

Challenges Faced by Educators Implementing Programs that Promote Personalized Learning

by

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## **Abstract**

This project is designed as an investigation into the challenges that educators have faced when starting programs which promote personalized learning and that take place primarily outside of the traditional classroom. The two locally developed programs that are the focus of this project, Outdoor Adventures 11 and Stream to Sea 11, provide students with the opportunity to explore areas of personal interest and receive graduation credits in both academic and elective courses. The teachers each experienced similar challenges in the implementation of their respective programs. Both were burdened with unmanageable administrative duties which were exacerbated by the need to access funding from outside the public school system. In the final chapter of this M Ed project are three key recommendations for teachers and administrators looking to successfully implement programs of a similar nature.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Prior to starting this program, I had little notion as to what curriculum actually entailed. I supposed that it was the government I.R.P.'s and the various resources that were supplied by the school, such as textbooks. As I became more experienced, I added my own units and materials for those units to the courses that I taught in order to spice up my teaching repertoire. Several years back I created an English unit where students developed skills identifying figurative language through a look at M.L.K. Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. That was my vision of curriculum. However, each day and perhaps each hour has broadened my understanding of what curriculum encompasses. It's like the proverb of the fish not really thinking about water because it's always in it. Once the fish is removed from the water it realizes that it's water. I hadn't given curriculum much thought until I was pulled out of the classroom and asked to look at it from a different perspective. It encompasses so much more than what I had previously thought.

On the first day of this program, our instructor informed us that curriculum could even include the physical plant, how our classroom was set up, the feeling of the school, etc.. In particular, this opened my eyes to the world of curriculum. Each journal article has provided me with a new perspective, a new understanding, and often a pearl. Some of the articles reminded me of my strengths as a teacher while others reminded me what it is that I need to change in order to improve what I have the power to improve about curriculum. With this in mind, it is my practices as a classroom teacher that I wanted to look at in greater detail, hoping to explore my curricular autobiography in the areas of classroom management, development of teacher-student relationships, and the aesthetics of my classroom. In other words, how do my teaching practices in these areas shape the taught curriculum in my classroom and where do I go from here?

## **What is My Management Style?**

I wonder how much my classroom management style affects the students' learning. As educators we may belong to the same union, work in the same province, the same district, the same school, even the same discipline but certainly don't share the same management techniques. I was most fortunate to have as one of my sponsor teachers Tom Morton. Tom taught social studies at John Oliver Secondary; he was a published scholar who embraced Kagan's cooperative learning model. As a result, I was immersed into Kagan's world as a student teacher and it has shaped my management style ever since because of the structural nature of his program (Kagan, 1992).

I understand how my management style affects my attitude toward teaching. With effective classroom management one is free to teach and enjoy it to the fullest. There is nothing more frustrating than being prevented from teaching because you are too busy managing unruly students. What exactly is my management style? I suppose you could say that above all I try to be fair with my students and use a discipline with dignity approach. I try to be consistent with my behavioral expectations and consequences but understand that not every situation requires the consequences to be black and white. I also try to create an environment that facilitates learning (both scholastic and life skills).

It didn't take long for me to realize that one of the most important values held by students is fairness. In some cases it can instantly turn them off as quick as a light switch. Perhaps this awareness of the importance placed on the teacher being fair comes from my own views growing up. What do I do to create this balance? I am open about what is fair and what is equitable.

Part of being fair entails having consistent expectations and consequences. In many ways this is the piece that is panoptic. This is due to the fact that my students know that they could be

seen by me but more importantly, they could be seen by their peers. I have a set of rules that are fair to everyone as well as consequences that are effective in reducing transgressions. I only allow water and gum in my room because (I tell the students) I live in the room all day and I don't want to clean up their mess. I expect students to be in their seats ready to learn at the final bell. However, if a student had a legitimate reason for being late, they were excused. I expect that if a student is late that they don't make a big production (because I don't) and that they never walk in front of me while I'm teaching. Another important expectation/rule is that only one person can speak at a time. I tell my students at the beginning of the year that my biggest pet peeve is people talking while I'm teaching. This also applies to them. If one of them is asking a question or giving their point of view, other students must wait to respond. As an aside, I find that many teachers have difficulty following this rule. So what then are the consequences? Years ago a colleague returned from an exchange in Australia and brought with him a set of writing tasks that were used when students erred in their ways. If they broke a rule, they copied out a page of rhetoric about why/what they did was wrong (boring). My brilliant wife suggested that I use literature as my tool for consequences. Therefore, if you are unable to arrive to class at the appropriated hour you receive a "fun file" to be completed after class. The task is to copy out Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* (needless to say there are a disproportionate number of Campbell Riverites who can recite Mr. Frost's poem). This approach reduces the need for me to manage behaviors, thus making my attitude toward teaching a positive one. The students enjoy seeing their classmates completing the task and actively point out their peer's transgressions.

Creating an environment that is conducive to learning has always been one of my goals and it is an important element of my management style. I tell my students that if there is just one student that needs a quiet room in which to concentrate they have the right to a quiet room in

which to concentrate. So, my expectation is that the classroom is quiet and it is. Of course, some activities require that several people be talking at once (group discussions or Think Pair Share). I feel that this style of classroom management or hidden curriculum enhances both student learning and my effectiveness as a teacher.

