Listen! Can You Hear Me?

Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners' Perspectives and

Experiences Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment

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Abstract

Listen! Can you hear me?
Unheard voices: A critical ethnography of college practitioners' perspectives and experiences working in a competency-based mediated environment

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The expansion of neoliberal globalization has influenced the marketization of education and led the charge to shape competency-based educational policies. In Québec, Canada, public school curricula have mandated competency-based education (CBE) to address and remedy student retention rates and employability concerns. While the stated goal proposed by reform policies for instituting CBE is to eliminate social and economic inequities, teachers are concerned that it may exacerbate inequality gaps among our most vulnerable populations. A critical ethnographic methodology was employed to structure and analyze individual interview narratives of ten CÉGEP college teachers, using critical theory and critical pedagogy as philosophical underpinnings. Additionally, I examined the neoliberal marketization of education to shed some light on the conditions that influence CBE practices.

The results indicated that the conditions under which CBE persists alienate college teachers from their work and perpetuate educational, structural, and societal inequalities. Teachers' feedback discloses that the excessive focus on CBE and the execution of its practices does not align with their beliefs of the experience education should offer students. The findings revealed disproportionate marginalizing of teachers' voices and participation in decision-making and workplace changes due to inequalities generated by neoliberal hierarchical connections. Consequently, my research shifted teachers' roles from reform implementers to allowing them to participate in interview dialogues about educational changes. Teachers' voices illustrate that such collaborative initiatives could result in educational progress, equitable changes, and positive effects on professional development. These findings support the notion that more intentional collaboration among educators is critical to re-address power inequalities, eradicate undemocratic neoliberal practices and sustain educational reform. It also suggests that teachers' involvement in critical discourse could be leveraged to work toward positive educational change. Given that little research has conducted an in-depth analysis of teachers' views and experiences in fulfilling CBE mandates, my thesis offers insights into how teachers can deliberate and mobilize their responses to address and challenge unilateral neoliberal competency-based reforms.

Keywords: competency-based education, neoliberal, critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical ethnography

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Chapter One

Introduction

Contextual Background

Educational improvement is vital for individuals to advance in society. To this end, competency-based education (CBE) has gained interest and acceptance (Sistermans, 2020; Stewart, 2021; see also Anderson, 2017; Bogo et al., 2011, p. 275;). However, CBE benefits for educational improvement and its efficacy are primarily unproven, causing many to question the driving forces behind such rapid changes and the actors contributing to its mandate (Anderson-Levitt et al., 2021; Efremova, 2021; Henrich, 2016; Muñoz & Araya, 2017; see also, Brockmann et al., 2008; Ellström & Kock, 2008; Kelchen, 2015; McCall, 2013; Murray, 2009; Ordonez, 2014). Given the increasing focus on CBE and its alignment with workplace needs, my thesis research aims to explore neoliberal market ideologies' influence on competency-based reforms. This involves examining how these practices perpetuate inequalities and emphasizing the need for more research to capture and document teachers' subjective experiences within these learning environments. Hence, it is essential to identify the driving forces and key actors to understand whether this type of educational reform is in the best interest of learners and teachers.

CBE is perceived as having the ability to effectively demonstrate theoretical and applied knowledge (Efremova, 2021; Prokes et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021; see also Le Boterf, 1994; Peleckis et al., 2013; Spencer & Spencer, 1993;). Competency-based education allows learners to activate and transfer resources in various contexts or settings to complete a required work-related task. Policymakers hail CBE as the approach that will revolutionize educational practices; many sectors, including academia, have yet to entirely accept this reform, including universities and schools (Kelchen, 2015; Pasha, 2019). Among researchers and practitioners who have

experienced the impact of CBE daily, acceptance of competency-based education reform is not widespread (Anderson-Levitt et al., 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also Bogo et al., 2011; Kelchen, 2015).

The competency-based model, which claims to be robust for education and dominates traditional pedagogical approaches,[1] has encountered strong teacher resistance. Limited attention has been given to the "CBE model's effects on the actual practitioners" (Hodge, 2015, p. 144; Ramanathan et al., 2022). Additionally, neoliberal ideology that influences [CBE] policies dismisses the input and "embodied knowledge" of teachers (Hodge, 2015, p. 144) and diminishes the "discontent and objection that teachers display toward its implementation" (Bogo et al., 2011; Datnow et al., 2013; Hodge, 2015, p. 144). For instance, while the growth in the use of competency-based practices may indicate its benefits and success, scholarly literature, current research findings, observations, and casual discussions with colleagues substantiate a need for more research in this area (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Cheng & Huang, 2018; Ellström & Kock, 2008; Kelchen, 2015; Ordonez, 2014).

Furthermore, interactions among teachers, local administration, and reform policymakers have created positive and negative tensions, with the latter being significant and ongoing. For example, teachers feel that power holders have been unresponsive to their concerns and

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[1] A critical difference between CBE practices and traditional pedagogy is that the former reflects the influence of neoliberal values by fostering economic competitiveness, restructuring education to focus on competencies for mobilization in the workplace and neglecting to acknowledge the relevance of educators' involvement in reform development. The latter, however, recognizes the teacher as a critical facilitator in knowledge construction and dissemination. The teacher's presence, involvement and perspectives are still pertinent in traditional pedagogical practices. In short, teachers in competency-based settings are knowledge transmitters and implementers of the assigned neoliberal agenda. In contrast, traditional pedagogy acknowledges the value of their embodied experiences and perspectives.

challenges and are unwilling to accept their contributions to pertinent workplace changes. Another critical tension concerns teachers' limited involvement in decision-making, particularly the most recent reform of the Social Science programs in CÉGEPS, which is structured in a competency-based framework. This example demonstrates how decisions to implement CBE are made by leadership with minimal input on educational reforms from teachers (Pasha, 2019; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also Bogo et al., 2011; Gonzalez & Carney, 2014; Kelchen, 2015; Ordonez, 2014). Also, failure to value the contribution of teachers to CBE processes and outcomes and failure to acknowledge their agency contributes to a lack of support received from teachers (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 624; see also Goodson, 2003; Nieveen, 2011; Priestley, 2011). As a result, CBE practices often contradict teachers' lived realities (Cheng & Huang, 2018; Torres et al., 2018; see also Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ellström & Kock, 2008). Therefore, the literature argues that criticisms suggest that "reforms are developed from a narrow perspective and do not reflect the true essence of education, ignoring important stakeholders such as teachers" (Neimi, 2021, p. 22).

Teachers are vital to effectively implementing curriculum transformation efforts and the sustainability of the adopted curriculum. Hence, as the pressure for productivity in the classroom environment increases, more research focuses on practical and engaging instructional practices for teachers (Aydarova et al., 2022; Ramanathan et al., 2022; Bullough, 2016; see also Andrews & Higson, 2008; Earl et al., 2003; Kelchen, 2015; Johnson, 2001; McCully, 2006). To ensure efficiency and sustainability in executing educational reforms, the importance of teachers' agency and input in decision-making, especially in carrying out their daily work, can no longer be disregarded. My research focuses on the English college sector, collège d'enseignement

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général et professionnel (CÉGEP) in Québec and explores instructors' subjectivities and experiences working in a competency-based environment at the college level.

In this chapter, I first briefly discuss the Québec context of a competency-based curriculum, and a broader analysis based on existing literature, examining the relationship between neoliberalism and CBE. To conclude chapter one, I share my research position and motivation for pursuing the study and present my research arguments and questions. To better understand these questions and the underlying relevance of my research, I have developed definitions of key concepts to clarify how I applied them in my dissertation.

Operationalization of Concepts

For my research, the following definitions have been operationalized.

Reform refers to local and provincial educational initiatives mandated by the government and the daily changes and decision-making that correspond with workplace practices.

Competency-based reform explains the process of amending educational issues and inequalities by adopting a path that weans schools off government dependence and promotes directives aligned with privatization and market-driven ideologies.

Competency-based education, a key concept used throughout my dissertation, characterizes a neoliberal pedagogical approach shaped by economic and market-based criteria. Thus, it suppresses critical thinking and critical consciousness to maintain the status quo.

Competency refers to being equipped with employable skills and qualities to carry out and complete a work-related task demanded by the industry or market.

