices would be informative, especially if pursued further into the trial period or even in the first few years of implementation. A longitudinal study in this regard would also be interesting to explore teacher, students, and even parental responses to educational reform. How are high school teachers using inquiry and project-based learning in subjects which require particularly rigorous skill and knowledge sets such as chemistry, physics, and math? Are BC high school teachers finding effective ways to encourage interdisciplinary inquiries that are deep and effective learning experiences for students? How are teachers exploring flexible competency-driven assessment at the senior levels, and what consequences is this having for students trying to meet post-secondary requirements?

Further explorations into leadership issues around the educational reform in BC would be informative. What leadership choices are districts making to support and encourage these reforms at the high school level? What kind of capacity-building is in place to support teachers and school leaders through these changes? What kinds of leadership networks are occurring at the district level to develop a “lead from the middle” approach to reform?
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The changing role of students in 21st century learning has great potential for further research, especially in BC. Are students changing, as several of this current study’s teachers suggest? How quickly are students building the self-regulative skills needed for personalized learning? Are intermediate students who are coming into high schools at the junior level ready for new curriculum learning (and if they are, are the high school teachers ready for the skills and expectations these students bring)? How much collaborative learning is going on in high school classrooms, how effective is it as a learning strategy (for content or for competencies), and is it increasing? How are BC high schools indigenizing their curriculum, at what speed, with what success, and with what challenges?

Recommendations for Teachers

The recommendations below focus on two suggestions for teachers, especially for high school teachers preparing for new curriculum implementation in BC. However, the suggestions may also be relevant to any teachers interested in 21st century learning reforms which they might be experiencing in their schools. The recommendations reflect the results and discussion of this study but are also grounded in prior research.

The first recommendation for teachers seeking to get a feel for how the new curriculum handles is: take it for a test drive. As the teachers in this study showed, there’s no need to go out and buy the whole package with all the bells and whistles. They just tried one project or one idea, to see how the students would respond. As the teachers in this study showed, test-driving the curriculum and exploring ways to engage deeper learning do not require heroic actions or hundreds of planning hours. Some of the projects the teachers described were planned on the proverbial “back of a napkin.” A few of the successful ideas that transformed their classes were the act of a moment. The simple activity of inviting students to help create a social studies
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course outline by brainstorming their interests helped improve student engagement throughout a semester. Teaching students to assess their own English assignments and to plan their next learning steps not only seems to be an empowering lesson in life-long learning, it may even reduce teacher marking. If nothing else, the new curriculum is about teachers giving up control to students and their learning choices. Once students have been taught research and planning skills, their engagement with projects and inquiries can free teacher time and redirect it to guiding and coaching. For the participants of this study, the new curriculum gave them permission to be the teachers they wanted to be. More significantly, the new curriculum’s most important impact may be to give students freedom to be the students they want to be.

The second recommendation to teachers is, you don’t have to do this alone. The teachers in this study seemed to be doing their test-driving on their own, and largely relying on their own understanding of the new curriculum. They did not seem to be part of a school-wide or district-wide effort, and they didn’t mention being funded as part of a provincially-supported pilot project. There has been extensive research in education describing how collaboration within communities of practice (such as professional learning communities) is the key to constant improvement through inquiry and experiment. The spiral inquiry model by Kaser and Halbert (2009) is just one popular example of how teachers work together on action research in their classrooms and schools. By sharing ideas and teaching experiments with peers, teachers can build a wider repertoire without having to do all the planning themselves. By sparking off each other’s ideas, and then testing and reporting the results to each other, teachers can build on each other’s energy and knowledge. In this way, a community of teachers becomes a community of co-learners.
Meanwhile, why not include students as active researchers alongside teachers in these collaborative efforts? Who has more of a stake in their own learning? Schools have long been institutions of hierarchy and control, but personalized learning has the potential to demolish this old top-down structure and create a more democratic experience. One possibility of transformation would see teachers become co-learners with their students, rather than directors and controllers of student instruction.

**Implications for Leadership**

As mentioned earlier, the teachers interviewed gave little indication of any role played by school or district leadership in their explorations of the new curriculum. The newer teachers mentioned that they had not been teaching in the first years the curriculum information was being discussed and thought they may have missed information that had gone to teachers in the district. A veteran teacher noted that he had a list of curricular directions given to him by school administration which he could follow. Whether this means that the teachers were not getting direct and energetic support from leadership around the new curriculum is not clear. However, one might assume that such support would rate at least a positive mention in the interview as the teachers described their experiences.

The first consideration towards a successful implementation of the new BC curriculum goes beyond the decision-making power of school or district leadership. More targeted Ministry of Education funding support for teacher-designed pilot projects would go a long way towards showing a commitment to the new curriculum and to the significant role of teachers in this reform. Since the new curriculum is focussed on transforming classrooms with a goal toward deeper learning, it is largely a teacher-driven reform, and will stand or fall on whether teachers are supported towards these goals. As the present study showed, there are teachers willing to be
curriculum developers and active classroom researchers, rather than just curriculum practitioners, but there are limits to what they can do on their own. As Fullan and Quinn (2015) stress, this kind of ad hoc patchwork reform is unsustainable and incoherent, no matter how much enthusiasm these teachers can sustain for it. Alberta’s funding of teacher-designed pilot projects (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012) is one successful model that could be engaged to keep the new curriculum driving forward.

