

Leadership, Preparation, and Resistance: Educators' Perceptions of Québec's Curriculum Reform

Simon Landry*

Faculty of education, Université de Montréal, Pavillon J.-A.-DeSève, 2332, boul. Édouard-Montpetit, Montréal, QC, Canada, H3T 1J4, simon.landry.6@umontreal.ca

Abstract

This qualitative case study explores educators' perceptions of Québec's late-1990s curriculum reform, which sought to transition from traditional instruction to a competency-based, student-centered model inspired by constructivist theory and Finland's success. Drawing on narrative inquiry and thematic analysis of interviews with fifteen retired teachers and principals, the study identifies "understanding" as the central concept shaping reform experiences, encompassing preparation, leadership, and resistance. Findings reveal systemic shortcomings: compressed timelines, inadequate training, scarce pedagogical resources, and a predominantly vertical leadership structure that marginalized practitioner input. These factors fostered resistance among educators and parents, compounded by political volatility and inconsistent communication. While participants acknowledged the reform's progressive philosophy, its implementation lacked inclusivity, empirical grounding, and longitudinal evaluation. The study argues that sustainable educational change requires hybrid leadership models, collaborative planning, and depoliticized, generational timelines. Québec's experience underscores the risks of rapid, politically driven reforms and offers insights into the socio-political and organizational conditions necessary for meaningful, enduring transformation.

Keywords: leadership, teachers, reform, curriculum

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/17-5-09

Publication date: May 30th 2026

1. Introduction

In the context of intensifying global competition and economic interdependence, the development of a high-performing education system has become an imperative for nations seeking to thrive in the global marketplace. Scholars such as Darling-Hammond and Rizvi & Lingard emphasize that education is central to national advancement, particularly as automation and artificial intelligence reshape labor markets. Historical examples, including the economic ascension of Singapore, South Korea, and Ireland, underscore the transformative role of educational investment. Consequently, governments frequently engage in comparative analyses of international education systems to inform domestic reforms aimed at enhancing efficiency. These reforms range from incremental adjustments to sweeping curriculum overhauls, as seen in Finland's widely studied 1970s reform. However, not all initiatives yield sustained success; the U.S. has witnessed mixed outcomes from policies such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race To The Top*. These dynamics illustrate the interplay between educational policy, socio-economic goals, and global competitiveness. To better understand this interplay and unpack why certain systemic changes endure while others falter, the following section contrasts two distinct paradigms of educational reform: Finland's gradual, highly inclusive model and Québec's accelerated approach.

Finland's reform, initiated in the 1960s and gradually implemented over three decades, was grounded in a commitment to equity, teacher professionalism, and holistic education. Central to its success was the elevation of teaching to a high-status profession, requiring rigorous academic training and granting educators significant autonomy. Finland's model minimized standardized testing and emphasized student well-being, creativity, and critical thinking. These reforms were aligned with Finland's transition from an agrarian to a high-tech industrial economy, necessitating a highly skilled workforce. The Finnish approach, characterized by long-term planning, consensus-building, and systemic coherence, led to sustained high performance in international assessments like PISA.

At the end of the 1990s, Québec undertook a major educational reform following the *États Généraux sur l'Éducation*, a public consultation aimed at addressing the province's low graduation rates, promoting greater educational equity, and preserving French language and culture. At the time, nearly 20% of seventeen-year-olds failed to graduate within the expected timeframe, prompting the government to act. Influenced by constructivist theories from Piaget and Vygotsky and also inspired by Finland's success in international assessments, Québec

adopted a student-centred, project-based curriculum . This reform replaced traditional numerical grading with competency-based evaluations and reduced standardized testing. Report cards began reflecting students' mastery of competencies rather than factual recall.

Québec's reform was rapidly conceived and implemented, with only four years between policy conception (1996) and the first classroom applications (2000). Unlike Finland's inclusive and gradual process, Québec's reform limited involvement from frontline educators, leading to resistance from teacher unions and implementation challenges . The reform introduced a standardized curriculum, centralized decision-making, and data-driven management, resulting in excessive oversight and a burdensome number of learning objectives and evaluations . Political volatility further undermined the reform's coherence, as successive governments altered or rebranded policies, contributing to confusion and disengagement among educators . While Finland's reform benefited from political stability and a unified vision, Québec's was hindered by ideological divisions between the Parti Québécois and the Parti Libéral du Québec, as well as the rise of the Action Démocratique du Québec, which opposed the reform. These political dynamics led to inconsistent policy direction and a lack of sustained support . This ambitious reform failed to achieve its intended outcomes, as graduation rates in Québec have remained among the lowest in Canada (see Figure 1) . While the reform was philosophically progressive, its practical shortcomings highlight the complexities of educational transformation and the need for sustained, inclusive planning and evaluation to ensure meaningful and lasting improvements in student outcomes. Ultimately, the Québec case underscores the limitations of transplanting educational models without adapting them to local contexts. While Finland's reform offers valuable insights into effective educational transformation, Québec's experience highlights the importance of inclusive planning, professional development, and political stability in achieving meaningful and lasting change in education systems.