Standardized approaches, exemplified by CBE, enforce a one-size-fits-all learning path for all students to attain mandated competencies and outcomes, irrespective of individual differences and diverse realities. This disregards the unique needs and strengths of each learner.

Neoliberal globalization/neoliberalism, throughout my dissertation, pertains to the marketization of education and curriculum to meet workplace demands, resulting in privatization and reduced government management and funding of public educational institutions.

Knowledge-based economy emphasizes the importance of knowledge and information technology in economic growth and to meet workforce demands.

Marketisation explains the incorporation of market, economic, and business-like concepts, ideas, and practices into education, resulting in a competitive nature for obtaining funding.

The status quo explicates compliance with undemocratic and inequitable unilateral neoliberal reform policies that deprofessionalize teaching practices and limit teachers' agency in decision-making processes about their work.

Agency is conceptualized as acknowledging the importance of instructors' views, beliefs, attitudes, suggestions, experiences, and practical knowledge relative to changes in workplace practices and reform by utilizing their expertise at all levels of educational development policies.

Sustainability describes instructors' continued commitment to achieving educational reform mandates despite the challenges, criticisms, and budget reductions, resulting in effective implementation and sustained reform practices.

Participants refer to terms such as instructors, educators, teachers, and subjects interviewed or surveyed for the research study. These concepts are used interchangeably throughout the research to represent participants as embodied knowers, thus embracing them as active and contributing beings to the execution and overall outcomes of this study.

Québec's Educational System: A Competency-Based Perspective

The Canadian educational system, specifically in the province of Québec, underwent major reform during the late 1990s. In response to global employability concerns and the increasing number of school dropout rates plaguing the province, policymakers conducted a major overhaul of education systems locally, anticipating that it would help address such issues. A critical aspect of the educational system reform is restructuring schools' curricula to prepare students to meet the needs of an increasingly technological and economically globalized world. Consequently, implementing a competency-based teaching and learning approach was a significant part of Québec reform efforts. The shift from a system linked to a curriculum to one based on employable outcomes (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1996; Ministère de l'Éducation, 1994; Muñoz & Araya, 2017; Savage, 2017; see also Brockmann et al., 2008) required a mandated list of competencies students should possess at the end of their studies. The overall justification provided by MELS (2001) for restructuring the curriculum to reflect a CBE included:

> establishing a different relationship to knowledge and refocusing on training students to think. The idea of a competency reflects the conviction that students should begin at school to develop the complex skills that will permit them to adapt to a changing environment later on. It implies the development of flexible intellectual tools that can be adjusted to changes and be used in the acquisition of new learnings (p. 4).

The competency-based approach transforms education to be flexible and adapt to new ways of knowledge construction, which involves "learning by doing" (Stewart, 2021; see also, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 1996, p. 14). Therefore, implementing a competency-based curriculum provides students with the necessary skills for the knowledge-based economy.

Pre-School and Elementary Level Competency-Based Structure Overview

With the mandate that all school systems adopt a competency-based approach to teaching, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) developed the Québec Education Program (QEP) curriculum to implement reform objectives effectively. The QEP consists of nine cross-curricular competencies, broad themes for learning, a preschool education program and programs of study organized into five subject areas (MELS, 2001). According to MELS (2001), as shown in Table 1, cross-curricular competencies "involves developing students' intellectual, methodological, personal and social, and communication skills" (p. 9), and the broad areas aspect focuses on students' ability to deal with real-life situations and make connections between school and everyday life learning.

Table 1

Québec Education Program Cross-Curricular Competencies

Competency general focus	Specific competencies
Intellectual competencies	To use information, to solve problems, to exercise critical judgment, and to use creativity.
Methodological competencies	To adopt effective work methods, to use information and communication technologies (ICT).
Personal and social competencies	To construct his/her identity, to cooperate with others.
Communication-related competency	To communicate appropriately.

The preschool education program focuses on competencies that contribute to overall child development. These competencies include the development of motor skills, building self-esteem, effectively interacting with others, resolving conflicts, communicating in both oral and written language, constructing and understanding the world, and developing work methods by working alone or with other students (MELS, 2001). The broad areas of learning also focus on health and well-being, career planning and entrepreneurship, environmental awareness and consumer rights and responsibilities, media literacy, citizenship, and community life (MELS,

2001, p. 9). The subject-specific competencies align with each subject's educational objectives and content knowledge (MELS, 2001). Additionally, most recently, the Québec government and the Ministry of Education structured a curriculum for preschool education for four-year-olds and five-year-olds. The preschool cycle program "aims to foster global development of all children by taking preventive action to meet their needs" (Government of Québec, Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 3)

Furthermore, *career development* is added at the high school level (MELS, 2004), and the curriculum is divided into two cycles. In secondary cycle one, the general competencies are the same as at the elementary school level but are more advanced. MELS awards students who complete the program with credits at the end of the two years. The cycle two competencies facilitate students in transitioning to the appropriate "vocational training centres or college-level institutions for pre-university education or technical training" (MELS, 2007, p. 6). In addition, according to MELS (2007), the "*work-oriented training path* enables students to develop a set of competencies related to employability and can lead directly to the job market" (p. 6). In cycle two, MELS awards credits at the end of each year to those who are successful. Upon the successful completion of their studies, students receive a diploma or certificate attesting to their studies and the level of their competency development (Government of Québec, Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 18).

CÉGEP College Program Renewal Process

In 1993, college education in Québec underwent what is referred to as the reform or "renewal process" (Howe, 2017, para. 2). This renewal process emphasized that the subject-specific content taught must be structured to enhance the development of the targeted competencies. Reform changes mandated by the ministry required that teachers modify

"disciplinary content … to resituate in a skills development perspective" (Howe, 2017, para. 2). As Howe (2017) suggests, in this context, "the competency approach refers to planning teaching and learning that focuses primarily on the development of competencies" (para. 3).

Furthermore, predefined competencies later obtained at the college level are connected to and measured regarding workplace performance. Cross-curricular competencies implemented in CÉGEP are referred to as "common competencies" (Côté, 2012, p. 1), which is "an ability to act, succeed, and progress that allows one to apply in varied spheres of activity forms of knowledge (content knowledge, skills, attitudes) acquired in a specific context" (Comité-Conseil de la formation Générale report, 2007, p. 2). As an effort to build upon the work done at the elementary and high school levels, MELS defined five common competencies that should underpin college pedagogy: (1) problem-solving, (2) exercising creativity, (3) adapting to new situations, (4) exercising a sense of responsibility, and (5) communicating (Côté, 2012, p. 1). These five competencies were "formally introduced along with the dissemination of the new specifications for general CÉGEP education in 2010" (Côté, 2012, p. 1).

Reforms or curriculum changes at the college level are developed, structured, and prescribed by the Ministry of Education of Québec. Additionally, the education ministry or policymakers initially decide on various programs and course competency revisions. This developmental process rarely includes immediate teacher involvement. Consultation with teachers comes later when collaborating on preparing documents and procedures for effective implementation. As we fast-forward from the 1993 reform to designing and developing current educational changes, there has not been much change concerning teachers' lack of concrete input. Therefore, a top-down approach has always been the norm.

Furthermore, this approach to reform decision-making has been criticized since the initial implementation of CBE. For instance, in Québec, many felt that the thought and effort invested in introducing and implementing CBE were inadequate, particularly concerning effective communication with key experts (teachers). For example, stakeholders such as parents, teachers, other school personnel, and even the public demonstrated significant resistance to the need for this new reform (Bouchard, 2014; Wilson, 1997). At the initial stages of CBE, the reform's primary relevance was resisted, particularly by educators. Competency-based practices were met with much ridicule, specifically related to the concept itself and the cross-curricular competencies (Wilson, 1997; Neault, 2014). Additional shortcomings included failing to provide coherent information about learning assessments and how the change from percentages to letter grades would accurately reflect students' overall performance (Lefebvre, 2017; Neault, 2014; Thompson, 1996). Parents became concerned about how their children would be graded and what this meant for students qualifying to graduate on time. Neault (2014) suggests that, although CBE was introduced with good intentions, its emphasis on a standardized pedagogical approach disadvantages many students. Therefore, documenting the perspectives and experiences of teachers is critical to gaining an accurate account of what is happening in these learning environments.

