COMMUNITY CONNECTED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CHANGE IN THE K-12 CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Emerging from lived experience in education and student success administration, the researcher offers a critique of experiential learning (EL) in Ontario and moves to identify universal problems in policy and system implementation of community connected experiential learning. A qualitative study with K–12 educators from a school board in Ontario and grounded theory methodology is used to analyze, code, and identify several theoretical cornerstones. The prominent themes of teacher pedagogy and community connections emerge and offer implications for theory and practice. The resulting implementation framework—viewed from the school/district/state tri level lens—will guide teachers, administrators, and policy makers on the integration of community connected EL with traditional learning methods and curriculum to provide K–12 students with rich, authentic, and engaging learning opportunities.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study is to understand educators experiences and how they align with best- practices literature to assist teachers, principals, EL leads- in EL implementation. EL activities provide students with opportunities to integrate conceptual, procedural and factual knowledge, and develop more complete understandings or conceptions to lead to more advanced learning (Burch et al., 2019). There are theories and propositions about EL implementation, but to achieve genuine understanding and realistic mobilization, we must recognize gaps/needs and then support teachers with plausible knowledge and resources so that they can consistently weave rich, authentic, community connected experiential practices into the traditional classroom and curriculum.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper, based on a qualitative study of educators, focuses on three research questions and considers how these insights might form an implementation framework:

1a) What are the dominant strategies currently being utilized by teachers in a board in Ontario to integrate community connected EL in the K-12 classroom?

1b) How do teachers select EL approaches and opportunities?

1c) What aids or constrains EL in teacher practice and schools?

2) What leadership strategies should be used at a school, board, and Ministry level to best be able to implement community connected EL in teacher practice?

3) What are gaps between strategies and approaches that teachers and administrators report as ideal and what the literature recommends as EL best practice?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study sought to improve adoption and development of community connected EL, and attention must be paid to systemic change and cultural transformation in education. To this end, Fullan (2003) and Fullan et al. (2001) note that to get large-scale education reform, you need to establish and coordinate ongoing accountability and capacity-building efforts at the three levels of school, district, and state. The tri-level framework brings the focus of education back to the power of the individual teacher, a concept confirmed by Dyer (1999) in the "backward mapping" concept which is "a statement of the specific behaviour at the lowest level of the implementation process that generates the need for a policy" (p. 48). Action oriented, grassroots participation is key here and despite district and state factors/influence, EL must be mobilized at the school level. This study aligns literature with in-school data to identify gaps in delivery and support.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory is an effective research method to study the implementation of EL as it enables the researcher to build theory authentically with rich data from educators in schools and classrooms- from the 'ground up'. This view emphasizes constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017; Cole, 2022; Lapan et al., 2011; Urquhart, 2017). It is a contemporary version of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original method and considers both data and analysis as social constructions (Lapan et al., 2011). This study's research questions and resulting 7 semi-structured interview lead questions are based upon self-assessment of practices and procedures that the 18 participants (8 K-12 classroom teachers (T), 5 coordinators/ consultants (C), and 5 administrators (A)) from a mid to large sized urban school board in Ontario have deemed essential to EL implementation success.

FULL DISSERTATION AND REFERENCES

To view the full dissertation and references, scan here:
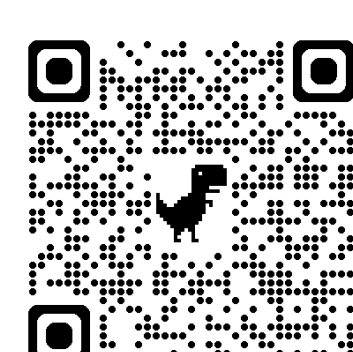
OUTCOMES AND KEY FINDINGS

Teacher pedagogy (i.e. teacher pedagogy misaligned, teacher pedagogy and efficacy, teacher pedagogy and support) and community connections (i.e. community opportunity, community alignment) emerged as the two most common themes.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS
Opportunity & Alignment