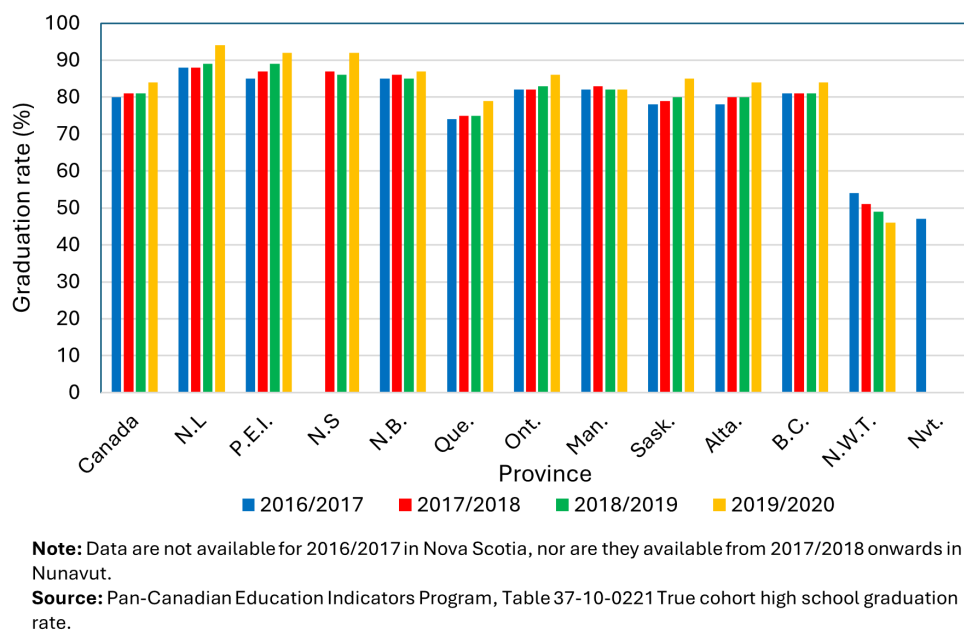


Figure 1 - On-time graduation rates in Canada by province. 2016/2017-2019/2020

The question this case study research aimed to answer was: “How do teachers and principals who experienced Québec’s curriculum reform of the late 1990s perceive the successes and failures of its initial implementation?”. Answering this question is critical because macro-level policy evaluations often obscure the lived realities of those tasked with enacting change. By giving voice to frontline educators, this study bridges the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Understanding these grassroots perspectives is vital for unpacking the granular mechanisms of reform failure; it demonstrates how a disconnect between vertical mandates and horizontal execution can inadvertently foster resistance, offering essential lessons for policymakers seeking to design more resilient, practitioner-informed educational transformations.

This study’s theoretical framework was grounded in the dual paradigms of vertical and horizontal leadership, two contrasting yet potentially complementary models of organizational governance. Vertical leadership,

characterized by a hierarchical, top-down structure, centralizes authority and decision-making, offering clarity and order, particularly in contexts requiring swift, directive action. In contrast, horizontal leadership emphasizes distributed authority, collaboration, and shared responsibility, fostering inclusivity, transparency, and employee empowerment. Leaders in horizontal systems act more as facilitators, encouraging team participation and ownership, which can enhance engagement and innovation. These leadership styles are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can be blended or adapted depending on situational demands, forming hybrid models that leverage the strengths of both approaches. This framework was particularly relevant to the analysis of Québec's education reform, where leadership dynamics across hierarchical levels—especially among principals and teachers—played a critical role in shaping the reform's implementation and outcomes. By examining how leadership was enacted and perceived within the education system during this period, this case study sought to uncover the extent to which leadership style influenced the reform's limited success. Understanding the interplay between vertical mandates and horizontal execution may illuminate systemic tensions and inform more effective leadership strategies in future educational policy initiatives.

Literature review: the pedagogical and societal imperatives of curriculum reform

Curriculum reform is fundamentally a socio-political and pedagogical endeavor. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Dewey and Bloom, effective reform is driven by clearly articulated goals that reflect both societal aspirations and institutional values. Contemporary curriculum design has increasingly embraced a learner-centered paradigm, prioritizing experiential learning, cognitive development, and the cultivation of measurable competencies over rote memorization. This epistemological shift advocates for interdisciplinary approaches, recognizing that modern students must be equipped to navigate complex, real-world challenges. Consequently, pedagogical strategies such as project-based and inquiry-driven learning have gained prominence for their efficacy in fostering critical thinking. Furthermore, modern reforms are increasingly underpinned by principles of inclusivity and cultural responsiveness, striving to promote equity and global awareness. Together, these principles—philosophical alignment, competency-based design, interdisciplinarity, and inclusivity—form the theoretical cornerstone of future-oriented curriculum reform.

Bridging policy and practice: the educator as the linchpin

While curriculum reform is typically initiated by macro-level policymakers and academic theorists, its ultimate success is contingent upon the micro-level realities of educators. Teachers and school principals serve as the crucial bridge between theoretical policy and classroom enactment. As Eisner and Stenhouse have long advocated, sustainable curriculum development must be informed by practitioners' experiential knowledge. For a reform to transition successfully from a policy document to lived pedagogical practice, educators must possess a deep understanding of its underlying rationale and vision. This echoes the longstanding complexities of curriculum inquiry highlighted by Egan, which must address both the substance of the curriculum and its practical delivery.

In a fluid and risk-prone society, educational transformation must be a shared, democratic responsibility rather than an imposed mandate. Educators act simultaneously as implementers, evaluators, and advocates. They are tasked with adapting broad curricula to diverse learner needs, fostering inclusive environments, and engaging in continuous professional development. Therefore, when reforms are imposed without the meaningful involvement of those responsible for their enactment, they frequently fail to bridge the gap between idealized models and practical realities, leading to systemic friction.

Leadership paradigms: the technocratic trap vs. participatory governance

Despite the centrality of their role, teachers and principals are frequently subjected to vertical leadership models during periods of reform. In such hierarchical systems, principals are often tasked with implementing sweeping changes without adequate consultation, systemic support, or preparation time. This top-down governance structure tends to prioritize bureaucratic compliance and managerial oversight over genuine pedagogical leadership. Scholars such as Habermas and Wheeler-Bell strongly critique this technocratic approach to educational governance, arguing that elite-driven decision-making and systemic fragmentation alienate frontline practitioners and erode the perceived legitimacy of the reform itself. When vertical mandates manipulate data to validate policy outcomes or demand immediate compliance, they distance educators from their core pedagogical mission.

In stark contrast, successful educational transformations—such as Finland’s renowned decentralization process—rely heavily on horizontal leadership and collaborative governance . Decentralized, trust-based approaches empower local actors, fostering a sense of professional ownership. Providing flexible national frameworks allows for local adaptation and encourages meaningful collaboration among educators, families, and community stakeholders . Studies have shown that participative approaches to reform leadership are beneficial; however, in practice, participative incentives are randomly used in national reform contexts .

The affective and temporal dimensions of reforms

Ittner et al. underscore that systemic reform is not merely a structural or cognitive exercise, but a deeply emotional one. International evidence demonstrates that involving school principals and teachers from the earliest stages of conception ensures they are not only structurally prepared but emotionally invested. Research indicates that educators' positive perceptions of a curriculum’s practical usability significantly enhance their openness to change. Crucially, Ganon-Shilon and Schechter emphasize the necessity of institutionalizing "safe time and space" to process initial skepticism and conceptual ambiguity.