Framing the Issue

The Need to Study Instructors' Perspectives on Competency-Based Education and Educational Reform

Over the past two decades, educational systems have been mandated to revamp school curricula to reflect a competency-based approach to teaching and learning (Gouëdard et al., 2020; see also Hill & Kumar, 2009; Ordonez, 2014). The belief is that CBE will prepare learners

to adapt to the realities of a rapidly changing world. The Province of Québec in Canada is no exception. Provincial educational systems underwent extensive overhauls in early 2000 to reflect a competency-based framework that could help modernize education concerning employability needs. Moreover, policymakers viewed CBE as a possible solution to address the increasing dropout and low graduation rates from high schools by providing a more engaging learning experience for students. Over a decade later, according to a study published by the Institut du Québec in 2018, little progress has been made.

CBE's individualized component accommodates students' personal learning needs and preferences. The flexibility and cost-effective nature of CBE would make higher education, particularly at the college (CÉGEP) level, more feasible and affordable for students and working professionals, regardless of socioeconomic background (Anderson, 2018; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; McCall, 2013; Shapiro, 2014). CBE was hailed as the tool to improve education's structure and effectiveness by preparing more workplace-ready individuals (Efremova, 2021; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Ordonez, 2014; Stewart, 2021). In short, these changes were designed by policymakers to better prepare a workforce-ready populace for a competitive local and global economy.

Despite these justifications and demonstrated benefits for mandating the use of a competency-based approach in teaching practices, the literature (Anderson-Levitt & Gardiner, 2021; Bogo et al., 2011; Hodge, 2016; Lynn & Desjardins, 2013; Steele et al., 2014) surrounding CBE reveals it is a frequently contested educational model. Despite the level of recognition this approach has received for flexibility in professional and vocational training, questions and disagreement surrounding its meaning and merit persist (Anderson-Levitt, 2021; Henrich, 2016; Hodge et al., 2020; Pasha, 2019). Intense debates are taking place in the academy concerning

what is occurring in CBE-driven environments and the driving force behind standardized

pedagogical methods (Fook, 2011; Hodge, 2015; Magnusson & Osborne, 1990; Miah, 2014).

Debates are also increasing over the conditions that led to CBE's rapid advancement, explicitly

relating to whose needs are served and what benefits are obtained from CBE (Cleary &

Breathnach, 2017; Hodge, 2015; Likisa, 2018; Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). I explain why

these debates challenge CBE and present a call for concern in the following discussion.

Education has always been a democratic right and public good for the betterment and

well-being of individuals and society. However, over the years, countries globally have become

economically integrated (Anderson, 2018; Likisa, 2017; Sistermans, 2020), placing more

pressure on educational institutions like CÉGEP to respond to the global needs of the workplace

and the economy. In response to this economic shift, education reforms have been redefined to

adopt a market-based approach to how students are taught and trained. Consequently, I argue that

CBE reforms at the college level reflect the influence of neoliberal values. Neoliberalism

involves the process or practice of reduced government responsibility and funding of public

education, thus encouraging more private sector involvement and leading to the restructuring of

schools' curricula to fulfill local industries' needs. For example, the marketization of CBE

reform has led to programs vying as eligible for resources by demonstrating their relevance

based on increased student enrolment and retention rates, student program completion rates, and

their ability to meet local provincial needs. Additionally, funding investment for programs at the

college level is determined by their output and profits in terms of producing employable

individuals. Competency-based practices are considered adequate for preparing skilled and

workforce-ready individuals in a shorter time. Incorporating these for-profit and competitive

notions in reform policies means that college institutions are becoming education market sites

oriented towards fulfilling local and global needs. These features characterize a neoliberalism perspective, thus highlighting CBE's market-driven practices. Therefore, neoliberalism and CBE are in a reproductive loop where the latter becomes a tool for the perpetuation of neoliberalism.

Although colleges like CÉGEP are "facing growing demands to advance CBE" (Anderson, 2017; Hittepole, 2019; Pasha, 2019; Prokes et al., 2021, p. 233), much is unknown about the obstacles teachers encounter and the conditions fueling the growth of competency-based school environments. These debates demonstrate considerable concerns about CBE development and its incorporation into educational systems. However, as discourse focusing on teachers' shared experiences in competency-based settings is limited, concrete knowledge about adopting CBE practices and their views about this approach is lacking. Participants' narratives confirmed that implementing the CBE model in educational settings does not reflect the intended purpose. For instance, the pressure and time constraint placed on students to complete studies in the least amount of time is contrary to the self-paced, flexible, and individualized learning proposed by this approach. The competency-based modality incorporated in college studies at the CÉGEP level focuses on providing a curriculum that aligns with career performance and is responsive to workforce needs.

Since CBE reform is labour-market demand-driven, employers' input and needs dominate curriculum design changes (Henrich, 2016; Likisa, 2018), and very few teachers participate in educational design and development. This lack of involvement not only creates poor "occupational standards alignment" but also vastly impacts teachers' "understanding of CBE principles of curriculum development" and the implementation process required (Likisa, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, the lack of buy-in by many institutions to reorient courses to fully embrace CBE (Gervais, 2016; Townsley & Schmid, 2020) is due to the many complexities

related to competency-based pedagogy. For example, effectively measuring and assessing

competencies, defining outcomes, and evaluating competence acquisition is challenging and still

poorly understood by many institutions (Blömeke et al., 2013, pp. 1-2; Burnette, 2016; Stewart,

2021). The literature regards these areas as highly neglected and at a research deficit, especially

in higher education (Blömeke et al., 2013; Rogers, 2021). The results from my research and the

subsequent section confirm that these challenges and misconceptions surrounding CBE continue.

Therefore, difficulties like these suggest a need to better understand teachers' perspectives, the

challenges encountered and how to best support them in competency-based teaching.

Challenges of Using Competency-Based Education

A lack of a clear and agreed-upon definition of CBE presents serious ambiguities and

inconsistencies in CBE-based models (Pasha et al., 2019; Prokes et al., 2021; Sistermans, 2020;

Stewart, 2021; see also Ashworth & Saxton, 1990; Steele et al., 2014). A standard definition

would help generate coherence among CBE models and eliminate concerns about determining

factors for identifying how assessments should be credited and what should count as evidence

that students have achieved a required competency (Pasha et al., 2019; Sistermans, 2020; Steele

et al., 2014). Moreover, some additional commonly observed and cited constraints to CBE

effective implementation and sustained educational reform include (i) neglecting to address the

difficulties encountered due to multiple inconsistencies between competencies practices,

(ii) refusal to acknowledge the role of neoliberal-market ideology in formulating CBE reform

policies, and (iii) the limited discourse devoted to exploring teachers' perspectives and

experiences of working in CBE-driven learning environments (Pasha, 2019; Prokes et al., 2021;

see also Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Curry & Docherty, 2017; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Johnson,

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2017). As further addressed below, these reported challenges demonstrate inequitable impacts on students in several ways.

A report on CBE implementation and outcomes in three pilot programs in the United States indicated an ongoing concern among teachers over effectively accrediting students who have demonstrated proficiency in a competency outside of the school setting (Steele et al., 2014). Disparities in accrediting students promote inequities across competency-based educational settings. Educators also argue that placing emphasis solely on what students can do diminishes the importance of the knowledge underpinning behaviour (Adams & Burns, 2023; Muñoz & Araya, 2017; see also Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Mulder et al., 2009; Ordonez, 2014). Competency-based education fails to explain how one should conceptualize the relationship between knowledge and competence since the emphasis on the former is almost non-existent in CBE models. As Hyland (1993) added, competency models significantly depend on an unrefined form of behaviourism that emphasizes performance over knowledge and understanding and artificially separates mental and physical components of performance. A CBE focus leaves no place for critical education, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and competency for human agency. As the literature (Freire, 2009; Giroux, 2014) suggests, the market-driven element of the competency-based approach limits any mode of critical thinking that challenges neoliberal perspectives.

