

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTED BY THE CANADA STUDIES FOUNDATION

R. D. Carswell reports the “findings of a survey of published and unpublished documents produced by and about teacher developers, to determine what professional and personal changes are reported as a result of involvement in projects supported by the Canada Studies Foundation.”¹ The concept of “changes” does not necessarily imply their desirability or even necessity, but given the story Carswell tells, it seems so here. This was an era where, at least in the United States, educators sometimes showed up at conferences wearing badges proclaiming they were Change Agents. While those badges referenced curriculum reform, they also implied the wearers possessed professional-personal agency, able to effect institutional change, the personal part a consequence of psycho-social development,² in Carswell’s terms, those “professional and personal changes” that followed “involvement in projects supported by the Canada Studies Foundation.”³

“Since its inception,” Carswell reports, the Canada Studies Foundation had developed “programs that involve the classroom teacher at every stage of planning and implementation in the curriculum development process.”⁴ The Foundation followed the National History Project and its report on the teaching of Canadian history, civics, and social studies - *What Culture? What Heritage?* – which had criticized teachers for the “poor quality of civic education.”⁵ Carswell tells us that “this depressing state of affairs was attributed to a combination of stereotyped and highly inflexible approaches to the study of Canada and insufficient and often inadequate teaching materials,” to which the Canada Studies Foundation responded (in phase 1: 1970-75) by “encouraging the production of Canadian studies materials leading to greater understanding of Canada and its problems,” involving “practising classroom teachers” in doing so.⁶ Foundation officials “hypothesized that placing the teacher at the centre of curriculum development would overcome the seeming paralysis of teachers in the area of Canadian studies.”⁷ Carswell himself recommended that the Foundation “evaluate changes in teacher developers, especially in the areas of knowledge of and attitudes towards Canada and improvement in teaching ability, that occurred as outcomes of involvement in curriculum development.”⁸

“What was new in Canada Studies Foundation projects,” Carswell continues, “was that development teams were expected to follow the curriculum-development process from the selection of objectives or intended learning outcomes to dissemination of products and processes,” as teachers were granted “monetary and professional support and the decision-making responsibility to engage in research, formulation of objectives, development and/or selection of materials and teaching strategies, field-testing procedures, evaluation techniques, and in-service education of other teachers.”⁹ Teachers, then, were positioned as “professional leaders with expertise in curriculum development.”¹⁰

“Outcomes” were mixed; Carswell starts with “some of the less positive outcomes,” among them teachers feeling “time pressures, neglect of the classroom, and poor public relations,” not exactly minor, despite Carswell’s characterization of them as “less positive.”¹¹

Almost a third of teachers surveyed reported experiencing “some hindrance in their professional growth.”¹² Curiously, Carswell appears to blame teachers, alleging that “teachers do not realize the amount of time that will be involved and that, even with released time, some re-allocation of their time resources will need to be made.”¹³ Why this isn’t the Foundation’s fault isn’t obvious, as planning (specifically the provision of adequate time) and making adjustments during the project (increasing teachers’ released time) could have addressed these issues. Insufficient time led to the other two outcomes - neglect of classrooms and poor public relations – although the latter also involved (perhaps due to insufficient time) participants’ colleagues, as most teachers surveyed reported “problems with helping other teachers understand their projects,” something that also occurred with staff and school authorities.¹⁴ Professional jealousy also seems to be in play here; project participants requested “programs designed to improve their skills in human relations,”¹⁵ an understandable but unnecessary request had school authorities reprimanded those guilty of unprofessional conduct. Perhaps such issues surfaced less on the two coasts of the country, as Carswell reports that “Canada West teachers and Newfoundland members of Project Atlantic Canada were more positive towards curriculum use and planning than the matched comparison groups.”¹⁶

“In terms of professional self-improvement,” Carswell reports, “project teachers found that they had considerably improved their skills in and knowledge of curriculum development,” a finding confirmed by an external evaluation.¹⁷ Enthusiasm ensued.¹⁸ My enthusiasm ebbed when I learn that the “skills” teachers reported learning “more knowledge about and improvement in were deriving and stating objectives ... developing instructional techniques ... developing and using evaluation techniques,” and “skill in communication and group techniques,”¹⁹ all distractions (it seems to me) from learning what to say (e.g. “content”), surely one invaluable outcome for those who appreciate they are the primary participants in the complicated conversation that is curriculum.²⁰ Content does come into play, as Carswell reports (relying on the external evaluation referenced in his essay) that almost all curriculum “developers (98%) judged that they had an increased knowledge of and interest in Canada,” having engaged in “extensive reading and research to improve their knowledge of Canada.”²¹ Many developers attended conferences and discussed their work with other teachers from across Canada, events, Caswell reports, that “increased their understanding of other regions.”²² My scepticism surfaces when he ups the ante even more, telling us that “not only did teachers become more competent in a professional way, but many claimed that they were more capable people and had more self-confidence after their experience in curriculum development.”²³ I’ve no data to doubt the claim, but it seems suspiciously exuberant, although maybe here I’m a victim of our own present-day cynicism concerning “success.” Carswell continues: “Involvement in curriculum development certainly seemed to increase morale and provide considerable satisfaction to the participants.”²⁴ Perhaps “satisfaction” sometimes inflated into “pride,”²⁵ if so a fact that could help explain the irritation of colleagues cited above.