This temporal and emotional processing is precisely what expedited implementation models, such as the one observed in Québec during the late 1990s, often fail to accommodate. When systemic objectives are misaligned with the lived experiences and emotional readiness of educators, resistance becomes an inevitable byproduct. Ultimately, literature suggests that trust, emotional awareness, and participatory leadership are essential preconditions for sustainable reform. They position educators not as passive executors of state mandates, but as active co-constructors of transformative change .

Methodology

Research design and rationale

To explore the complex, context-specific realities of curriculum reform, this study employed a qualitative case study methodology synergized with a narrative inquiry framework . While case study parameters bounded the research temporally and geographically, the narrative inquiry approach centered the personal stories and lived experiences of educators as valid, vital forms of knowledge. This dual methodology was intentionally selected to capture both the structural dimensions of the reform—such as the imposition of vertical leadership—and its affective impact on those tasked with its implementation. By prioritizing practitioner narratives, this design provides a robust mechanism for unpacking the reform’s unintended consequences, the systemic friction between policy and practice, and the grassroots realities of educational change.

Participant selection and context

The study was conducted during the spring of 2024, focusing exclusively on Québec’s public francophone education system from the mid-1990s to 2022. The participant pool comprised retired teachers, principals, and pedagogical advisors. This specific population was purposively sampled for two strategic reasons: 1) to ensure respondents possessed longitudinal perspective, having actively experienced both the pre-reform and post-reform educational paradigms, 2) to mitigate vulnerability and encourage candor, as retired individuals are shielded from potential professional repercussions or employer oversight .

Recruitment was initiated through Québec’s two major teachers’ unions (FAE¹ and FSE²) and their corresponding retirees’ associations (APRFAE³ and AREQ-CSQ⁴). While APRFAE did not respond to the request, AREQ-CSQ facilitated recruitment by disseminating the call for participation through its newsletter, reaching over 15,000 retirees. Additional participants were secured via snowball sampling. The number of participants per category (teachers, principals, advisors) was chosen to represent the proportion of these same employment categories in the Quebec education system. With approximately 90 000 teachers in the province, 3 000 principals and vice-principals and about 2 000 advisors, it was determined that teachers should make up the largest part of the participant pool, and only a select few principals, that would represent both the high school and elementary school realities, would suffice. Advisors were not expected to participate in the study when the methodology was established, but through a snowball effect, one advisor contacted the researcher, and it was

¹ Fédération Autonome de l’Enseignement. <https://www.lafae.qc.ca/>

² Fédération des Syndicats de l’enseignement. <https://fse.lacsq.org/>

³ Association des Personnes Retraitées de la Fédération Autonome de l’Enseignement. <https://aprfae.com/>

⁴ Association des retraitées et retraités de l’éducation et des autres services publics du Québec. <https://areq.lacsq.org/>

determined that the point of view of an advisor would be a welcome addition to the participant pool. The final sample consisted of fifteen individuals: eleven teachers, three principals, and one pedagogical advisor (see Table 1), representing diverse geographic regions and school levels within the province.

Identification code	Main occupation	School level	Gender	Region	Career span
AM-01	Administrator	Secondary	M	Trois-Rivières	1965-2017
TM-01	Teacher	Secondary	M	Québec City	1965-1999
CP-01	Advisor	Primary	F	Estrie	1981-2016
TF-01	Teacher	Primary	F	Montreal	1991-today
TM-02	Teacher	Secondary	M	Laval	1990-today
TF-02	Teacher	Primary	F	Lanaudière	1981-2016
TM-03	Teacher	Secondary	M	Lanaudière	1992-today
TF-03	Teacher	Primary	F	Saguenay	1979-2014
AF-01	Administrator	Primary	F	Laurentians	1964-2000
TM-04	Teacher	Secondary	M	Charlevoix	1983-2015
TM-05	Teacher	Secondary	M	Québec City	1978-2013
TF-04	Teacher	Primary	F	Québec City	1969-2009
TF-05	Teacher	Primary	F	Chaudières	1975-2011
TF-06	Teacher	Primary	F	Lanaudière	1986-2016
AM-02	Administrator	Primary	M	Laurentians	1972-2007

Table 1 - Participants to the study

Data collection procedures

Data collection was structured in two sequential phases. Phase one involved an online questionnaire designed to gather foundational demographic and professional data (e.g., years of service, geographic location, administrative level). This phase served as a filtering mechanism to ensure all participants met the specific inclusion criteria.

Phase two comprised the primary data collection: semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Lasting approximately one hour each, these interviews were designed to be dialogic rather than interrogative, allowing participants the flexibility to construct and share their narratives regarding the reform's rollout, the leadership dynamics they experienced, and their emotional and professional responses. All interviews were conducted in French, the working language of the participants, and were audio-recorded with explicit consent.

Data analysis

To preserve the authenticity of the narratives and avoid the inaccuracies of automated tools, all interview recordings were manually transcribed by the researcher and subsequently translated into English. The analysis adhered to a systematic coding process aligned with narrative inquiry principles. It began with open coding to identify emergent themes, emotional responses, and specific institutional challenges directly from the raw data. This was followed by axial coding, which organized these initial codes into broader, interconnected categories—specifically looking at how leadership influenced local preparation and resistance. Finally, selective coding was employed to distill the data into a core category that encapsulated the central phenomenon of the educators' lived experiences. This iterative, recursive process allowed for the development of a nuanced framework that captured both the singular and collective dimensions of navigating systemic educational reform.

Trustworthiness, ethics, and limitations

The study's credibility was established through rigorous, transparent procedures, most notably member checking.

Both the original French transcripts and their English translations were provided to participants for verification, ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of their captured statements in their preferred language. Furthermore, reflexive engagement with the data and detailed methodological documentation strengthened the study's validity.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Participants were assigned anonymized alphanumeric codes (e.g., TM-01, AF-01), and all identifying information regarding former employers or specific schools was redacted from the transcripts. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices, and all materials were systematically removed from Microsoft's servers in strict compliance with the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board⁵ (REB) requirements.

Finally, while the findings offer significant insights into the dynamics of educational reform, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study is bounded by the unique linguistic, cultural, and political context of Québec, necessitating caution in generalizing these findings to distinctly different international jurisdictions. Additionally, the study excluded private and English-language schools; although subject to the same curricular mandates, they represent a small fraction of the province's landscape and would not have yielded sufficient data for meaningful inclusion. Most critically, the pool of eligible participants with dual-paradigm experience is rapidly shrinking, underscoring the temporal urgency of this research in documenting these institutional memories before they are lost.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts reveals that the central phenomenon underlying the lived experience of this curriculum reform is the concept of "understanding" (see Figure 2). For systemic change to transition from policy to practice, stakeholders overwhelmingly expressed the need for the reform to be thoroughly decoded, explained by leadership, and conceptually mastered prior to implementation. When this foundational understanding is absent, the system fractures.