Moreover, refusing to acknowledge the importance of incorporating critical teaching modes has led to resistance and significant barriers to implementing and adopting CBE in traditional postsecondary settings (Johnson, 2017; Steele et al., 2014). CBE greatly minimizes students' agency and fails to consider the social context that shapes their educational possibilities. Reasons cited in favour of abandoning traditional instructional methods reported

that it was too knowledge-driven, did not adequately cater to the learning needs and preferences of students, incorporated little student engagement, and teachers were the main disseminators of knowledge (De Bruijin, 2012; Khan, 2014; Klein-Collins, 2013). What makes competency-based education different from traditional methods is its market-driven pedagogy that suppresses students' critical consciousness. This lack of awareness allows neoliberal education ideology to continue and dominate by shaping student agency and professional identity to reflect the same market-driven perspective.

There are many critical scholars (Apple, 2006; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2014) whose work opposes current neoliberal reforms and has proposed a critical approach to education (Apple, 2006; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2014) as a means of resistance. Critical pedagogy-based educational models challenge both traditional methods and oppressive approaches like CBE. Although criticized for its inability to prepare students to meet local and global employable demands adequately, traditional pedagogical approaches acknowledge the importance of teacher-student interaction and the process that leads to learning. Neoliberal educational practices, however, have been shown to deemphasize these critical aspects and "perpetuate undemocratic life, in opposition to the goal of critical pedagogy-based educational practices, which promote the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9; Savage, 2017). Critical education perspectives explicitly demonstrate its "intent and commitment to the unwavering liberation of oppressed populations" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9).

Furthermore, critical pedagogic educators argue that resisting neoliberal pedagogy is insufficient. They advocate for collaborative conditions that expose inequitable practices and promote the political agency to maintain democracy (Apple, 2006; Foley et al., 2015; Freire,

1998; Giroux, 2014). Education should serve as the "most emancipatory and democratic function" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9). Critical approaches to education emphasize the historical importance of students contributing to knowledge construction. In opposition to traditional educational methods and CBE, critical education suggests that students should be at the forefront of framing and developing their educational experience. By doing so, "students come to understand themselves as subjects of history and to recognize that conditions of injustice, although historically produced by human beings, can also be transformed by human beings" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 11). Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009) contend that "this level of student social agency" (p. 11) and critical thinking are precisely what neoliberal approaches like CBE oppose. Similarly, as teachers encounter challenges with adopting and implementing competency-based practices, reform mandates adversely impact students, as discussed in the following sections.

Inequitable Student Assessment

Limited guidelines are in place to cater to and assess students who may not easily and rapidly adapt to competency-based instructional practices. For example, how can we accurately evaluate students who rely on knowledge to guide them through achieving competency or those who need to engage in both instructional techniques (learning and skill-building) simultaneously? Therefore, educators must struggle formulating individual credit systems to address the issue (Curry & Docherty, 2017; Steele et al., 2014). Furthermore, assessment has been demonstrated to be the weakest link (Efremova, 2021; Stewart, 2021; see also Govaerts et al., 2007; Torres, 2018) and the widely neglected aspect (Blömete et al., 2013; Burnette, 2016) in CBE models. With such a lack of consistency across CBE models, teachers challenge the requirement of holding all students to a standard definition of proficiency (Steele et al., 2014, p.

xv). Teachers suggest that requiring institutions to conform to standard competency-based approaches ignores contextual differences and perpetuates educational injustice, which goes against education's beliefs and values. Such strategies maintained by CBE cannot accommodate the ethical and epistemological foundation of professional practice and [many educational systems] (Hyland, 1993).

With constant tension and lack of parity among CBE programs, an overall concern echoed from the literature is "how to ensure the sustainability of the models" (Curry & Docherty, 2017; Steele et al., 2014, p. xv). Research suggests that the sustainability of the CBE models relies on (i) "the partnership and collaboration between educators, policymakers, technology developers and funders of these programs and (ii) addressing equity concerns attached to and embedded in CBE models" (Aydarova et al., 2021; Steele et al., 2014, p. xv). Teachers have, therefore, reported "equity challenges both in the implementation of CBE and accurately assessing students based on performance" (Efremova, 2021; Curry & Docherty, 2017; Steele et al., 2014, p. xv). Such analysis leaves one to question the decision-making processes surrounding developing and implementing standardized assessments like CBE and whether students' individualized needs are central to promoting this type of educational reform. Therefore, examining the undemocratic and inequitable elements embedded in competency-based policies and reform practices is necessary to reveal hidden agendas and address teachers' concerns.

Undemocratic Pedagogical Practices

Competency-based education was initially intended to offer an entirely student-centred learning experience when many educational systems were vulnerable. Through policies and political mandates, decision-makers viewed this vulnerability as an opportune time to enforce their ideological agenda through CBE (Elliot, 1993; Klein-Collins, 2013; Magnusson & Osborne,

1990). According to Elliot (1993), CBE "continues to linger in the political domain as an ideological device for eliminating value issues from the domains of professional practice and thereby subordinating them to political forms of control" (p. 496). Teachers who aim to offer their students the most effective and beneficial instructional practices are lured into an education method that disenfranchises their voices and reduces their educational values and standards. Brown (1994) describes CBE as being imposed, hierarchical, deterring emancipation or independent free thought. This marginalization or disconnection of [education's] ethical values and principles makes the profession more vulnerable to the managerial policies of market-oriented influences (Hodkinson & Issit, 1995; Pasha, 2019; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2018).

Such structural domination and power relations lead me to think that competency-based programs marginalize teachers' voices by presenting demands already developed to achieve predetermined ends. For example, I believe that the lack of consistency over the range of CBE programs persists because, before implementation, these models have already been customized and packaged to accommodate specific workplace demands. I contend that the role industries, the labour market economy, and funding organizations play in influencing CBE policies is evident. For instance, teachers' voices and concerns have been significantly downgraded and silenced when it comes to fulfilling the demands and needs of economic players. In support, the literature has indicated that CBE's "standards and goals are narrow and usually vary by programs to reflect the needs of the industry" (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990, p. 10; Likisa, 2018; Muñoz & Araya, 2017). Research further added that CBE focuses on immediate employer needs, and less emphasis has been placed "on preparing learners with the flexibility needed for a more uncertain future" (Muñoz & Araya, 2017; Okoye et al., 2015, p. 68; Pasha, 2019). My research sought to unpack the structural restrictions, social powers, and neoliberal perspectives

influencing the CBE framework and its implementation. Addressing neoliberal perspectives in connection with CBE is particularly interesting to my research because this concept illustrates neoliberalism's role in reshaping reform policies to "respond to changing economic demands" (Savage, 2017, p. 143) in a knowledge-based economy.

Neoliberal Connection to Competency-Based Education

Neoliberal ideologies are gradually dominating educational policymaking regarding its direction and how to educate and train students. *Neoliberalism* is commonly used interchangeably with the term *globalization*. The concept explains a complex set of dominant[2] values, ideologies, and practices that influence "the economic, political, and cultural aspects of society" (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 1; Savage, 2017). The principles of neoliberalism prioritize maximizing profits and outcomes, often overlooking the injustices in achieving these goals. Through ideological hegemony, policymakers enforce social, structural, and professional restrictions on subordinate societal groups and marginalized individuals to maintain the current status quo. For example, with CBE, educators' role is reduced to guiding students in acquiring technical skills or workplace competencies required by the industry. The shift in teachers' roles from instructors to facilitators and mentors (Pasha, 2019) confirms that education is viewed as a product rather than a process. Consequently, "the CBE product was always considered more valuable than the learning process" (Pasha, 2019, p. 3296).