### **How Do I Develop Relationships?**

Aoki (1992/2005) talked of ‘pedagogical thoughtfulness’ and ‘pedagogical watchfulness’ and this thrilled me because that has similarities to my style as a teacher. Developing relationships between students and teachers is an important piece of the curriculum as far as I’m concerned and I feel that has an effect on my strengths as an educator.

How do I develop relationships with my students? One thing that is important is to establish boundaries. There is a limit to how much information is exchanged. For example, not sharing information with students that could emotionally burden them. Likewise it is best not to ask questions of a deeply personal nature. Once boundaries are established it frees one up to create a relationship between the teacher and the student.

In many ways I am an open book. I share my personal life with my students. This helps to humanize me in my role as a teacher. I share funny stories about my family; I have pictures and artwork created by my daughter on the wall by my desk. I share my roller coaster ride with the Vancouver Canucks. I share my past, telling funny stories of when I was younger. I even have a few photos on the wall of my classroom from when I was in high school. They have fun trying to pick me out of the team picture, and even more fun seeing me with hair. Two years ago our family bought a labradoodle puppy. The students enjoy hearing of his exploits, what he’s destroyed or how he’s growing so quickly. All of this helps them see Mr. Patterson as a real



person not some bald, middle-aged teacher prattling on about John Locke's influence on modern democratic thought.

Letting the students see me as a real person is not enough to develop a relationship, caring about them is the key. Lewkowich (2012) talks about the importance of "loving gestures of recognition and care" (p. 467). I try to pay attention to what is going on in my students' lives both in school and out. I watch, I observe and I listen. I watch for signs, body language or mood. Is there something going on in their day that will affect their learning? I observe how they interact with their peers or how their peers interact with them. Are they being bullied in that quiet way that is so prevalent. I listen to what is going on outside of my room or outside of school. Often students forget that you are around when they are talking to each other or they simply want to share with you their lives outside of the classroom. I encourage students to share their concerns with me and they know that I have their best interests at heart. I feel that creating strong teacher-student relationships has a positive effect on the learning environment.

### **How Do the Aesthetics of My Classroom Affect Student Learning?**

The aesthetics of the classroom often reflect the teacher, their style and their personality. This is true with the aesthetics of my room. The room at my new school has a cathedral ceiling with windows facing the forest at one end and windows facing a pod of classrooms at the other. I wonder sometimes if the room itself creates an aura of academia because of the architecture. Regardless, what I have done to that room most certainly plays a role in my curriculum.

The way that I keep my room organized is a reflection of my teaching style and the expectations that I place on my students. The class is neat and orderly. The desks are in rows, neatly adjusted for the next group. The bookshelves full of novels, magazines and resources are kept tidy despite the efforts of a few to disorganize them. My own desk, which goes from being

covered with papers to being cleared, much like the daily tides, remains organized with stacks of student works.

How I have decorated my room was determined in part by the wall space available. I have used an eclectic collection of visuals to grace the room. Several pieces of framed art such as my grandmother's Mona Lisa, an etching of a coronation from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a recent portrait on Queen Elizabeth II reflect the social studies curriculum as do several national geographic posters. Shakespeare and M.L.K., Jr. posters reflect the English curriculum. Several maps around the room continue to supplement the curriculum. As I mentioned earlier, I also display personal items such as photos of myself or family (there is a Christmas picture of Santa and my three children displayed in the window beside the door; Santa is sitting on my oldest son's knee). Student works also appear on some of the walls, used mainly as exemplars.

I feel that the aesthetics of my classroom play a major role in my hidden curriculum. When students from other classes follow a friend into my room during transitions, I enjoy noting their reaction. In a way, it's like watching someone enter a museum for the first time; they exhibit a sense of awe or wonder, scanning the room to take it all in.

### **Where Do I Go Now?**

My purpose for enrolling in this program was to grow in a new direction as an educator. I have been teaching in the public school system since the fall of 1996 and still have at least a dozen more years before I retire. There are many areas in which I feel that I have already grown as a teacher but there are areas that are yet untapped. Throughout this program I have been introduced or re-introduced to a smorgasbord of ideas which have already impacted my teaching practices. The area that I have chosen to focus on the immediate future is enhancing my curricular practices with a greater array of tools or strategies in order to promote personalized

learning. In the past, I have too often seen 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, the goal of the BC Ministry of Education, as unattainable because of the many obstacles in our underfunded public school system. However, I believe it is possible for me to enhance my current curriculum toward personalized learning within that system. I am excited about the challenges and possibilities that lay ahead.

I will begin with a review of the literature concerning personalized learning in order to establish a working definition, how it is implemented in the school system and finally, challenges that arise in its successful promotion. The focus of this project is a study of two programs currently running at our high school. Both programs, Outdoor Adventures 11 and Stream to Sea 11, utilize personalized learning and take students out of the traditional classroom for much of the time. Each program is unique, however they share many of the same challenges such as funding and administrative duties which place an enormous burden on the educators involved. Finally, I will present the reader with recommendations based on the findings of this study.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The British Columbia Ministry of Education is in the process of implementing a new graduation learning plan (GLP) that will entail significant use of personalized learning as students will create their own capstone project (starting in grade 10) in order to fulfill their graduation requirements. The ministry is also working toward changes to the curriculum and assessment practices in order to facilitate greater opportunities for personalized learning. Recently, the Campbell River School District unveiled its strategic plan for 2014-2018 in a twelve page booklet complete with colourful photographs of various school-related activities. Outlined were four strategic focuses in order to meet the goals of the plan. The first focus is “safe, caring and engaging learning environments” (p. 8); the second is “personalized learning opportunities” (p.9); the third is “enhanced facilities for learning” (p. 10); the final strategic focus is “strengthen and expand community relations” (p. 11). This project will look at the strategic focus of personalized learning opportunities. Specifically, what is personalized learning, how it can be implemented, and the challenges of implementation.