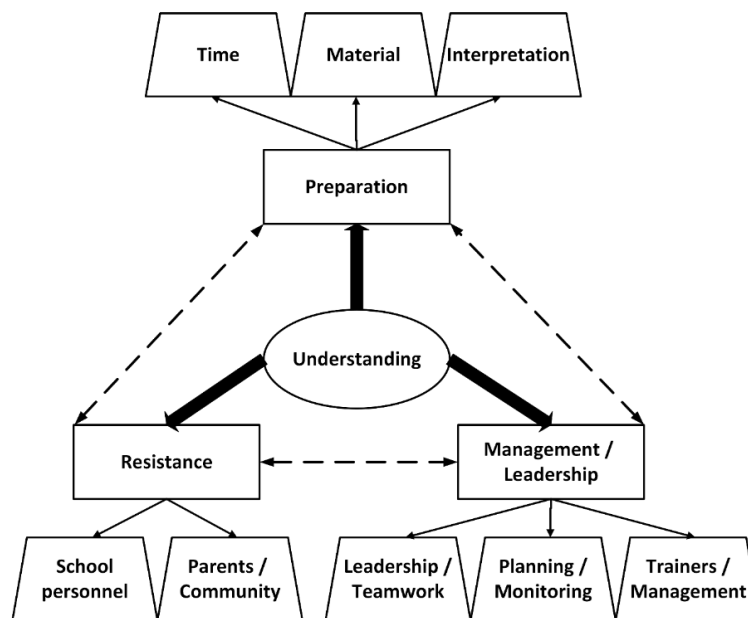


Figure 2 - Data coding themes

This central concept is articulated through three interrelated categories: Preparation, Management/Leadership, and Resistance. A general framework illustrating the interplay of these dynamics is presented in Figure 2.

⁵ [University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board](http://www.uwindsor.ca/research-ethics-board)

The illusion of preparation: time, material, and cognitive overload

The findings underscore the critical importance of comprehensive, empirically grounded preparation—a phase fundamentally compromised during the Québec reform. Thirteen of the fifteen participants expressed a pervasive sentiment of unpreparedness, directly attributing this to a vertical, top-down leadership model that marginalized educator input. Three salient themes characterized this preparatory deficit: time, material, and conceptual interpretation.

Time was identified as the most severe constraint. Despite a nominal four-year window between the *États Généraux* (1996) and the first classroom rollout (2000), the pace and scope of the mandated changes overwhelmed educators. The simultaneous overhaul of deeply ingrained pedagogical philosophies and subject-specific content—such as integrating technology into science or restructuring mathematics pathways—resulted in acute cognitive overload. Without adequate time to internalize these paradigms, many reverted to traditional practices. As TM-02 related, some educators deliberately shifted to teaching different grade levels to avoid the reform for as long as possible, hoping it would eventually be rolled back. The perceived timeline of this reform was composed of a very short preparation period, where stakeholders (teachers and principals) felt that their opinions and voices were unsolicited and unheard. Teacher training and material development was perceived as being done in separate silos without true collaboration and implication from those in the field (see Figure 3).

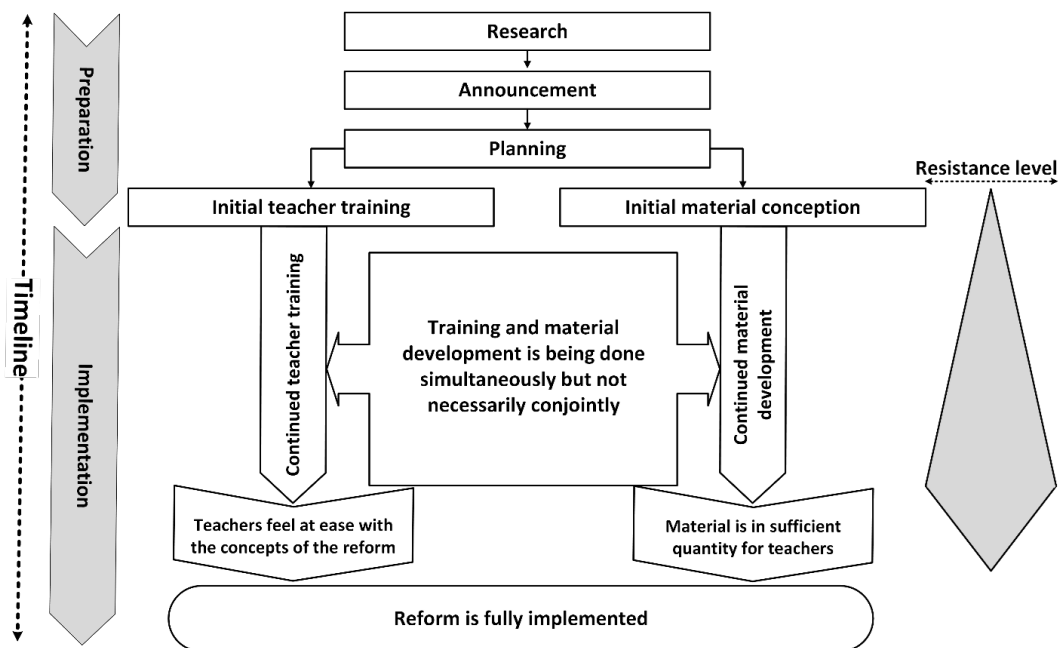


Figure 3 - Perceived timeline of the reform

Material readiness further exacerbated this friction. Participants reported a glaring lack of concrete, practice-oriented resources. Teachers such as TF-06, TM-02, and administrator AF-01 expressed frustration over the absence of empirical examples demonstrating how competency-based evaluation translates to everyday classroom realities. Instructional materials often arrived too late; as TM-04 noted, "teaching materials arrived at our schools at the end of August, only a few days before the start of the school year". This scarcity of "ready-to-use" resources, as highlighted by pedagogical advisor CP-01, fueled immediate skepticism.

