

# Question

*How do we foster transformative teaching & learning within existing traditional structures?*

Sarah Garr considers the impact of concrete and intangible structures as education moves from traditional to transformative.

While curriculum changes are leading us towards a significant re-fashioning of our role as educators, the reality is that many schools and districts are constrained by traditional structures that can pose significant barriers to meaningful and sustained growth.

Traditional structures can encompass everything from the concrete, (the physical spaces of our school community) to the abstract (mindsets, attitudes, belief systems).

Let me begin with one example of the concrete. While the physical space of a school community does not necessarily impede transformational teaching and learning, it can pose a challenge. With many schools traditionally designed as a collection of “little boxes,” how do we encourage teachers and students to move beyond the walls of their classrooms to engage in collaborative learning experiences?

As part of the West Coast Regional Exchange (WCRE), facilitated by Stephen Hurley and Max Cooke from the Canadian Education Association, I had the opportunity to marvel at the beauty of our venue, Norma Rose Point (Vancouver), a school which was designed for teacher collaboration. Although Principal Rosa Fazio was quick to point out that it is more about a mindset than a physical space, I couldn't help but think about the impact that teaching and learning in such a space might have on the hearts and minds of the members of the school community. My sentiment

was later reinforced through a conversation I had with the head teacher of an alternate program. He shared his ongoing struggle to convince “his kids” that they were valued within a physical space that was aging and run down.

Transformative teaching and learning should and can happen within traditional and sometimes less than ideal physical spaces, but I don't believe that we can discount the impact, both positive and negative, that those spaces can have on staff and students. A school community is not confined, or defined, by a “bricks and mortar” structure, but it can provide a supportive foundation.

That is, not an insurmountable barrier, but a factor to be considered. Other examples of concrete traditional structures might include elements such as timetables, staffing, budget constraints, and Ministry guidelines and policies.

In addition to these more concrete structures, however, there are less “tangible” traditional structures to consider. The truth is that by our very nature, humans are creatures of habit. In times of uncertainty and flux, we tend to default to familiar, traditional modes of thinking. The “known” is comfortable. It's safe. As such, despite the implementation of a new curriculum, many educators continue to teach the way that they were taught.

With a curriculum that challenges students to explore, take risks, and venture into a world of creativity and inquiry, educators must take up this same challenge, to become comfortable with be-

ing uncomfortable, and to model the same growth mindset that we are hoping to instill in our students. How successful will the integration of a transformed curriculum be if it is combined with traditional modes of thinking?

With the integration of a new curriculum we have an opportunity to transform learning for our students. But it's not enough to squeeze a new curriculum into our existing traditional structures. If teaching and learning do not begin to look significantly different in BC schools, then we will have failed our students.

There are no easy answers. But we must continue to have conversations,

*We now know better and so we need to do better.*

mindful of existing traditional structures. Within the unique contexts of our districts and schools, what do we identify

as the non-negotiables, those elements which we are unable to change? And what are the elements that we are able to address and transform to facilitate the types of learning experiences that we know are best for our students?

As Stephen Hurley reminded members at the WCRE, “an issue is where an opportunity and a challenge meet.” Rather than viewing existing traditional structures as insurmountable barriers to transformational teaching and learning, we can view these as opportunities for innovative and creative solutions. I look forward to continuing this conversation, both with my colleagues in BC, across Canada, and globally. 

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