### **Definition**

What is personalized learning? In many of the conversations that I have had with my colleagues about personalized learning, they often confuse it with individualized learning or differentiated instruction. They are unclear with the distinction of each method or tool that can be used for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. If we are to move toward a progressive reform of our public education system there needs to be clarity about what personalized learning really is and how it is substantially different from individualized learning and differentiated instruction.

Personalized learning is not individualized learning. Individualized learning focuses the learning being the sole responsibility of the teacher where the teacher tailors each lesson, assignment or project for the individual students within the classroom (Courcier, 2007). With the current BC public school practice of having overcrowded, inclusive classrooms, that would be a daunting task for any classroom teacher. Nor is personalized the same as differentiated instruction. While it is part of personalized learning it only applies to teaching and learning inside the classroom (Courcier, 2007). It is a tool that can be employed to help you apply personalized learning much like the variety of strategies used in cooperative learning for example.

What then is personalized learning? Benson & Childress (2014) refer to it as the “student learning experiences... what they learn, and how, when and where they learn it...is tailored to their individual needs, skills and interests, and the school allows them to take ownership of their learning” (p. 34). That is to say that personalized learning involves both student and teacher input into the shaping of their education. The role of the teacher shifts from the sage on the stage, lecturing, assigning and assessing to that of a guide on the side who then becomes a facilitator of student learning. As the facilitator, personalized learning requires the teacher “to devise a greater repertoire of scripts for how their (the students) education would unfold” (Campbell, Robinson, Neelands, Hewston and Mazzoli, 2007, p. 138). It becomes less about filling the student with knowledge like a vessel, and more about the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding (Jaros & Deakin-Crick, 2007). It is a shift from daily lessons that lead to units that fulfill the requirements of the curriculum and it is always evolving. Because the student is an active participant in their learning process there is then a negotiation or dialogue that can take place to

allow flexibility in how, where and when the student will learn (Deed, Thomas, and Lovejoy, 2014).

Personalized learning is not new, nor is the concept of using open space to de-institutionalize schools. Many teachers already include approaches to personalized learning as some of the ideas or tools have been employed for years. However, there too are new approaches that are yet to be employed.

### **Implementation**

What does personalized learning look like? While I have attempted to define personalized learning, the picture becomes clearer if you look at how it has been implemented in different schools around the globe.

Benson and Childress (2014) studied two separate schools in the US that successfully implemented personalized learning with funding from the Gates foundation. In California's Silicon Valley, Summit Public Schools created partnerships with outside expertise from organizations such as the Khan Academy. It used a blended model in which teachers acted as curators and created playlists from which students could access educational videos to accelerate their learning in areas where they usually struggled. The teachers were able to constantly adjust the model in order to meet the needs of their students based on their feedback. Students were able to decide whether they wanted more one-on-one tutoring to supplement their learning rather than group instructional time.

Another school in the Benson and Childress case study was that of Whitmore Park Middle School in South Carolina, one of the lowest scoring schools in the state. This school was transformed when the principal and teaching staff was given the autonomy to introduce personalized learning. With the help of the Gates Foundation they were able to utilize a

competency-based model that focused on skill level rather than grade level. Students there worked at their own level of ability and received academic support through digital lessons. The principal attributed the opportunity to make widespread changes to having not only the financial support but also the academic support from higher education institutions, and digital support from local providers.

Campbell et al (2007) examined both personalized learning and curriculum change through a study of several schools in Great Britain. They looked at the school-wide model which provided students with opportunities outside of traditional class time to participate in tutorials. These sessions allowed small groups of students to work collaboratively with other students and an instructor to explore each subject in greater depth.

Closer to home, Thomas Haney School in Maple Ridge, BC was physically designed to facilitate personalized learning (Jenkins and Keefe, 2002). This public school was designed to create open spaces for learning rather than just traditional classrooms. These open spaces facilitated dynamic usage that allowed for individual study as well as group meeting spaces. The architectural design was deliberate and promoted multiple opportunities for students to engage in learning. They created a learning environment that was both personalized and that bred success. The school has been at the top of the Fraser Institute's list of schools. In particular, the role of the teacher was that of a coach and advisor who guided the students along their journey and made personal connections with them. Present was a culture of collegiality where teachers shared a common prep space and met to collaborate as departments. They were involved in creating student guides for meeting the prescribed learning outcomes required by the ministry. Teachers worked together in an interdisciplinary manner. Scheduling and pacing student learning was flexible which accommodated the needs of the learner; students were able to participate in

creating their own weekly timetable. Finally, authentic assessment allowed students the opportunity to master concepts because tests could be retaken and assignments rewritten.

### **Challenges**

While these examples of the implementation of personalized learning demonstrate its successes, the process of achieving universal usage is fraught with obstacles such as funding, architectural design, state control of curriculum and to some extent professional development.