Additionally, teachers implementing competency-based practices are not typically involved in key decision-making regarding this type of reform. It is uncommon for teachers to be

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[2] *Dominant* or *dominance*, as used in my dissertation, refers to the elite groups of society determined by class status and social power relations.

present during the initial and crucial stages of reform design and development. However, the research emphasizes that "the curriculum development of CBE is demand-driven, where employers need to serve as curriculum advisor committees and provide internships and shadowing experiences for students" (Likisa, 2018, p. 6). The recent research literature (Henrich, 2016; Likisha, 2017; Prokes et al., 2021) on CBE highlights employers' role in curriculum development and little to no emphasis on the relevance of teachers' involvement. Although "connections between education and the labour worlds must be strengthened, it must not focus only on this kind of link" (Muñoz & Araya, 2017, p. 1084). Although the "marketplace relevance of competencies is emphasized, its value in a student's education is absent" (Ramanathan et al., 2022, p. 3296). This imbalance in decision-making power and contributions results in a narrow and limited view of education promoted by CBE, which has no intention of helping the masses (especially disadvantaged students) break free of socio-economic barriers. More importantly, scholarly literature (Anderson-Levitt et al., 2021; Savage, 2017) has challenged CBE's status quo by illuminating the inequalities this approach presents for the disadvantaged. The neoliberal perspective of Competency-Based Education (CBE) maintains the social (elite) class order by ensuring that only the privileged will continue dominating various societal sectors. This means that the status quo is preserved by using education to maintain elite domination. Despite promising to transform pedagogy by focusing on affordability, easy access, and flexibility, especially for the most vulnerable and underprivileged, CBE enforces inequitable practices instead. For instance, the competency-based approach has been criticized for directing low-income students toward limited vocational programs while steering more affluent students toward prestigious university studies (Savage, 2017). Additionally, integrating market-oriented ideas into competency-based practices results in program funding being determined by local

economic needs and growth demands. Consequently, students with the most pressing needs struggle to find a place within the college system, a sentiment echoed by research participants.

One example of neoliberal practices that may seem normal is the provision of school choice options by the Québec government. This involves parents competing to enroll their children in a specific school. Parents strive to get their children accepted into a school with a solid academic reputation and high graduation rates. While the government says this approach is to involve parents in education decision-making, the choice offered to parents reflects neoliberal market values, which have become typical in educational systems. The current approach to school admissions does not ensure that all parents have an equal chance of getting their child into their preferred school, even if they apply early. School acceptance is based on the child's aptitude, academic records, and class status. This approach, which emphasizes competence and market-based reforms, can lead to a system favouring certain classes and further marginalizes underprivileged families. While these observations are specific to the educational system in England, similar social class-based inequities, as noted by Hill (2006), can also be found in Québec system:

> "Where there is a market in schools (where high-status schools can select their intakes, whether on 'academic achievement' or other class-related criteria such as 'aptitudes'), then the result is increasing 'raced' and gendered social class differentiation. The middle classes (predominantly white) rapidly colonize the 'best' schools; the working classes (white and black) get pushed out. They do not get through the school gate. High-status/high-achieving middle-class schools get better and better results. In a competitive market in schools, 'Sink' schools sink further, denuded of their 'brightest' intakes" (p. 15).

The statement above illustrates how school choice primarily benefits a limited number of students, "serving as a class advantage and catering to the self-interest of certain parents (Ball, 1993, p. 4). Additionally, school choice contributes to inequality as many children cannot secure spots in schools within their vicinity, leading parents to place their children's names on waiting lists for prestigious schools. Furthermore, due to a competency-based curriculum, some educational institutions are renowned for their performance and rankings in various fields, including sciences, arts, business, and sports. Instead of treating "equal access to quality education in all schools" as a human right, it is being utilized as an effort to govern populations in accordance with market-based ideas and practices (Savage, 2017, p. 149). Although no official school ranking system exists in the province, schools are organized based on choice, prestige, available opportunities, and funding. These are determined by economic and business organizations or parents' experiences with different academic institutions. This analysis represents the characteristics of a neoliberal marketization of education.

Furthermore, Roberts (1986) argues that implementing the CBE approach assumes certain things about reality and the social order that upholds the current socio-economic model, known as the status quo. For instance, in the United States, the well-known No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standardized approach that emphasizes accountability in student achievement based on ethnic, racial, and economic status (Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006) faced significant opposition. These benchmarks were used not to determine which schools needed more resources but to monitor and control individuals' educational progress and employment prospects.

Moreover, although the shift in curricula to include a CBE approach seemed to have been suggested with good intentions, a careful examination of its focus on the needs of the workplace in a market-driven economy showed that it disproportionately affected disadvantaged students

(Braithwaite, 2017; Hill & Kumar, 2009). Braithwaite (2017) adds that this disparity includes educational institutions with a high-minority population, students from low-income backgrounds, and lower hierarchical class status, further widening the achievement gap. Such factors also determine whether incentives and funding to advance specific educational programs will be eliminated or continued (Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Brathwaite, 2017; Salinas, 2017). Research findings revealed that "results-based logic of neoliberalism instrumentalize[s] teachers, dehumanize[s] students, and make[s] the classroom into a space of performance and efficiency, thereby, denying any genuine engagement with social problems, political issues, or cultural critiques" (Portelli & Konecny, 2013, p. 92).

In competence-based neoliberal reforms, the prioritization of equity is crucial. In the final sections of this chapter, I suggest that teachers, who are often overlooked in these discussions, should have a more active role in policy deliberations. This involvement could come through invitations from policymakers, which is currently rare, or through self-initiated efforts such as policy advocacy[3] (Aydarova et al., 2022; Muñoz & Araya, 2017; Torres et al., 2018). By participating in advocacy, teachers can better prepare and equip themselves to address the injustices and challenges they face, provide evidence-based insights, and potentially have a say in discussions "with policymakers on important educational issues" (Aydarova et al., 2022, p. 143). Therefore, in emphasizing the importance of teachers' roles and recognizing the need to uphold democracy and equality in the research process, I must also acknowledge my positionality, as discussed further below

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[3] Policy advocacy refers to teachers' noncompliance with the status quo, critiquing and educating themselves about policies and their potential ramifications, and conducting pilot programs to test the effectiveness of reform mandates.

Positioning Myself: Who Am I?

Over the past two years, as I finalized the ideas for my thesis research and even after the proposal defence, I felt uneasy about conducting this study. Although I have conducted qualitative work before, I have no experience as a critical ethnographer. Additionally, coupled with my lack of experience with critical ethnographic research, I constantly grappled with tensions about my positionality. With qualitative research mainly, there are always tensions that we must consider as researchers (Delamont, 2016); however, I believe it is essential to explain early on how I reconciled with these tensions to better position myself within this research.

As CBE continues to gain significant traction in higher education, this research emerged from my professional experience in the Québec college education system, which is structured within a CBE framework. Casual communications with colleagues and scholarly literature reveal several critical concerns surrounding CBE that have been afforded little attention and have not thoroughly been articulated in existing research. Some of the critical concerns include: (i) the concern with how market-driven practices like CBE promote social inequity and marginalize teachers' voices, (ii) teachers' discontent with not being consulted during decision-making determining how they should do their work, and (iii) teachers' lack of training on effectively incorporating competency teaching.

Furthermore, I could not overlook the inconsistencies between competency-based models, increased tensions from unheard teachers, and the structural constraints and hierarchical power relations at play. Notably, becoming aware of the numerous complexities, challenges, lack of resources and funding, and little to no professional development training encountered by educators working in CBE settings was disheartening. Even more astounding is that, firstly, most of these accounts rarely incorporated teachers' concrete experiences from their perspectives and

lived realities. Secondly, no plan has been presented to address the many shared concerns echoed. Additionally, the frequent surfacing of several concepts in the literature compelled me to examine further the conditions under which CBE was initiated and continues to be implemented. Some include moving toward a knowledge-based economy, focusing on competencies and skill-based education, emphasizing resource allocation, accountability and teaching efficiency, and training students to become employable. Consequently, I argue that consultation with teachers is vital in examining the conditions under which they incorporate competency-based approaches into practice (Roger, 2021; see also Morke et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Ordonez, 2014).

Although the combination of teachers' concerns and gaps in the literature substantiated the relevance of this study and fueled my motivation, I struggled with whether I was the right person to carry out this research. As I listened to teachers' stories of frustration and witnessed the discontent, I still questioned my position to share the Other (or our) story. Will I be seen as authentic in sharing their stories, or will participants think they are only needed to complete my research? With understanding the importance of positionality (Gary & Holmes, 2020), it is here at this juncture that I briefly provide insight into some significant experiences and feelings that have shaped my life, thus encouraging my passion for pursuing this research study. Who am I to do this research? Who am I to do this work? (Fines, 2006). Am I entitled to research about them? These critical questions must be addressed as I interrogated this feeling of uneasiness. These questions invoke feelings of concern and uncertainty and confirm my insider commitment to using this research as a vehicle for teachers to have agency and voice. The tensions I wrestled with regarding my position within the inquiry motivated my research study and took me in several directions. On the one hand, I am an English-speaking woman of colour and a naturalized

Canadian citizen teaching in a predominantly white-populated college institution; as a minority, am I one of them and what makes me qualified to share their stories?