Finally, the interpretation of the reform—moving from a knowledge-based to a competency-based model—remained conceptually opaque. Nine participants admitted to never fully grasping the pedagogical rationale, even decades later. This conceptual ambiguity fostered a profound disconnect between academia (the designers) and frontline teachers (the implementers). As TF-05 noted, universities and classrooms felt like "separate entities that did not work together", transforming what should have been a collaborative pedagogical shift into an externally

imposed mandate. The shortened preparation phase, creating a time constraint, pushed managers and administrators away from a collaborative form of leadership and towards a more vertical style to meet the demands of the reform calendar.

Management and leadership: the burden of verticality

Leadership dynamics emerged as the pivotal mechanism either facilitating or obstructing the reform. Participants heavily advocated for horizontal leadership—characterized by autonomy, creativity, and collaboration—yet consistently experienced vertical, bureaucratic constraints. As administrator AM-01 argued, "autonomy breeds leadership as well as creativity", a condition actively stifled by top-down mandates.

This verticality severely impacted school principals, who found themselves overwhelmed by administrative duties, diminishing their capacity for pedagogical leadership. While some, like AM-01, actively resisted this by prioritizing roaming the hallways during class hours to focus on pedagogy, others, like TM-05, indicated that administrative burdens made such leadership "simply impossible".

Pedagogical advisors, tasked with bridging the gap between policy and practice, faced a significant crisis of legitimacy. Their credibility was undermined by a perceived disconnect between the innovative methods they promoted and the traditional instructional methods they used to train teachers. TM-03 illustrated this paradox by recalling how advisors attempted to train educators in student-centered approaches using rigid, traditional lecturing. Because teachers evaluate the quality of the training alongside the message, sub-par professional development critically hindered adherence.

Furthermore, the implementation suffered from a systemic absence of monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Participants (such as AM-01 and TM-04) advocated for a data-driven, scientific approach to implementation, yet noted a complete lack of post-implementation evaluation. As TM-03 highlighted, there was "never any official documentation of the reform period, no feedback, and no evaluation" regarding its promised benefits. This technocratic oversight — prioritizing launch over longitudinal evaluation — ultimately undermined the reform's accountability and long-term viability. When understanding and credibility are brought into question, this leads to a crisis in legitimacy and various forms of resistance to the proposed change.

Resistance: a symptom of misalignment

In this context of rushed timelines, material scarcity, and vertical leadership, resistance became an inevitable and rational response from both school personnel and the broader community. Among educators, resistance was primarily a symptom of misunderstood expectations and fear. As AM-01 and TF-02 observed, opposition stemmed not necessarily from ideological disagreement, but from anxiety fueled by unfamiliar terminology and a lack of foundational understanding. As TM-02 and AM-02 powerfully summarized: "change happens when you have the motivation to change; you have to prepare the ground for change".

The vertical leadership style intensified this opposition, particularly among one specific union faction (FAE). Symbolic acts of defiance, such as the burning of curriculum documents witnessed by TF-01, underscored the depth of professional alienation.

Beyond the school walls, parental exclusion from the reform dialogue created a secondary wave of resistance. AM-02 and TF-04 recounted how parents, confused by competency-based report cards that lacked traditional numerical grades, relied on media narratives that often sensationalized controversy and educator dissent. Teachers and administrators found themselves inadequately equipped to answer parental inquiries, further eroding public trust.

Synthesizing the experience: toward a practitioner-informed framework

Despite the overwhelming initial friction, narrative data revealed an important temporal nuance: as training gradually improved and materials became accessible in the subsequent years, educator understanding increased, allowing them to engage more meaningfully with the pedagogical concepts (as mapped in Figure 3).

However, the enduring lesson from this case study lies in the discrepancy between how the reform was implemented and how practitioners believe it should have been enacted. As illustrated in Figure 4, participants envisioned a collaborative, horizontal framework prioritizing early experimentation, empirical research, and the simultaneous, well-resourced training of educators, parents, and pedagogical advisors before mandatory implementation. In their view, reformers should allow for a long preparation phase where stakeholders (educators, administrators and the community) have sufficient time to grasp the reasoning behind the reform,

thus allowing these stakeholders to foresee possible issues and work on them before they manifest themselves. A longer preparation phase would allow for a more collaborative leadership structure, where leaders would naturally emerge, instead of being imposed as they perceived in the Quebec reform, most likely due to the very short timeline given between the announcement and the first rollout. This desired structure, where the timeline is inverted from the one they perceived was used in the Quebec reform (see Figure 3 and Figure 4), would allow for a long preparation period and a short transition phase, instead of the opposite, and thus resistance would have been minimal and the implementation of such a structured reform would have been more harmonious. These perceptions of the leadership styles deployed in the actual reform and the way they envision a successful reform seem to align with current research on leadership styles, where vertical leadership is seen as more appropriate when time is an issue, and horizontal leadership is seen as an effective strategy for stakeholder adhesion but is more time-consuming.