Funding seems to be an integral part of the successful implementation of personalized learning. The British model of tutorials has been used in the privately funded system for over a century and is generally reserved for those with socio-economic advantages (Campbell et al, 2007). Those that can afford to pay tuition will choose an educational environment where class size and composition are not an issue and the learning conditions are better suited to promote personalized learning. It is essentially a two-tiered system. The two schools in the US, Summit and Whitmore Park, were successful because of the generous contributions from the Gates Foundation. They were able to bypass any crucial budget restraints associated with the implementation of personalized learning.

It seems that with public funding for independent or charter schools in BC, more opportunities are available for parent choice of where they have their children educated. Those that can afford to pay tuition will choose an educational environment where class size and composition are not an issue and the learning conditions are better suited to promote personalized learning. But what of the economically disadvantaged which often includes minorities? Isn't the system simply creating a greater divide between the classes?

In addition, to the issue of funding, the Thomas Haney model clearly demonstrates the need for the physical plant to be conducive to the adoption of personalized learning with open



spaces. Its school was architecturally designed to facilitate space, outside of a traditional classroom, for individual students and group learning. A case study in Australia by Deed, Lesko and Lovejoy (2014) noted that the successful implementation of personalized learning was made possible by the architectural design of the physical plant, allowing for open spaces. The teachers at this school had both shared open space which was used by other students but they were able to adjust the open space to create a more intimate environment for their students to learn as a group. Clearly, this is an important element to personalized learning that cannot be ignored. Currently, many of our public schools have failed to design alternate room or space for learning outside the traditional classroom box.

Another significant obstacle to the infusion of personalized learning into the public school system is the government mandated curriculum. As seen in the UK model “it is not schools and teachers who prescribe the content, pace and control of curriculum, it is the state” (Campbell et al, 2007, p.138). In other words, that system does not include the stakeholders, the ground troops, the facilitators, the teachers. The local context is often overlooked or ignored. What is the make-up of the classroom, the school, the community? One of the aspects of the success with personalized learning in the Australian model is that “teachers are involved in the production of new syllabuses and curriculum guides” (Kirk and Macdonald, 2011, p.552). In this model, which is similar to BC’s, teachers have become partners in the development of curriculum so that it isn’t just top-down but bottom-up as well.

## **Conclusion**

Changes are on the horizon. It seems as though the BC Ministry of Education is recognizing the need to reform our current public education system in order to facilitate greater opportunities for personalized learning. Proposed changes to the curriculum that will move away

from a long list of learning outcomes toward a smaller set of core competencies will free up teachers and students to be more creative in how, when and where they master those skills. However, some courses may be better served by having a longer list of learning objectives to ensure that every one is on the same page. The ministry is also looking at changes to standardized assessment which may impede the ability for teachers and students to personalize learning if the assessments make the course content driven which doesn't translate to the exploration of person interests to master core competencies. Unfortunately, funding remains the largest road block to personalized learning. With continued cuts to BC public school funding, school plants will remain uncondusive to the need for open space. Specialized programs will rely solely on fund raising or outside funding to create opportunities beyond the classroom.

As demonstrated in this review of the literature, there are challenges associated with the successful implementation of programs that promote personalized learning especially when they operate outside of a traditional classroom setting. Next, I will study two programs that are currently running at our school and discuss the many challenges that they face.

## **Chapter Three: Project Presentation**

### **Introduction**

This M Ed project is designed as a reflection of two programs that are running in a local high school that utilize personalized learning. Both of these programs were created by their respective teachers and were given ‘carte blanche’ by our administration in terms of structure and delivery. One of these programs ended in semester one and the other is beginning in semester two. Informed by case study approaches, I will consider the successes and challenges of the completed course, and discuss the challenges of the course that is beginning in semester two in relation to understandings of personalized learning discussed in my research of the literature. In particular I will consider the challenges faced by educators who are offering programs that promote personalized learning outside the traditional classroom setting. Through this chapter I will discuss the nature of these two programs, the challenges they faced accessing much needed resources and managing the overwhelming administrative tasks, and conclude by recommending three aspects for educators and administrators to keep in mind when developing and offering such personalized programs.

### **The Programs**

The first program that I will examine is an Outdoor Adventures 11 course that gives the students credit for Social Studies 11, English 11, Outdoor Recreation 10 (which is a locally developed board authority authorized course) and Sustainable Resources 11. The students are out of the building most of the semester on various multi-day outdoor adventures and then spend time in the school to work on elements of the two academic components of the course. A third

element to the program is that the schedule for the teacher and students is flexible. It is not based on a regular school week because of irregular time spent out of the building. In addition, I will discuss the academic achievement results on the Social Studies 11 government exam and compare them to the results from other Social Studies 11 students in our school. I know and have taught many of the students in this program.

The next program that I will examine is called Stream to Sea 11. It is a half day course in which the students receive credit for Biology 11 and BAA11 (which is a locally developed board authority authorized course). The program takes the students out of the building on a regular basis to a salmon bearing creek system next to our campus. The teacher has planned partnerships with local companies that are involved in habitat management. Like the outdoor adventures program, the teacher has been given complete autonomy by the administration and is allowed a flexible schedule within the constraints of the students' morning classes. I will discuss the many challenges that the teacher of this program has faced and is facing in getting this experience running. In the following section I introduce the Outdoors Adventure 11 course, and then discuss the logistics of supporting and offering the course in the local high school.