I am also a Ph.D. student and researcher, which positions me as an outsider. During this process of self-interrogation, I reflected on my experiences as a citizen growing up and working in a post-colonized country, where reform was almost non-existent, and teachers continued to encounter similar concerns with little participation in educational changes. Moreover, this research process resurfaced thoughts I had suppressed about migrating to Québec with the minority label, a non-Québécoise and questioning if I would ever feel apart and have my voice heard as one of the Other. As I relived these experiences and thoughts, the feelings of domination and being on the margins flooded my emotions. I believe that as a teacher in the CÉGEP system, representing a minority group in this institution and province, a mom of two boys born in Québec and are being educated in the French school system. My biography positions me as ideal to understand the feeling of control and power relations that permeate reform policies and to be understood as an insider. Therefore, my place in the research process is dual. As an insider, I am from the margins with them; I understand the narratives of teachers exposed to unilateral educational reform decision-making. I am entitled to conduct this research and tell their subjective stories.

The Research Rationale

Reflection on my position helped me better formulate my research study's overall rationale and arguments. Several factors motivated me to pursue research in this domain. Firstly, my interaction with colleagues and workplace observations, followed by examining the scholarly literature on CBE, encouraged me to pursue this research study. Secondly, my interest in emancipatory-based research or seeking to help the marginalized initially emanated from my

experience working as a teacher in a previously colonized country. Thirdly, my most recent

inspiration came from being a woman of colour (an underrepresented identity) working in the

Québec college system that promotes a competency-based framework. Finally, listening to

colleagues' concerns, needs, and frustrations led me to probe deeper into understanding CBE

implementation conditions. Some common problems were related to how restructuring courses

and programs can impact how instructors do their work and potentially threaten job security.

Additional concerns were related to resource allocation and a lack of understanding of what takes

place to prepare students to meet the various courses and programs' competency requirements.

Ball (2008) suggests that increased policy-imposed changes have made teachers feel

disempowered and professionally marginalized. Such demonstration of power, in turn,

contributes to the resistance on the part of teachers to properly implement the policy, further

disempowering vulnerable populations and promulgating societal inequities.

A vast body of literature discusses and promotes the strengths and benefits of

incorporating CBE into existing educational systems (Anderson, 2017; Johnstone & Soares,

2014; McCall, 2013; Ordonez, 2014). However, few significantly highlight teachers'

perspectives, struggles, concerns, and inequalities with this instructional delivery approach.

Much of the literature on CBE focuses substantially on quantifiable results and benefits (Frank et

al., 2010; Klein-Collins, 2013; McCall, 2013) and rarely discusses how teachers are trained or

how their concerns and challenges are addressed. Few researchers (Efremova, 2021; Growe &

Montgomery, 2003; Morcke et al., 2013; Mulder et al., 2009) discuss teachers and students'

setbacks and frustrations. In sum, I contend that CBE reform initiatives have perpetuated

inequities in students' outcomes and increased achievement gaps among those who were

supposed to benefit from this educational reform. By analyzing the structural and socio-

economic context behind CBE, such as the neoliberal economic globalization and the demand to meet labour force needs, I understood better the basis for restructuring educational systems to incorporate this reform and teachers' objections toward underlying practices.

Moreover, as reflected in educational reform discourse, particularly concerning CBE, little emphasis is placed on determining the initial driving force behind its mandated implementation. Some pertinent questions remain unanswered: (i) Why has CBE been resisted by parents, teachers, and other professionals? (ii) How are teachers adopting or resisting this change? and (iii) What possible challenges and inequalities such changes pose for teachers and students, respectively? I invoke four fundamental questions proposed by critical theorist Bohman (2016) to help direct and contextualize my research's overall purpose: (1) What is wrong with this social reality? (2) How did it come about? (3) Whose interests are being served, and (4) How can we make things better? Within this context, I critically examined CBE in light of neoliberalism and discussed reasons for teachers' possible resistance to current educational reforms.

Central Research Argument

The abovementioned discussion demonstrates a need to gain insight into college instructors' perspectives on CBE and educational reform. The central argument put forth in my research study is that: t*he neoliberal conditions that influence the structure and implementation of CBE perpetuate educational and societal inequities, disproportionately affecting underprivileged students and marginalizing teachers' voices*. I argue that standardized approaches like CBE should not be accepted as all things good regarding students' best interests. Standardized methods like CBE reduce the educational process by minimizing the importance of knowledge to emphasize workplace competencies. This marketization of education provides

students with a limited, narrow, and specific educational experience and ignores the pitfalls, obstacles, and inconsistencies CBE poses.

I contend that insights into teachers' views and 'subjectivities in the context of competency-based reform will shed light on how neoliberal decision-making contradicts their lived realities and ideologies. A plausible starting point to challenging the status quo is getting teachers' voices heard through critical research and retelling their stories from their perspectives and experiences working in a CBE environment. Perhaps, based on teachers' ideological perspectives, this approach can offer concrete guidelines for sustaining CBE reform in ways that produce equitable outcomes for teachers and students. Therefore, instructors' voices are vital to informing sustainable and equitable educational change.

Research Questions

My research aims to understand the experiences and perspectives of college teachers working in a competency-based environment. I am particularly interested in how various power dynamics, such as social, political, and neoliberal economic ideologies, influence their lived experiences. Guided by several research objectives and questions, Table 1 below illustrates the interconnections between the objectives, the research questions, and the data collection methods to guide this inquiry. First, research objectives were achieved by aligning research questions to data collection methods. My research study is not intended to be generalizable to all CÉGEP colleges within Québec, Canada. However, it aims to offer deeper insights into teachers' perspectives and experiences working in CBE settings undergoing reform. Secondly, my study illuminates how hierarchical power structures and dominant discourses diminish teachers' role in decision-making and implementing educational practices. Finally, my research study offered

teachers a platform to suggest ways to facilitate a more inclusive and equitable dialogue among

all educators on educational reform.

Table 1

Identification of Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives	Research Questions	How did the questions assist with achieving the objectives?	Research Method
1. To explore the conditions under which competency-based reform is implemented using college instructors' lived realities of working in a competency-based education milieu.	1. What are the goals and aims of competency-based education and the broader working conditions/environment of CÉGEP teachers? 2. How do and in what ways do the goals of CBE contradict or conflict with instructors' lived realities?	Obtaining firsthand knowledge from college instructors provided a better understanding of the motivation behind CBE reform in terms of instructors' perspectives of CBE and how it impacted their lives and lived realities.	Semi-structured interviews
2. To examine the inequitable outcomes that standardized pedagogical approaches like competency-based education create.	3. What are the outcomes of standardized approaches like CBE, and how do teachers view CBE results in terms of equity and social justice?	The detailed research questions exposed existing confluences and contradictions between instructors' experiences and why they resisted CBE education, an approach embedded in neoliberal policies. This insight helped contextualize their experiences and evaluated how neoliberal economic perspectives relative to CBE impede their role as teachers.	Semi-structured interviews
3. To propose recommendations for more equitable and sustainable reform efforts.	4. What changes/modifications in the current CBE model could lead to more equitable and	The stated research objective allowed instructors to exercise agency in the research process and illuminated underlying structural contradictions that	Semi-structured interviews

sustainable reform efforts?	stifle their participation in work-related reform. The data garnered helped gain a more in-depth understanding of how individual instructors perceived and experienced structural constraints and power relations. This feedback led to (i) collectively formulating guidelines and strategies that are necessary to address structural constraints if any meaningful change is to occur, (ii) justifying the importance of structural changes in eliminating educational and social disparities perpetuated by neoliberal-informed approaches, and (iii) suggesting more inclusive and equitable approaches to educational improvements, decision-making, and reform practices.

The subsequent chapter discusses a literature review on CBE, teachers' agency, and neoliberalism. This review provides a context that highlights and supports the relevance of the research questions and methodology employed. The literature surveyed also identifies the gaps concerning the process that leads to competency achievement, the reality of teachers' experiences with education reform, and the inequitable conditions perpetuated due to a neoliberal approach to CBE.