One BC-grown initiative that could provide a model of how to handle these pilot projects is the Networks of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII), led by Kaser and Halbert. It is a voluntary, inquiry-based network of schools which is funded by the BC Ministry of Education. According to the NOII website, “(p)articipating schools develop a question to address through their inquiry, collaborate with colleagues through regional meetings, and share case studies in a spirit of generosity and curiosity” (NOII, 2018). NOII has been in operation since 2000 as an independent support but has established and proved itself throughout the province as an effective way to improve learning through collaboration. Perhaps it is time to fully fund this project as a formalized province-wide Ministry initiative.

Other initiatives that could be considered at the district level are the development of voluntary teacher teams, where teachers could plan and then teach lessons together. By observing another teacher teaching a jointly planned lesson, they could work together to refine it, and then teach and observe the improved lesson again. In this way, a catalogue of peer-reviewed lessons could be published and presented to others throughout the district and province.

As mentioned earlier, the interviewees rarely mentioned direct support from school or district leadership in their work with new curriculum ideas. With so little time left until full implementation in the high schools, it might be assumed that educational leaders would be
offering clear, constant, and thorough direction about how schools and the district were moving forward with these dramatic changes, but it seems such direction may not have been offered to these teachers. One of Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2012) requirements for successful Fourth Way educational reform is that leaders should “communicate incessantly” (p. 179). The authors point to Finland where educators developed a collective responsibility around solving school problems; to Singapore where “intensive interaction” is the hallmark of an energetic school culture; and to a poverty-stricken but highly successful school in England whose leaders “took the time to communicate their vision to everyone—even the lowliest substitute teachers, and the learning mentors from the community” (p. 179).

The new curriculum classroom transformations are about letting go of control and allowing freedom of choice for student learners. It would be consistent with the philosophy of the new curriculum for leadership to work alongside teachers on a more equal footing. Transparency and open communication is one way to share the control of curricular change with all the stakeholders, including teachers, staff, parents, and students.

Another key element which can sustain educational improvement during reform is the development of professional capital within schools through capacity building and collaboration (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012). Capacity building is key to sustaining the efforts of reform over years. By helping teachers and leaders gain the skills to engage in curriculum development and shared inquiry, the learning community grows together through sharing research and innovations.

Reform-supporting leaders benefit by building relationships, being transparent, and building collaborative cultures where they learn with the group, both as models of learning and mentors (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). This collaboration can be encouraged within schools, but also
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between schools and districts, helping to spread some of the classroom ideas of teachers who are test-driving new curriculum ideas.

While many of the ideas above pertain to educational leaders at many levels, how can a school leader help support test-drivers like the ones interviewed for this study? Recent whole system reform thinkers believe that educational change does not have to come all at once, and leaders do not have to be responsible for full-scale measures to initiate change. As we saw in this study, it might be enough just to crack open the door to student choice and learning freedom, for the transformation to gain its own momentum, changing students, teachers, and schools completely. Fullan and Quinn (2015) describe the first steps a change leader can take towards encouraging the learning community to begin shifting practices. Not all teachers have the confidence to change all at once, and as the teachers in this study show, changing all at once is not necessary or even required. The authors recommend these steps to support the “leap” to deeper learning in classrooms:

- Foster clarity of the purpose for the leap and specificity of the destination
- Support the early leapers, and learn from their attempts
- Build the capacity of others to leap with support.
- Create a culture of collaboration where leaping can be nurtured.
- Recognize successes at leaping at all points of the journey. (p. 28)

The authors add that “we need to make the journey of change vivid for people…a catalyst to have honest conversations about their worries, desires for change, and their needs for support” (p. 29).

In conclusion, stories such as those told by the teachers in this study begin to make the journey vivid for both other teachers and educational leaders. These stories could give leaders
some context as to where and how they can start to support “early leapers” in high schools in the first years of implementation of the new BC curriculum. From the results of this study, this support, encouragement, and collaboration can fuel more test-driving which will build the confidence of teachers and students, helping to develop and sustain effective educational reform.
References


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Retrieved from: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/teach/teaching-tools/aboriginal-education


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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1) Please describe your teaching career to date, including communities you’ve taught in.
   a. When did you start teaching?
   b. Why did you become a humanities teacher?
2) Describe how you understand the new curriculum.
3) How are you finding the changes to the curriculum?
   a. How comfortable are you with working with the new curriculum?
   b. What do you think about these changes?
   c. How have these changes affected you and your classrooms?
   d. How are you dealing with the changes?
4) How do you feel these changes are affecting the way students learn in your class?
   a. What does your classroom look like?
   b. What did you see/hear the students doing that told you the students were learning?
   c. Is there a specific example of student learning that you could share with me?
   d. Do you have any other thoughts about the curriculum that you would like to add to this discussion?