### **Outdoor Adventures 11**

Course description as found in the Secondary School Course Guide 2015-2016:

#### *Outdoor Adventures 11 ZOA11*

*Location: School and outdoors*

*Outdoor Adventures will take full advantage of the amazing natural world surrounding our community to help each student reach their potential, academically, physically and globally. It is a student focused, one semester course designed for those who seek adventure. This first semester course works in a range of environments from the classroom to the mountains, from paddling through lakes to rock climbing and winter camping safety courses. We will also be involved in community work. Through all these locations and activities we will study; history, geography, English and the environment. Grade 11 students are welcome to apply. It is expected that a large interest will be shown as this course is open to the district and as such an application and interview will be required.*

*Government exam: Yes – SS 11*

*Semester 1**Course credits: 16 – SS 11, EN 11, Outdoor Recreation 11 and Sustainable Resources 11**Preparatory course(s): completion of grade 10***Discussion**

In order for this program to become reality it was necessary for the teacher to gain approval from the school district's board of trustees. This was not a simple matter of submitting a course description but rather a painstakingly in-depth documentation of every detail of the program. I was amazed at the size of the document developed for outdoor adventures 11. For each outing, whether a day trip or an overnight excursion, there was an itemized list of equipment and supplies, mode of transportation and emergency plan or exit strategy. Although the document was over 100 pages in length, it contained much of the information from a previous program designed by the same teacher at the grade 10 level but was abandoned due to the number of government exams (English, science and mathematics). He was able to re-use many trip plans and access documents from other existing programs to develop the proposal for board approval.

Ultimately, it was with the enthusiastic support of the school administration that allowed this program to take off. The principal was a key player in promoting outdoor adventures 11. He managed to find ways to access funding for a female educational assistant (an EA that is a CUPE employee) who could act as a chaperone on the overnight excursions in addition to her regular role in academic support of category students in the program. This required that her regular hourly salary become flexible to account for the overtime hours worked. She was given banked time off as compensation. All of this was facilitated by the creativity of the school administration.

There was no funding from the school district for this program. With the exception of access to some school district owned equipment like snowshoes and canoes, the teacher had to find and fund raise all of the necessary resources. This year the students in outdoor adventures 11 were charged a fee of \$200, which is often a dilemma in the public system as you do not want a program to be cost prohibitive to the few that cannot afford it. In addition, the students were required to participate in several fund raisers such as a bake sale, bottle drive and garage sale. While these programs did create revenue, it was simply not enough to meet the financial needs of the program. The teacher was able to access some funding from the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) indirectly. They do not allocate resources to academic programs but will give money to school clubs and athletic groups, so he used money allocated for his outdoor club for the outdoor adventure 11 program because most of the students are club members as well. Donations from outside business was an available resource for used equipment; two outdoor-focused businesses donated used back packs, tents and clothing.

The home community for this program is nestled in an awe-inspiring environment rich with opportunities for the Outdoor Adventures 11 program. Mountain, river, lake and ocean exploration is accessible without a long journey, but despite this, transportation remains the largest expense and limitation. The further away from civilization the destination is, the more complicated it becomes. The teacher's planned multi-day hike on the north island trail was made more challenging by the fact that our district would not travel that far north on the island and this meant renting an additional bus from the district to the north of us. In addition to school district buses and drivers, the program is able to access parent support for less remote trips particularly if they are local day trips and on a few occasions, parents provided water transportation. These too are limited to the number of available volunteers as well as their personal schedules.

One interesting aspect of this program is that the teacher does not use any community personnel or experts in the field. This is in part due to his own vast personal experience. Before becoming a certified teacher, he first earned a recreation diploma from a college and then worked for Parks Canada. He has become very proficient at all aspects of mountaineering, skiing, and boating and is able to pass on the knowledge to his students. He prefers not to rely on others out in the field because of some of the negative aspects that may arise with people not associated with education. For example, while someone may be knowledgeable, they may not be well suited teaching an eclectic group of high school students. Also, he found in the past with other similar programs, the community expert's schedule occasionally means cancellations or delays that have caused problems with planning.

The program had several multi-day overnight trips; climbing a local mountain, canoeing on a local lake system, ocean kayaking, and hiking the north island. In addition, there were five weeks that the students spent out of the school building participating in various activities in and around the community such as the indoor climbing gym and kayaking at the recreation complex in order to prepare for the field trips. To compensate for this schedule, they were given time on their own to use as they saw fit at a place of their choosing, whether it was at home, at a friend's house or in the school building itself for academic purposes. There were also formal classroom sessions scheduled to facilitate the academic component of the program, specifically Social Studies 11 and English 11. This task was one of the more challenging aspects of the program for both the teacher and the students. While he was successful in blending these humanities courses together and with the environmental nature of the program, the fact that Social Studies 11 is a content laden course with a government exam attached presented a challenge. I personally know and have taught several of the students that were enrolled in this year's outdoor adventures

program so I took note of their provincial exam marks when they were published. I noted that their results were consistently lower than those from other classes in the school despite many of them normally achieving high grades in the past. This of course in no way reflects on the teacher but rather the system that needs a standardized exam in a course that could be perfectly suited for personalized learning experiences like Outdoor Adventures 11. Unfortunately, as noted in my review of the literature, “it is not schools and teachers who prescribe the content, pace and control of curriculum, it is the state” (Campbell et al, p. 138). In other words, until we are free of government examinations for various courses it will remain to be difficult to successfully implement personalized learning in a program such as this.