Organization of Thesis Chapters

I have organized the dissertation into six chapters. In this first chapter, after introducing the research study, I provide a brief background overview of CBE reform in the Québec context

and general bodies of literature on this subject. This overview examines what conditions led to the implementation of CBE and provides several discussions and arguments that help substantiate my study's relevance. I specifically highlight neoliberalism's connection to CBE and present examples of how its ideas are shaping the marketization of education. In this chapter, I also discuss the operationalization of concepts, the problem statement, a brief statement of my positionality, main objectives, and research questions. In the second chapter, I provide an overview of the literature base I explored for my research. I undertook the review to pinpoint the gaps and existing research shortage, specifically related to the essential role educators can play in implementing more equitable and sustained educational reform. In this respect, I explore three bodies of research literature: (i) a general examination of sustained education reform, (ii) competency-based education, and (iii) the role of the teacher and power relations in the context of a neoliberal political economy. In my review of these three bodies of research literature, I better understood the challenges associated with implementing CBE and the significant role of teachers' agency in reform organizations. Additionally, I explored how the influence of CBE practices, driven by neoliberal privatization and market concepts, contributes to educational inequality.

In chapter three, I provide the theoretical framework of my research. My discussion focuses on the theoretical influences of critical theory and critical pedagogy in challenging oppression and inequity and promoting emancipatory practices in school settings. I specifically emphasize critical pedagogy, as explained by Paulo Freire, as his work not only advances the ideas of critical theory but also offers practical methods that teachers can incorporate into classroom practices to challenge and reject inequitable educational practices. I also discuss how both theoretical perspectives provide a language of critique, further informing the research

methodology discussed in the subsequent chapter. In chapter four, I present critical ethnography as my research methodology. In this chapter, I detail how I used my chosen methodology to conduct the interviews, achieve the research objectives and address the study's research questions. I first briefly justify the chosen methodology instead of conventional ethnography and describe the usefulness of critical ethnography as the chosen methodological framework. Then, I address my position as a researcher. Afterwards, I elaborate on the methods for choosing participants and the techniques and approaches for gathering data. Lastly, I will address the data analysis process, including the step-by-step procedures for organizing and coding the final data and the ethical considerations related to my research.

In chapter five, I present the data I collected for my research. I highlight the voices of research participants by providing detailed descriptions and verbatim responses. I provide a thorough thematic analysis and discuss participants' stories in relation to the research questions. In this chapter, I use the research findings to support the critical relevance of teachers' input in educational reform policy and development for effective implementation and sustained changes. The discussion also demonstrates how my approach to reporting research findings aligns with and maintains the beliefs promoted by my methodological framework. First, in chapter six, I provide a reflective overview of my theoretical underpinnings and the methodological framework in connection with the research findings. Finally, I provide an overall thesis conclusion concerning the research findings. I discuss potential implications, limitations and recommendations for future research work and conclude with some final reflections.

Summary and Conclusion

The introduction chapter of my dissertation presented the relevance and justification of my research study. Competency-based education, a fundamental concept of this inquiry, is

introduced by discussing its place in local and global educational institutions. Based on an overview of key research literature, I substantiated the significance of this work by discussing the tensions, inequalities, and discrepancies that neoliberal market-based educational policies perpetuate. Grounded in the existing literature and reflective thoughts of interviews, I focus on teachers' challenges and concerns, limited voice and agency in reform initiatives and the inequities market-driven reforms present for students and teachers. In addition, I explained and defined key concepts that are used later in my thesis.

Furthermore, I briefly reflected on my position and identified my research rationale, major arguments, and research questions that formed the basis for subsequent chapters. Overall, the discussion presented in this chapter established a need for more collaborative and equitable approaches to teachers' involvement in reform policy initiatives. It further demonstrated that this could be made possible through research that privileges teachers' voices and experiences.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Teachers are essential actors in educational reform. The literature substantiates that policies and decision-making processes should reflect coordinated efforts and perspectives from key stakeholders, particularly educators (Niemi, 2021; Prokes et al., 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022; Rogers, 2021; see also Hokka et al., 2017; Tao & Gao, 2017; Salinas, 2017). I contend that if current neoliberal structured approaches to decision-making persist, educational systems will fail to reap the full benefits of CBE reform and risk failing the individuals deemed central in this process, the students. I explicate through the lens of college teachers' perspectives and experiences the existing inequalities that neoliberal CBE reform perpetuates in the Québec college system (CÉGEPS). The review is informed by three bodies of literature: a broad examination of (1) education reform, (2) competency-based education, and (3) teachers' role and power relations in the neoliberal political economy. I conclude this chapter by highlighting existing literature gaps that justify the study's need.

A Broad Examination of Educational Reforms

Reviewing neoliberal views is vital to understanding the implications and reasons behind CBE expansion. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is a theory of political and economic practices that liberates individuals with entrepreneurial freedoms encompassed in free markets, bolstered by "deregulation, reduction of social programs, indifference to the environment…, and withdrawal of State control over education" (Rossiter & Heron, 2011, p. 306). The focus on competencies demonstrates how "market forces deteriorate traditional educational goals of justice, self-determination, and equality" (Rossiter & Heron, 2011, p. 306). Standardized approaches like CBE use surveillance and accountability techniques to ensure that education

systems produce demanded outputs for a neoliberal market economy (Adam & Burns, 2023; Sharma & Sanfor, 2018; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2018; see also, Aronson & Hemingway, 2011; Vinson & Ross, 2006; Dornbusch et al., 1996). The socio-economic context in which CBE reform is implemented and maintained overlooks existing social problems and inequalities (Williams et al., 2022; Zeichner, 2019; see also, Brathwaite, 2017; Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Hill & Kumar, 2009). Sustainable reform efforts require a substantive change in how policymakers collaborate with and incorporate the ideas of the teachers who implement it (Aydarova et al., 2021; Niemi, 2021; Pasha, 2019; Prokes et al., 2021; see also, Datnow, 2002; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Hargreaves, 2002; Johnson, 2001; McCully, 2006 & Towers, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the key factors that impede effective implementation and sustained changes to support my argument on the significance of teachers' agency in reform development.

Implementing and Sustaining Educational Changes: The Concerns

With the global demand for more competent individuals in the workplace, educational changes and classroom instructional practices must be realistic and sustained. Datnow (2002) discovered that schools that implemented changes "rarely sustained the reforms" (p. 215). Other research literature indicates that "while educational reforms have improved the quality of education in many countries, it is surprising that the goals of reforms are often not reached" (Niemi, 2021, p. 16). Similarly, Earl, Watson and Katz (2003) reported that "although some reforms demonstrated early success, few managed to sustain progress and were eventually abandoned" (p. 7). Ongoing inclusive collaboration among policymakers, educational reform regulators, and teachers may provide a viable mechanism for attaining effective and sustainable

educational reform (Prokes et al., 2021; Rogers, 2021; see also, Datnow, 2002; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Hargreaves, 2002; Johnson, 2001; McCully, 2006; Towers, 2012).

Addressing CBE sustainability will require a shift in how education reforms are structured and introduced. Educational change can no longer be top-down; it should be implemented flexibly with room for input and dialogue. Top-down reforms frequently propose overarching principles and policies as one-size-fits-all approaches for all educational institutions. Approaches reflecting little or no input from teachers implementing such changes eventually prove ineffective (Earl et al., 2003; Muñoz & Araya, 2017; Niemi, 2021; Prokes et al., 2021). The perpetuation of a top-down approach to educational reform has created stagnancy or total abandonment of such reform. For example, contextual and decision-making issues "for reform cases in New Zealand, Victoria, Kentucky, California, and Chicago revealed that the trajectory of most reforms is unlikely to be completed or sustained as anticipated by policy mandates" (Earl et al., 2003, p. 7). Hence, Niemi (2021) cited Burns et al. (2016) and Cerna (2014), stating that [educational reform] "cannot rely solely on top-down power structures but requires genuine dialogue to foster interconnections, knowledge sharing, and diversity" (p. 30).