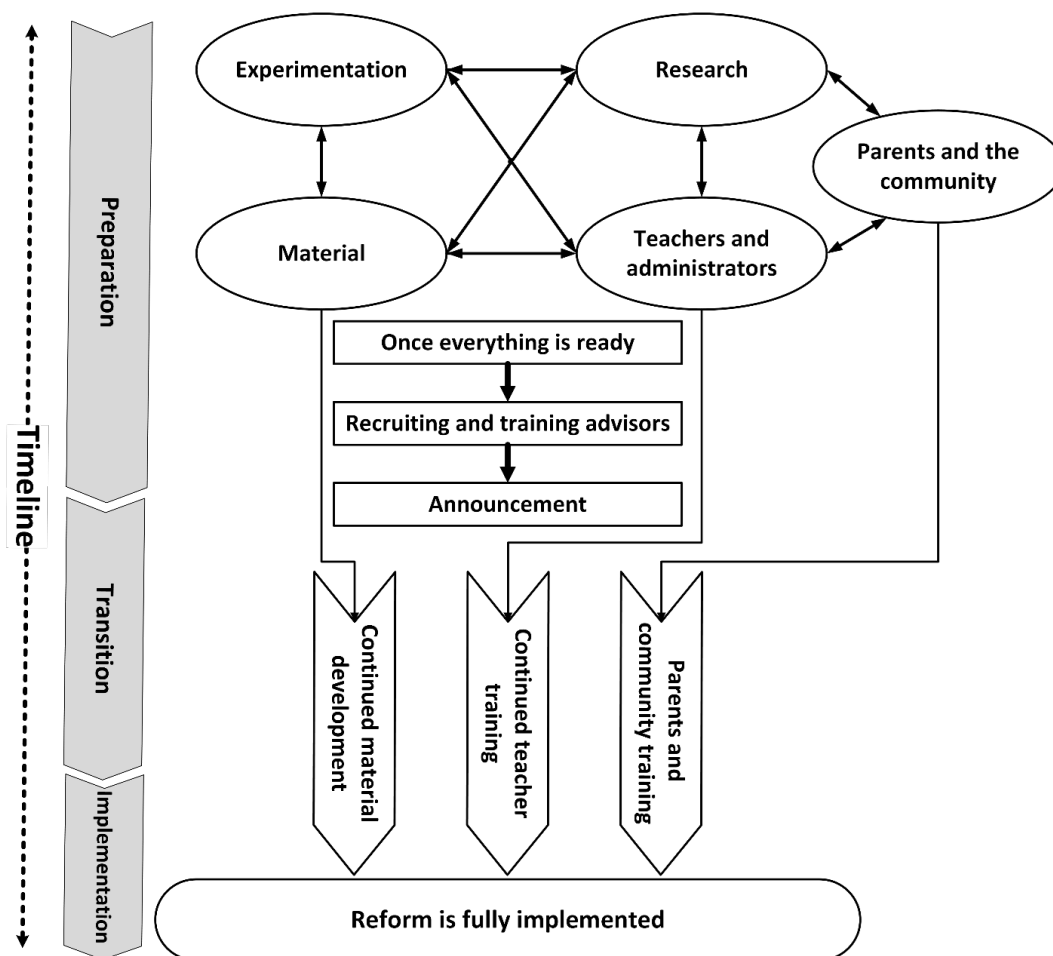


Figure 4 - Successful reform framework as perceived by the participants

Ultimately, this study confirms that the duration of a reform's rollout is less critical than its conceptual sequencing and leadership dynamics. Québec's politically fragmented, top-down implementation fostered alienation, whereas a depoliticized, practitioner-inclusive approach—echoing Finland's horizontal consensus-building—might have yielded a more resilient transformation. For future policy initiatives, this underscores that structural educational reform cannot succeed if the cognitive and emotional capacities of the frontline educators tasked with its execution are ignored.

Summary

Synthesizing the lived experience of reforms

The synthesis of the interview data reveals a stark misalignment between the systemic ambition of Québec's educational reform and the practical realities of its grassroots implementation. Driven by an accelerated timeline and a distinctly vertical leadership model, the simultaneous overhaul of both curriculum content and pedagogical philosophy precipitated profound cognitive overload among educators.

This top-down governance severely restricted teacher involvement during the critical planning phases, positioning educators as passive recipients rather than active co-constructors of change. The implementation was further compromised by structural inadequacies: professional development was frequently deemed insufficient, often delivered by trainers lacking perceived pedagogical credibility, and vital instructional materials were delayed, arriving only as the reform was already unfolding in classrooms. Consequently, educators were thrust into a massive paradigm shift without the requisite tools or conceptual understanding to navigate it. This systemic lack of preparedness became the primary catalyst for widespread resistance—a resistance rooted not necessarily in ideological opposition, but in professional insecurity and a failure of leadership to communicate the reform's underlying rationale.

The temporal dynamics of resistance

However, the narrative data also uncovers a crucial temporal evolution regarding this resistance. As illustrated in the framework mapping the participants' lived experiences (Figure 3), the initial surge in professional and public opposition was directly proportional to the lack of conceptual clarity and material readiness. The data demonstrates that resistance was not static; as training gradually aligned with classroom realities and instructional materials became widely accessible in the ensuing years, educators' understanding deepened. This delayed conceptual mastery ultimately empowered teachers to engage more authentically with the reform's student-centered objectives and effectively address the concerns of parents and the community, thereby facilitating a gradual decline in systemic friction.

Discussion

The paradox of process over pedagogy

This study set out to critically examine the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding the initial implementation of Québec's early-2000s curriculum reform. While the original research focus sought to evaluate reactions to the reform's pedagogical shifts, the narrative inquiry revealed a profound, unanticipated reality: for frontline educators, the sequencing, timelines, and preparatory phases were more significant than the curriculum content itself.

A paradox emerged from the data. Despite the intense initial stress, widespread disengagement, and systemic friction, once the reform was fully implemented—and appropriately resourced with functional materials and comprehensive training—many educators eventually acknowledged its pedagogical strengths. The shift toward student-centred, competency-based learning was ultimately recognized as a valuable evolution. This highlights a fundamental implication for educational policy: the intense resistance documented was not an ideological rejection of constructivist pedagogy, but rather a structural rejection of a flawed implementation process. It demonstrates that even the most progressive educational theories will falter if the operational vehicle used to deliver them is broken.

The disconnect between expected and enacted leadership

The findings sharply illustrate the systemic tensions between vertical and horizontal leadership paradigms. The study highlights a severe disconnect between educators' expectations of their professional roles and the reality of

the reform's governance. Teachers and principals, viewing themselves as pedagogical experts, anticipated a participatory, horizontal role in shaping the reform's deployment. Instead, they were largely relegated to the role of passive recipients within a highly technocratic, vertical hierarchy.

Only a minority of participants (teachers engaged in post-graduate studies and pedagogical advisors) reported feeling actively involved in shaping the reform's trajectory. For the majority, the top-down initiative was characterized by insufficient communication, inadequate training, and a glaring lack of clarity regarding its scientific and empirical underpinnings. This verticality effectively stripped educators of their professional autonomy, validating the literature's assertion that top-down mandates tend to alienate the very practitioners required to enact them.

A practitioner-informed blueprint for future reforms

By contrasting the flawed historical rollout with the lived expertise of the participants, this study offers a corrective blueprint for future policy initiatives. Figure 4 illustrates a summarized framework of a successful reform process, not as imagined by policymakers, but as explicitly structured and perceived by the practitioners who navigate its consequences

This practitioner-informed framework subverts the expedited, vertical model. It advocates for a highly horizontal, inclusive approach that demands robust pre-implementation phases. Central to this model is the necessity of early, localized experimentation, continuous empirical research, and the comprehensive development of instructional materials before widespread deployment. Furthermore, it underscores the critical need to recruit, train, and validate pedagogical advisors prior to official announcements, ensuring they possess the practical credibility required to lead their peers. Finally, this framework integrates parents and the community as active participants in the transition, rather than treating them as an afterthought.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the success of systemic educational reform is intrinsically linked to the principles of horizontal leadership. To ensure both pedagogical efficacy and crucial educator buy-in, policymakers must transition from imposing reform upon schools to co-constructing it with them.