During this past semester, I was in contact with many of the students who participated in the outdoor adventures program. Despite the fact that they were often out of the building they were quite visible when they were at school. They did not follow the same bell schedule and occasionally used various open spaces in and around the school for setting up or testing their equipment. So I was given opportunity to inquire about their experiences throughout the duration of the program as well as at its completion. While there were a few instances where minor personality conflicts occurred, there was a universal sense that they became quite a tight-knit group throughout the semester. The teacher too expressed his delight in the cohesion of the class. As an outsider looking in though, one aspect of a program that takes students out of the building for extended periods of time is that it has an impact on the school culture. Many of the students play a positive role in contributing to the atmosphere in the school, whether it is participating in various clubs, athletic teams or the band program. The exclusive commitment to the outdoor adventures meant that they were lost to those extra-curricular programs for the semester. Perhaps



in a larger high school this would have less of an impact but in a school with a population of 730 (grades 9-12), a group of 25 confident and motivated grade 11 students are noticeably missed.

The teacher has invested much of his time and energy in developing and implementing this wonderful program, and as this past semester was the maiden voyage he hopes that it will have generated enough interest to run again next year. There are, however, some changes that he would like to see for the future to improve the program and reduce the financial burden. He plans to increase the student fee from \$200 to \$300 for next fall as well as apply for several corporate grants that are available. So much of his time was spent developing and organizing the program that it left little time to seek out the financial resources that are available for educational programs like the funding by the Gates Foundation mentioned in the Benson and Childress (2014) in my review of the literature. He also expressed an interest in expanding outdoor adventures 11 to include another teacher in the disciplines of mathematics and science working with a larger group of students.

In the next section of my project I examine another program that is currently running in our school with the goal of revealing the challenges that have been experienced in its implementation.

### **Stream to Sea 11**

Course description as found in the Secondary School Course Guide 2015-2016:

*Stream to Sea 11 STS11*

*Location: School and outdoors*

*What animals link our streams, forests and oceans together? Is there a way I can do much of my learning outside doing hands on activities? What does it take to be a marine biologist? All these questions are answered in the new biology course at our school, called Stream to Sea. You'll investigate the biology of our forests, streams and oceans. The entire course is meant to introduce you to how we study these areas, what professionals within these fields actually do and lets you try it out for yourself. You will receive an official Dept. of fisheries and Oceans (DFO) Stream Keepers course accreditation, and a Level 1 Naturalist certificate through the local*

*aquarium. It is an academically rigorous course but you also need to be excited about being outside.*

*Semester 2*

*Course credits: 8 – Bi 11 & BAA11*

*Preparatory course(s): Sc 10 & completion of grade 10*

## **Discussion**

This is the first semester that his program/course has been run so that I am able to witness its development first hand. It will still be in progress at the time that this project is published. The purpose of reflecting on this new program is to demonstrate many of the challenges associated with its development and implementation.

As in the case of the outdoor adventures 11 program, the teacher of stream to sea 11 was required to gain approval from the school district's board of trustees because it included a locally developed course along with BC Ministry of Education's biology 11. He submitted a twelve page document that included a course synopsis, rationale and a description of the four modules or components of the course. Unlike the submission by the Outdoors Adventures 11 teacher, there was not the detailed trip plans and emergency plans included in the proposal. This is due in large part to the fact that most the off-campus component of the Stream to Sea 11 program takes place locally and rarely far from emergency services if the need arises.

This program received funding from the school board office, once again thanks to the enthusiastic support from the school principal. He was successful in pointing out that the Biology 11 resources had seen little investment in several years and that this program met the district goals of personalized learning opportunities and strengthening and expanding community relations. In addition, the teacher applied for but had not yet received one-time grants from a conservation trust fund, bank, and environmental foundation. He finds this process of searching for his own resources quite daunting as it is a time consuming administrative task that he was not

prepared for. On top of all of this he had already completed two fund raising activities in this first term of the second semester: a bake sale and a gardening products sale. The teacher partnered up with a local composting company to sell the various products they have available for residential landscaping needs (bark mulch, top soil, organic liquid fertilizers, etc.). Customers could pre-order packaged retail products that were then delivered to the school for pick up or they could take a coupon to the company's site where 10% of the proceeds go to the sea to stream 11 program. The advantage to this particular fund raiser is that it is continual as long as it is promoted on a regular basis, and it is a product that many people utilize in our community.

To date, the teacher has avoided charging a fee to students for this course. However, like the outdoor adventures program, the cost of transportation is a significant piece of the program's budget. For local excursions our school is blessed with being set in the heart of a conservation area that includes a salmon bearing stream within walking distance. This provides the program with a virtual outdoor laboratory at no cost. Other day trips, such as the local hatchery, aquarium or river, require the students to use public transportation or in some cases to hire a district school bus. Unfortunately, the district school busses have time restrictions because they are needed for regular use before the end of the scheduled class time is over. One of the major expenditures of this program is for transportation to and from a marine station on the west coast of Vancouver Island at a cost of approximately \$7000.

For this program the teacher is attempting to utilize local experts as a valuable learning resource. Later this spring, he hopes to work with the local DFO officer to include a 'stream keepers' course in order for the students gain accredited certification. Likewise, the marine station experience will provide them with the opportunity to gain their level 1 naturalist certification. Because our home community is primarily a resource-based city, there are several

local companies that can be accessed as a learning resource, whether it be in forestry or fisheries. However, the teacher has found it difficult to get firm commitments or even returned phone calls and emails from these private sector experts. Often they are just too busy. Because the teacher has not lived in the community for very long, he simply does not have many personal connections with people in the related industries in this area. This makes planning for a guest speaker often difficult.