SCHOOL
Teaching & Learning

DISTRICT
Priorities &
Professional Development

STATE
Policies &
Programs

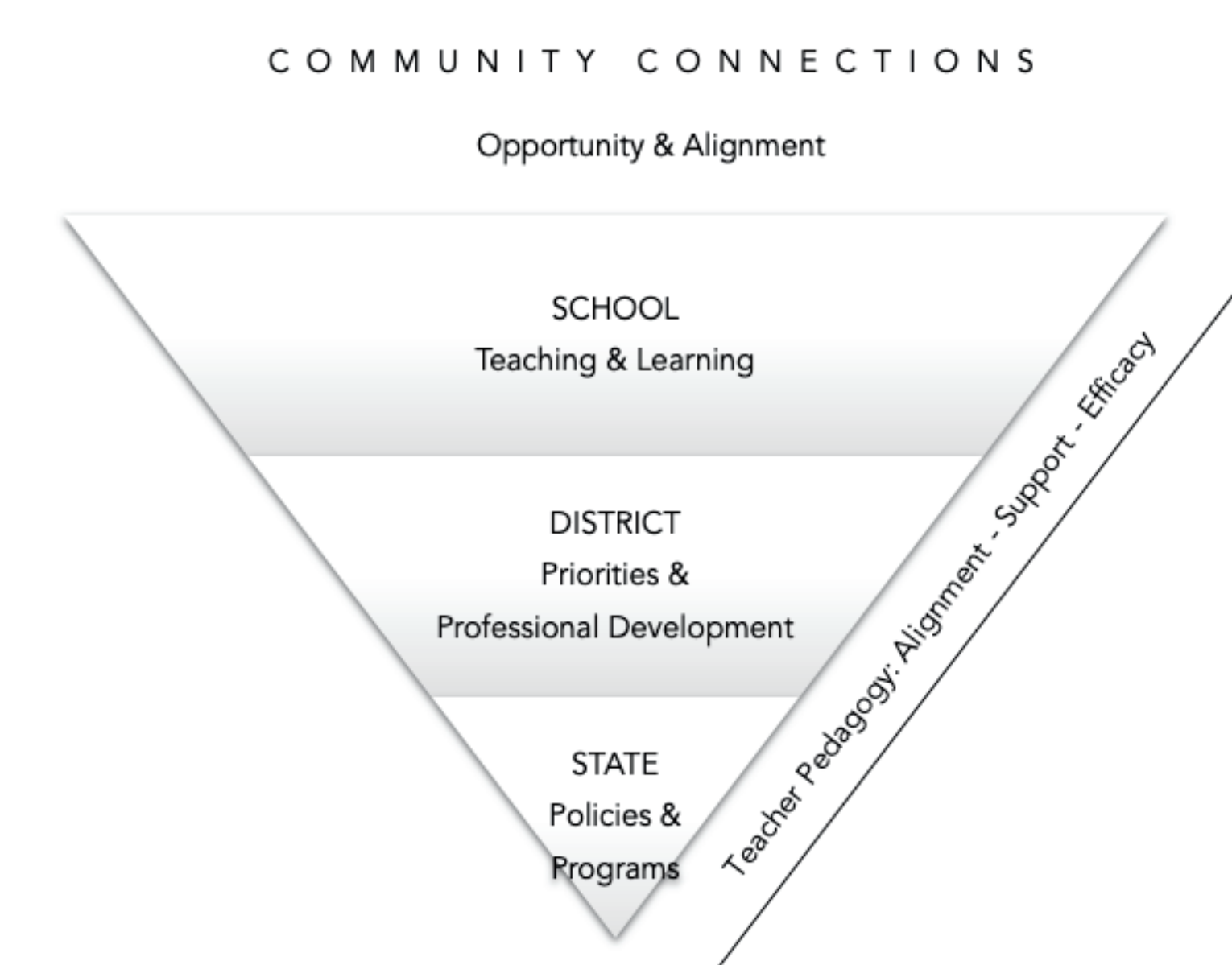Teacher Pedagogy: Alignment - Support - Efficacy

Figure 1- Implementation Framework: Community Connected Experiential Learning in the K-12 Classroom

A framework addresses the following:

Recommendations to the teacher
- Work towards interdisciplinary teaching and cross curricular integration of subjects.
- An integral part of this EL 'journey' must be student reflection (Kolb, 1973; Gibbs, 1988; Eyler, 2009; Qualters, 2010; Foster et al., 2021).
- With "live project work" comes a focus on the 'softer skills' of communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, responsibility, empathy, negotiation, time management, and professionalism (Sara, 2011; Harmon, 2022).
- Position EL as lifelong learning as in this view there are no limits, specifically time, on how or when the 'learning' will take place. EL calls for learning to be thought of as a lifelong continuum (Yardley, 2012).

Recommendations to the school leader
- Transformational leadership is encouraged for the school leader to usher in change and genuinely increase the level of teacher involvement in reform adoption to promote long term teacher development and empowerment for change (Datnow et al., 2012).
- Combine individual development with development of a school wide professional learning community, of which, Fullan (2012) argues, is an element of capacity.
- Prioritize EL by having it be an integral part of the school improvement plan as "a major challenge for educational leaders is to translate the vision into everyday practices" (Duignan, 2008, p. 40).
- Literally and figuratively 'open the doors' of the school to the surrounding community. Community connections clearly offer alternate perspectives and realistic situations that can positively disrupt group thinking and challenge educational norms (Duignan, 2008).

Recommendations to the district
- Districts must set experiential teaching and learning as a priority by establishing an accountability/ capacity building initiative across many schools (Fullan et al., 2001).
- When experiential- student centered- constructivist district goals are encouraged, there must be efforts made to reduce tension with objective- quantifiable- standardized outcomes.
- Educational reform stakeholders must be prepared to build a context for discussion and a capacity to implement the reform, as "the success of the reform will weigh heavily on the school system's ability to communicate and negotiate concerns among all those involved" (Datnow et al., 2012, p. 38).
- Continue with a capacity building recommendation to add new resources in terms of materials, professional development, access to expertise, and time (Fullan et al., 2001; Datnow et al., 2012.

Recommendations to the state
- Increase the amount of information schools have about reforms prior to adoption to avoid misalignment. Revise policies and programs to reframe and present EL as a "category of learning" (Beard & Wilson, 2013, p. 1) that "subsumes a wide variety of activities and engagements" (Foster et al., 2021, p. 7).
- Take the view that experiential learning can support all disciplines and broaden the curriculum (Fullan et al., 2001). This shift in mindset and placing experience at the centre of the curriculum is no guarantee of educational success- but it "has important things to say about freedom, democracy, and the faith in human potential" (Roberts, 2011, p. 116).