Conclusion

This case study delved into the lived experiences of educators navigating Québec's late-1990s curriculum reform, exposing a profound dichotomy: a philosophically progressive pedagogical vision compromised by a highly vertical, accelerated, and disconnected implementation process. By amplifying the voices of those tasked with enacting this massive systemic shift, this research reveals both the enduring strengths of competency-based education and the critical socio-political failures that marred its deployment.

The evaluation void and the politicization of pedagogy

Despite the reform's longevity and the incremental modifications it has undergone over nearly three decades, a glaring systemic gap remains: the reform has never been subjected to a rigorous, longitudinal evaluation of its pedagogical efficacy. As participants astutely highlighted, subsequent adjustments to the educational system—such as fluctuating report card frequencies or grading scales—have often been superficial, driven more by shifting political agendas than by empirical educational imperatives. This persistent lack of data-driven assessment comparing student outcomes across cohorts severely undermines the ongoing legitimacy of the province's educational framework. It highlights a troubling reality where political optics consistently overshadow pedagogical science.

Toward sustainable transformation: a generational approach

Importantly, these findings suggest that the structural sequencing of a reform, rather than its sheer duration, dictates stakeholder adherence. Successful educational transformation requires a paradigm shift in how governments approach systemic change. Drawing parallels with the bipartisan, long-term planning required for major public infrastructure projects, this study advocates for a radically depoliticized, generational approach to educational reform.

Just as Finland's renowned educational overhaul benefited from political stability and a unified, multi-decade vision, Québec's politically fragmented implementation serves as a cautionary tale of how inconsistent policy continuity diminishes educator engagement. In today's highly polarized political climate, the grand, sweeping overhauls of the past may no longer be viable. Instead, smaller, incremental, and highly targeted reforms may

offer a more sustainable path forward, provided they are resourced adequately and implemented transparently.

Final thoughts

Ultimately, this research contributes insights into the micro-political dynamics of educational change. It reinforces an imperative: regardless of the scale or scope of a policy initiative, successful reform hinges entirely on the early, horizontal, and sustained involvement of educational practitioners. Policymakers must recognize that teachers and principals are not mere conduits for state mandates; they are the intellectual infrastructure of the education system. To avoid replicating the costly failures of the past, future reforms must be collaboratively built upon their expertise, honoring their foundational role in shaping the educational landscape.

References

- Ahonen, Arto K. "Finland: Success through Equity—the Trajectories in Pisa Performance." *Improving a country's education: PISA 2018 results in 10 countries* (2021): 121-36. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59031-4_6.
- Banks, James A. *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*. Routledge, 2015.
- Barma, Sylvie, and Barbara Bader. "How One Science Teacher Redefines a Science Teaching Practice around a Theme: A Case Study in the Context of Educational Reform in Quebec." *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education* 8, no. 1 (2013): 131-61. http://www.ijese.net/makale_indir/IJESE_1555_article_58395d54c72fb.pdf.
- Bloom, David E. "Education in a Globalized World." *World Economics* 7, no. 4 (2006): 87. <https://econpapers.repec.org/article/wejwldcen/257.htm>.
- Carson, Jay B, Paul E Tesluk, and Jennifer A Marrone. "Shared Leadership in Teams: An Investigation of Antecedent Conditions and Performance." *Academy of management Journal* 50, no. 5 (2007): 1217-34. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.20159921>.
- Cherubini, Lorenzo. "Lessons Learned from American Educational Legislation for Canadian Educators: No Child Left Behind and the Ontario Aboriginal Education Framework." *Journal of American Indian Education* (2010): 69-85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43608590>.
- Clandinin, D Jean. *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*. Sage publications, 2006. doi:10.4135/9781452226552.
- . "Teacher Education as Narrative Inquiry." In *Journeys in Narrative Inquiry*, 79-90: Routledge, 2019.
- Cyrenne, Diane, Sharon Smith, Marylou Harvey, Geneviève Boisclair-Châteauvert, Simon Larose, and Stéphane Duchesne. "Perceptions De L'enseignement Et Réussite Éducative Au Secondaire: Une Analyse Comparative Selon Que Les Élèves Ont Été Exposés Ou Non Au Renouveau Pédagogique." (2014). <https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/education/publications-adm/education/evaluations-programmes/Renouveau-pedagogique-secondaire-rapport-evaluation.pdf>.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. Teachers College Press, 2015. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a7ee/faf0bb4fe0efac19c3035fc55aa3a5f13c6.pdf>.
- DeMitchell, Todd, and Joan Stipetic. "The Superintendent, the School Board, and Free Speech: A Question of Loyalty." *The Clearing House* 68, no. 6 (1995): 367-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.1995.9957273>.
- Dewey, J. "September. Experience and Education." Paper presented at the The educational forum, 1986.
- Egan, Kieran. "What Is Curriculum?". *Curriculum Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (1978): 65-72.
- Eisner, Elliott. "" Educational Objectives: Help or Hindrance?" Elliott Eisner [1967]." *American Journal of Education* 91, no. 4 (1983): 549-60. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/443718>.
- Elliott, John. "The Curriculum Experiment: Meeting the Challenge of Social Change." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 47, no. 2 (1999). <https://philpapers.org/rec/ELLTCE>.
- Ganon-Shilon, Sherry, and Chen Schechter. "Doubting Leadership: Principals Shaping a School Doubting Process within a National Curriculum Reform." *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 55, no. 4 (2023): 400-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2022.2097650>.
- Gay, Geneva. "Teaching to and through Cultural Diversity." *Curriculum inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 48-70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>.
- Gunnulfsen, Ann Elisabeth, and Hedvig Abrahamsen. "School Leadership and the Realizing of a Curriculum Reform: Supporting Resources, External Actors, and Dilemmas." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 69, no. 7 (2025): 1464-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2434821>.
- Habermas, J. "Knowledge and Human Interests (Orig. Title: Erkenntnis Und Interesse, First Published in 1968)." (1987).