Stream to Sea 11 is scheduled as a double block in the afternoon each day. This affords the teacher the ability to be flexible with class time. Like the Outdoor Adventures 11 program, he is able to utilize time outside of the traditional school schedule when the need arises and later set the students free during scheduled class in compensation. For example, when the students return from their visit to the marine station on the west coast of the island they will have several afternoons to do with as they wish during the school week. How much time is spent in the field is determined by two key factors: season and weather. This program is scheduled in the second semester which falls in the winter and spring, therefore, it is not until the spring that the flora and fauna begin to develop in the forests so more time is spent in the field as the season progresses. Likewise, the climate in the region is such that April, May and June provide more opportunities for favorable weather in which to work and study in the field. At this point he expects the class to only spend approximately 30% on the time in the school building.

One of the aspects of this course that is quite appealing is that the students will be engaged in more personalized learning. They will have several opportunities to conduct research in the area that interests them, not just what the teacher tells them to research. They have already shown an interest in work in the field by signing up for the program, but they can then focus or

specialize within the program on any aspect they are drawn to. The teacher becomes the coach or advisor who guides their students along their journey (Jenkins and Keefe, 2002).

To date, the Stream to Sea 11 program has presented significant challenges to the teacher. As previously mentioned, accessing much needed funds that allow the course to offer a greater variety of opportunities outside of the traditional classroom is difficult and time consuming. Creating partnerships with experts in both the public and private sector is often frustrating. All of this takes up much of the teacher's time, on top of the task of developing and facilitating a new course. He estimates that approximately 80% of his working time is dedicated to administrative duties which is a similar experience shared by teacher of Outdoor Adventures 11. Another challenge to the success of this program is that of student enrolment. Because this was the first offering of this course, it was permitted to run with only thirteen students, which is almost unheard of in today's BC public schools. If he does not recruit more students to enrol in the course next year it simply will not run, and all of his effort to date will have been spent on a one time project whether it is successful or not.

### **Conclusion**

I will continue to engage in meaningful dialogue with both of these adventurous colleagues offering suggestions and simply being a sounding board for their frustrations. I will continue to promote their wonderful programs in both the school and in the community. They are enthusiastic, caring educators with a passion in their respective areas of expertise and I am proud that they are working at my high school.

In studying these two programs it has become evident that there are common challenges faced in their successful implementation. Funding is an essential element needed to run a course or program that occurs outside of the traditional classroom setting. Accessing those resources

from outside of the school system can be difficult and time consuming for educators. Likewise, administrative duties were a significant burden for these teachers. Too much of their valuable time was spent planning for activities and raising funds. In the final chapter of this M Ed project I will offer recommendations for teachers and administrators interested in starting a successful program similar in nature to those examined in this project.

## **Chapter Four: Reflection**

### **Project Summary**

This M Ed project was designed as a reflection of two programs that are currently running at our school that utilize personalized learning. Specifically, it focusses on the challenges faced by each teacher in starting these new programs that take place primarily outside of the traditional school facility. These programs were chosen for study because they both employed personalized learning for their students. While there was a prescribed curriculum, students were given the freedom to focus their academic pursuits in areas of interest.

The first program took place during the first semester of the school year. Outdoor Adventures 11 is a 16 credit program consisting of two academic courses, English 11 and Social Studies 11, as well as two elective courses, Outdoor Recreation 11 and Sustainable Resources 11. This program required and received approval from the local school board, which meant that the teacher needed to prepare detailed documents that outlined the specifics of the course. While the program was fully and enthusiastically supported by the school administration, little funding was made available from the school district and this meant that the teacher was required to find a variety of resources outside of the school system. These included fund raisers, student fees and donations from the private sector. Due to the nature of this program, which spent considerable time away from civilization, the teacher had detailed plans for any emergency situation and this added yet another administrative duty to the already overburdened educator. In addition, one of the academic courses, Social Studies 11, has a government examination. This seemed to have a slightly negative effect on the program as the group tended to score lower on this assessment than those of their peers.

The second program that was studied is Stream to Sea 11. It is another locally developed course that takes place outside of the school facility and in and around the local ecosystem. The students receive credits for Biology 11 as well as an elective. The classes take place all afternoon, which allows for flexibility in the timetabling of field work. Like the Outdoor Adventures 11 program, Stream to Sea 11 required and received approval from the local school board. The program started in the second semester of this school year and will still be running at the time of this publication. Unlike the first program, limited funding was made available from the school district, however, the teacher still needed to raise funds to meet the significant financial resources required for the program. The teacher has had the exhaustive task of planning, implementing and resourcing this program and has found that most of his time is spent on administrative duties.

The conclusions that were drawn from this study were enlightening. Both programs required of the teacher a significant amount of administrative effort. They spent most of their working day organizing support for their course rather than facilitating learning for their students. Funding or lack thereof was another factor that came to the forefront in this study. Both teachers knew that there were resources outside of the school system that could be accessed but lacked the time and knowledge to pursue them. Finally, having a government examinable course attached to a program that is promoting personalized learning presented challenges. It is difficult to allow students to explore their interests in an area that has a content driven outcome.

### **My Experience in this Course**

Throughout this M Ed program, I have gained a stronger understanding of the scope and nature of curriculum. Each course experience offered a smorgasbord of ideas that have enriched my practices as an educator.