Despite suffering insufficient time, teacher-curriculum developers were reported as “more research oriented, perceived the need for research and theory, used a theoretical base, and had more appreciation of the need for curriculum theory than they had before becoming involved in curriculum development.”²⁶ What curriculum theory interested participants is implied when Carswell writes: “Involvement in curriculum-development projects appears to convince most teachers that a knowledge of theory and research in curriculum may be useful

to help them achieve specific tasks associated with curriculum development.”²⁷ While a few participants reported that their involvement had been “detrimental to their classroom behavior ... most of the participants felt that their teaching had improved and their students had benefited from involvement in CSF-sponsored projects,” a feeling following “deeper knowledge of children's abilities and needs, better questioning techniques, more use of inquiry approaches, simulation games, role playing, discussion, interviewing, and audio-visual aids to a stronger and broader grasp of content to be taught.”²⁸ Teacher-curriculum developers “sensed a greater interest and growth in learning in their students as they were involved in using, evaluating, and improving materials and processes developed by the teachers.”²⁹ Carswell concludes:

[M]ost teachers experienced personal and professional growth, felt pride and satisfaction with their involvement, were predisposed to bring about change in education, were more concerned about educational research and theory, and reported improvement in their teaching with increased benefits for their students. Certainly, the Canada Studies Foundation has achieved the aim of involving classroom teachers in the curriculum-development process, and, as a consequence, sparked considerable personal and professional growth in the participants.³⁰

Aside from the U.S.-based Eight-Year Study,³¹ I’ve never seen reported such enthusiasm for a teacher-focused curriculum development project.

COMMENTARY

If this project were the almost unqualified success R.D. Carswell reports it to be, I am amazed it has not continued non-stop, if not funded by the CSF – it disbanded in 1986³² - then by Ottawa and/or provincial ministries of education. After all, the question of Canada remains very much in play, not only educationally but politically, economically, and culturally. While not doubting the survey results Carswell reports, I would have liked to speak with participants, maybe discovering more about those undermining issues – time constraints, neglect of their classroom duties, and professional jealousies – they experienced. After all, even Carswell admits that almost a third of teachers surveyed reported experiencing “some hindrance in their professional growth.” That is a significant percentage. I’d like to know more. After all, surveys can’t convey lived experience; that requires ethnographies, autobiographical-narrative inquiries, or perhaps *métissage*.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Carswell 1977, 35.

² Fifty years ago, the phrase denoted not economic but political and personal “development.” See, for example, Hampden-Turner 1968.

³ Carswell 1977, 35.

⁴ Carswell 1977, 35.

⁵ Hodgetts 1968, 110; quoted in Carswell 1977, 35.

⁶ Carswell 1977, 36.

⁷ Carswell 1977, 36. Placing teachers as the centre of curriculum development reminds us of the work of Miriam Ben-Peretz (see research brief #55) and of Jesse Newlon, whose involvement of teachers in curriculum development in Denver, Colorado during the early 1920s – the so-called Denver Plan – is also associated with the founding of the field of curriculum in the United States.

<https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2294/Newlon-Jesse-1882-1941.html>

Accessed January 25, 2021.

⁸ Carswell 1977, 36.

⁹ Carswell 1977, 36. As the reference to Newlon in endnote 7 indicates, there is nothing new about involving teachers in curriculum development, not in North

America in any case, and using concepts as “objectives” and “evaluation” had been standard practice for decades.

¹⁰ Carswell 1977, 36.

¹¹ Carswell 1977, 37.

¹² Carswell 1977, 37.

¹³ Carswell 1977, 38.

¹⁴ Carswell 1977, 38.

¹⁵ Carswell 1977, 38.

¹⁶ Carswell 1977, 39.

¹⁷ Carswell 1977, 39.

¹⁸ Carswell 1977, 39.

¹⁹ Carswell 1977, 39.

²⁰ Pinar 2015, 109.

²¹ Carswell 1977, 39.

²² Carswell 1977, 39.

²³ Carswell 1977, 39. “More capable” and experiencing “self-confidence” are vernacular and very partial elements of psycho-social development (referenced above), and point to the significance of the state of the person for professional practice, an insight inspiring narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), studies in life history (Goodson 2018), and autobiography (Miller 2005).

²⁴ Carswell 1977, 40.

²⁵ Carswell 1977, 40.

²⁶ Carswell 1977, 40.

²⁷ Carswell 1977, 40-41.

²⁸ Carswell 1977, 41.

²⁹ Carswell 1977, 41.

³⁰ Carswell 1977, 41.

³¹ Pinar 2010. Lawrence Stenhouse’s (2006) Humanities Project might well be a third.

³² <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canada-studies-foundation>

Accessed January 24, 2021.