- Hallinger, Philip. "The Evolving Role of American Principals: From Managerial to Instructional to Transformational Leaders." *Journal of educational administration* 30, no. 3 (1992). <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578239210014306>.
- Ho, Esther Sui-Chu. "Accomplishment and Challenges of Hong Kong Education System: What We Have Learned from Pisa." *Educational Journal* 31, no. 2 (2003): 1-30. https://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~hkcesa/articles/Ho_2004_ej_v31n2-v32n1_1-30.pdf.
- Ho, Jeanne, David Hung, Puay Huat Chua, and Norhayati Binte Munir. "Integrating Distributed with Ecological Leadership: Through the Lens of Activity Theory." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 52, no. 2 (2024): 304-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221077156>.
- Ittner, Doris, Gerda Hagenauer, and Tina Hascher. "Swiss Principals' Emotions, Basic Needs Satisfaction and Readiness for Change during Curriculum Reform." *Journal of educational change* 20 (2019): 165-92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09339-1>.
- Ivanitskaya, Lana, Deborah Clark, George Montgomery, and Ronald Primeau. "Interdisciplinary Learning: Process and Outcomes." *Innovative higher education* 27 (2002): 95-111. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021105309984>. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000204447>.
- Jonnaert, Philippe, and Armand M'Batika. *Les Réformes Curriculaires: Regards Croisés*. Vol. 15: PUQ, 2004. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000204447>.
- Lambert, Karen, and Dawn Penney. "'It Was Just as Political as It Was Pragmatic': The (in) Formal Roles and Policy Work of 'Curriculum Leaders' in a Federated Education Context." *Research Papers in Education* 38, no. 4 (2023): 636-60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2022.2065519>.
- Levine, Murray, and Adeline Levine. "Education Deformed: No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top: 'This Almost Reads Like Our Business Plans'." *American journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82, no. 1 (2012): 104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2011.01142.x>.
- Lipsky, Michael. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2010. doi:10.1086/292470.
- Loh, Jason, and Guangwei Hu. "Understanding Middle Leaders' Concerns in Curriculum Change: A Missing Perspective." *Asia Pacific journal of education* 41, no. 4 (2021): 711-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1997711>.
- Mathou, Cécile. "Réformes Par Compétences Et Gouvernance Par Les Résultats: Mouvements Convergents Ou En Tension? Le Cas Du Renouveau Pédagogique Au Québec." *Éducation et sociétés* 43, no. 1 (2019): 155-69. <https://doi.org/10.3917/es.043.0155>.
- Müller, Ralf, Shankar Sankaran, Nathalie Drouin, Anne-Live Vaagaasar, Michiel C Bekker, and Karuna Jain. "A Theory Framework for Balancing Vertical and Horizontal Leadership in Projects." *International Journal of Project Management* 36, no. 1 (2018): 83-94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2017.07.003>.
- Niemi, Hannele. "Education Reforms for Equity and Quality: An Analysis from an Educational Ecosystem Perspective with Reference to Finnish Educational Transformations." *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal* 11, no. 2 (2021): 13-35. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1309479.pdf>.
- Pearce, Craig L, and Jay A Conger. "All Those Years Ago." *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership* (2003): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229539>.
- Quebec Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation. *Pour Une Évaluation Au Service Des Apprentissages Et De La Réussite Des Élèves*. Avis au ministre de l'Éducation. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec (2010). <https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/publications/evaluation-service-des-apprentissages-50-0473/>.
- Rizvi, Fazal, and Bob Lingard. *Globalizing Education Policy*. Routledge, 2009. doi:10.4324/9780203867396. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000222400>.
- Sahlberg, Pasi. "Finnish Lessons: Mengajar Lebih Sedikit, Belajar Lebih Banyak Ala Finland. Diterjemahkan Dari Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland." New York: Teachers College Press, 2011.
- Salonen-Hakomäki, Sanna-Mari, Tiina Soini, Janne Pietarinen, and Kirsi Pyhältö. "Leading Complex Educational Change Via National Participative Reforms? A Case of Finnish Core Curriculum Reform Leadership." *Journal of Educational Change* 25, no. 3 (2024): 531-54. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-024-09502-3>.
- Soini, Tiina, Kirsi Pyhältö, and Janne Pietarinen. "Shared Sense-Making as Key for Large Scale Curriculum Reform in Finland." (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83867-735-020211012>.
- Stake, Robert E. "Qualitative Case Studies." (2005).
- Stenhouse, Lawrence. "An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development." (*No Title*) (1975). <https://lccn.loc.gov/75325847>.
- Sullanmaa, Jenni, Kirsi Pyhältö, Janne Pietarinen, and Tiina Soini. "Relationships between Change Management, Knowledge Sharing, Curriculum Coherence and School Impact in National Curriculum Reform: A Longitudinal Approach." *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 27, no. 6 (2024): 1395-419.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1972165>.
- Sweller, John. "Cognitive Load Theory." In *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 37-76: Elsevier, 2011.
- Traver-Martí, Joan Andrés, Belén Ballesteros-Velázquez, Nagore Ozerinjauregi Beldarrain, and María del Carmen Cerezo Maiquez. "Leading the Curriculum Towards Social Change: Distributed Leadership and the Inclusive School." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 51, no. 3 (2023): 554-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143221991849>.
- Tyler, RW. "Education: Curriculum Development and Evaluation: Oral History Transcript." *Berkeley, CA: University of California, Regional Oral History Office* (1987).
- Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, and Michael Cole. *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard university press, 1978.
- Walker, Allan, Qian Haiyan, and Zhang Shuang. "Secondary School Principals in Curriculum Reform: Victims or Accomplices?". *Frontiers of education in China* 6, no. 3 (2011): 388-403. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-011-0138-y>.
- Wheeler-Bell, Quentin. "Standing in Need of Justification: Michael Apple, Rs Peters and Jürgen Habermas." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 561-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2017.1279219>.
- Zhang, Yaxing, and Deborah Henderson. "Interactions between Principals and Teacher Leaders in the Context of Chinese Curriculum Reform: A Micropolitical Perspective." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 45, no. 5 (2018): 603-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0275-x>.

Simon Landry is a doctoral student at the Université de Montréal. He holds a bachelor's degree (B.Ed.) in education from Université Laval, in Quebec City, Quebec Canada (2003). He also holds a master's degree (M.Ed.) in curriculum studies from the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario, Canada (2024). He is currently completing his doctoral thesis in the field of generative artificial intelligence in education.