As a history major I thoroughly engaged in the historical context of curriculum development in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. We are entering an era that will see significant changes in how we view education and it was interesting to see the cyclical nature of curriculum evolution. It was in this context that I began to look deeper into my own professional practices and this enabled me to engage with new approaches presented in the subsequent courses of this program.

One course that had an impact on both my personal and professional life was about technology in education. On a personal level, the technology that was demonstrated helped me move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The interactive use of iPads encouraged me to purchase my own device for use at home and this year I also entered the world of the iPhone, replacing my outdated flip phone. Professionally, I now feel more comfortable utilizing technology in many of my lessons. I even took a chance with a Shakespeare unit and used the computer lab so that the students could create comic strips using a web based resource.

The environmental course allowed me to look at how I could do a better job of integrating it into my teaching practices. Since then I have felt more confident emphasizing environmental topics throughout the curriculum. In addition, some of the literature that was introduced connected with what I explored in personalized learning, especially the use of open spaces outside of the traditional classroom.

Another course, Aboriginal pedagogy, has had a lasting impression on me and helped fill some of the gaps in my understanding of Aboriginal culture and specifically Aboriginal pedagogy. Our field trip to the local Big House was awe-inspiring. I gained a sense of confidence when teaching my students about First Nations people.

The most moving aspect of this program was the course on personalized learning and curriculum change. I had always seen personalized learning as somewhat unattainable in our current public system, but after studying the two programs at our school I can see its many possibilities for the future. The final assignment for this particular course was the most enjoyable. It was an annotated bibliography with a personalized twist. We were given the freedom to reflect on each chosen article using a variety of formats and voices. I found this allowed me to be more creative in how I interpreted the literature. I plan on utilizing this particular strategy more often in my own teaching practices.

### **Impacting My Career**

This graduate experience has had and will continue to have an impact on my career as a teacher. Much of what I have read and learned during this process reinforced the value of what I do as a teacher and I have gained confidence in areas that I was less than enthusiastic about teaching. I plan to be an instrument of change toward personalized learning in our school and perhaps in our district.

Our school district is moving toward an increase in the implementation of personalized learning and hope to have it aligned with the BC Government's proposed new graduation learning plan (GLP). This spring the teaching staff at our high school will be visiting Thomas Haney Secondary in Maple Ridge in order to witness first hand their framework for personalized learning. As discussed in the project, we currently have programs in our school that are using approaches to personalized learning and it is our intention to expand those opportunities for our students and teachers. Armed with my new understanding of the possibilities for personalized learning in our current system as well as the challenges faced implementing it, I am looking forward to taking a leadership role in the upcoming changes.

I have already started developing units in some of my courses that utilize personalized learning and promote environmental, technological, and aboriginal elements. For example, in Social Studies 10 the use of the open space and experiential hands-on learning in the outdoors during a First Nations unit or using the Internet to take a virtual road trip through BC. I will continue to evolve my teaching practices to promote personalized learning in my courses, in the school and in the district.

### **Three Key Recommendations**

There can be several challenges involved in the successful implementation of a program that takes students out of the traditional classroom setting. For those interested in engaging in personalized learning through such a program I have three key recommendations. Investigate sources of funding programs that require resources such as transportation and equipment. Determine ways to reduce administrative duties for the teacher. Finally, look to working in concert with a colleague or colleagues to develop and run a program.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the educators of the two programs studied in this M Ed project was the lack of resources that were made available. Funding is scarce in our current public school system and as a result teachers are left on their own to find ways to financially support their specialized programs. Much of their time can be consumed organizing and running fund raising events like those mentioned in this project. Perhaps the solution is to look for funding from outside sources such as corporations and other entities that make money available to educational programs. Have this in place before the program gets off the ground so that the teacher is free to teach and not bogged down with yet another administrative duty. There are resources out there so take the time to find them before you start your program.

Another challenge that was faced by the teachers of these programs was that they spent an inordinate amount of time with administrative duties. The teaching profession requires of us to do more than simply teach our students. There are many tasks that are performed throughout the school year and take place outside of traditional class time. Most of these tasks relate directly to student learning; there are hours spent on student assessment and program development. However, taking students out of the classroom and away from the school requires planning and resources, both of which can be time consuming and add to the administrative load of the teacher. Find ways to reduce administrative duties. If at all possible, utilize school support staff such as secretaries or educational assistants. Involve parent volunteers to help carry some of the burden. Allocate responsibilities to others whenever it is feasible.

In my many discussions with the teachers of the two programs another recommendation emerged. Both expressed that they wanted to work with a colleague and develop a cross curricular program that combined two areas of study and two groups of students. They saw this as an opportunity to attract student enrollment in their programs and share the overwhelming administrative duties. The Stream to Sea 11 program may not continue to run unless more students sign up for the course next semester. Likewise, the Outdoor Adventures 11 program does not attract students that focus on the sciences. Developing a program with a colleague or colleagues would reduce administrative time and perhaps attract a wider range of student participation.

Locally developed programs such as those discussed in this M Ed project are neither new nor ground breaking. However, they are an important step in the right direction towards promoting personalized learning. If they are to be successful and sustainable they need funding, which should be in place before the program even begins. Teachers need to find ways to reduce

administrative time so they can have more time facilitating student learning. Finally, collaborating with colleagues in program development can help alleviate much of the stress associated with heavy administrative tasks required in running these programs.

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