Instructors should play an integral role in determining reform agenda(s) pertinent to education (Aydarova et al., 2022; Stewart, 2021; Torres et al., 2018; see also, Datnow, 2002; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Earl et al., 2003, p. 9; Snyder et al., 1992; Woolner et al., 2018). Understanding the hierarchical social context in which CBE reform is being developed and implemented is equally important. Social structures that inform CBE reform deliberately restrict the role of instructors in these learning environments. The social organization of this decision-making relationship is based on power and is forged among the elites of society (politicians, industry, business leaders, economists, and corporate sectors). These individuals ensure that

through mandated educational policies, schools are conditioned to continue socializing students into their respective class positions. So, by limiting educators' involvement in the development of educational reforms, schools serve as the platform to replicate capitalist/market rationality. Consequently, rather than schools helping to challenge and overcome social inequality, they are used to reinforce inequitable practices.

Such hierarchical structures also exist within educational institutions among administrators, teachers, and students. For example, teachers are subject to implementing mandates from administration that come from external power structures, with little response time. Students undergo similar power dynamics based on their class positions. They have academic advisors who influence their program choice and create a course schedule for each semester. As students are not the focus of this dissertation, expanding this idea will not go further. However, both examples demonstrate the systemic nature of social organization, and addressing and challenging such social inequalities starts with targeting the root causes. Thus, social status as an agenda can influence the implementation and direction of CBE reform practices. The research literature on CBE suggests that to reverse the limited perspectives of neoliberal educational reforms and sustain equitable change, "input from more educators must be taken before implementing new curriculum changes" (Niemi, 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022, p. 1).

Moreover, changes that "reflect the nature of the institutional setting and are supported by those who will implement it into practice are more likely to achieve effective and sustainable reform" (Earl et al., 2003, p. 10). When educational reform demands fail to acknowledge the context and realities of instructors' daily classroom practices and experiences, teachers must make the necessary modifications to make them applicable. Whether educational changes are

initiated from a macro level (governmental) or micro-level (school-based), educators'
perspectives and experiences are just as crucial for reform's effective implementation and
sustainability. Once the novelty of reform has passed, college instructors play a significant role
in determining whether these changes continue. Many reforms have failed to adopt an inclusive
approach in their design, developmental, and implementation processes, which hinders
instructors from contributing substantially. In this same respect, ongoing dialogue is vital
because this type of involvement increases motivation and demonstrates instructors' capacity to
engage in reform (Datnow, 2020; Leijen, et al., 2022; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also Earl,
Watson & Katz, 2003).

The level of social engagement in decision-making about their workplace practices helps
improve instructors' understanding of reform initiatives (Datnow, 2020; Leijen, 2022; Yakavets,
et al., 2023; see also Echols et al., 2017; Firestone et al., 1999). Hargreaves (1998) reminds us
that teaching is not merely an instructional approach but also an emotional practice. Feeling a
part of the larger scheme of their daily work practices influences instructors' motivation and the
likelihood of continuing reform practices, even with limited resources and support. For example,
in terms of successful and sustaining change, Earl and Lee (2000) emphasized that a change in
leadership approach contributed to positive outcomes of Canada's Manitoba School
Improvement Program (CMSIP). Earl and Lee indicated that a 'distributed' leadership role
across the school proved effective. For example, the shift in leadership started from a collection
of individuals rather than a single person or specific group. The ongoing determination to ensure
successful outcomes is attributed to this type of collaboration and the personal stake involved.
Many studies have identified the vital role of teachers' agency in educational reform and school
practices (Cheng & Huang, 2018; Vilches, 2018; Sung et al., 2022; Leijen, 2022; see also Biesta

et al., 2015; Holcomb, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Riveros et al., 2012, p. 208; Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Smith et al., 1997; Tarnoczi, 2006; Weik, 1979 & 2009). At this point, I slightly changed my focus on discussing CBE, which I think is a compelling point of departure for understanding how this approach is susceptible to the influences of neoliberalism.

Effective Teaching Practices Relative to Instructions: Competency-Based Education

In recent years, there has been ongoing concern about whether educational institutions, particularly colleges and universities, provided students with the basic skills required in the workplace. Scholars conducted numerous studies and utilized various data types to identify instructional "practices that contribute to college students' cognitive and affective outcomes" (Kilgo et al., 2015, p. 510). Researchers (Foster & Jones, 2020; Lewis et al., 2022; Monat & Gannon, 2018; Stewart, 2021; see also Andrews & Higson, 2008; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Kilgo et al., 2015; Ordonez, 2014) found CBE to promote effective practices relative to educational outcomes. The following section briefly describes how CBE can improve educational outcomes. I also provide several definitions to illustrate how various professions perceive CBE and highlight some key criticisms that identify this approach as fostering neoliberal market standards.

The Components of Competency-Based Education

What is Competency-Based Education? Defining the Key Concepts

CBE has been around since the early 1960s and continues to evolve. Researchers vary in their perspectives on how to define CBE. An extensive review of the literature revealed that there are multiple perspectives: policy-based (MELS, 2001 & 2004; Palardy & Eisele, 1972; Lepi, 2013; Ordonez, 2014), pedagogically (Holmes et al., 2021; Long et al., 2020; see also Grant et al., 1976; Palardy & Eisele, 1972), business (Peleckis et al., 2013, p. 63), professionals

(Boyatzis, 1982; Izquierdo & Buyens, 2008; Sanchez, 2010; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Woolacott, 2009), professional organizations (Canadian Society for Training and Development [CSTD], 2010), and healthcare (Schilling & Koetting, 2010, p. 166; Taber et al., 2010, p. 687). In the absence of a coherent definition, the following meaning by Le Boterf (1994) will inform my research as it adequately captures the nature and essence of CBE:

> Competence is not based on a state or knowledge possessed; it is a process. It is not reduced to knowledge or know-how. It cannot be assimilated to a learning outcome; therefore, possessing knowledge or abilities does not transfer into being competent … Competence does not lie in the resources (knowledge and capabilities) but in *the mobilization of these resources* (pp. 16-18).

As mentioned above, researchers vary in their perspectives on how to define CBE. For example, Mulder et al. (2009) refer to *competence* as the capability to use various knowledge, skills, and attitudes to complete a task, solve problems and function effectively in the workplace, a role, and situations. Mulder et al. (2007) suggest that *competence* is "concerned with the meaningful objectives and content of learning that will engender the personal development of students and position them within the domain of knowledge that can best prepare them to function effectively in society" (p. 68). From a business perspective, competence "describes a person's vocational training for relationships with the external environment. For each person, as well as a business manager, a place in society, organization, the company depends on his personality traits (personal characteristics), acquired knowledge, skills and abilities, specific activities valuable and necessary to carry out" (Peleckis et al., 2013, p. 63).

There is no commonly agreed-upon definition of what this educational approach should entail. Without a coherent definition for CBE, ideas from a policy-based, pedagogical, and

professional perspective were explored. From a policy-based perspective, MELS (2004) views CBE as the ability to act effectively or respond appropriately in situations of a certain complexity. This teaching and learning provide opportunities for students to further develop their competency mastery throughout their schooling and beyond (MELS, 2004). CBE is a shift from seat time to mastering concepts at one's own pace and a learner-centred experience (Palardy & Eisele, 1972; Lepi, 2013; Ordonez, 2014).

Pedagogically, CBE focuses on mastery and achieving specified criteria (Palardy & Eisele, 1972). Grant et al. (1976) noted: "Competence-based education tends to be a form of education that derives a curriculum from an analysis of a prospective or actual role in modern society and that attempts to certify student progress based on demonstrated performance in some or all aspects of that role" (p. 6). Professionals view competency education as a set of related knowledge, characteristics, attitudes, and skills which impact workplace performance and how effective individuals do their work but are evaluated by accepted standards and can be improved through training and development (Sanchez, 2010; Woolacott, 2009). Izquierdo and Buyens (2008) suggested that competency is an underlying characteristic of a person, evidenced by effective job performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Moreover, professional organizations have various perspectives on the definition of competence and CBE. For instance, The Canadian Society for Training and Development [CSTD] (2010), currently known as the Institute for Performance and Learning, defines competence as "clusters of interrelated knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for performing effectively in a particular area" (p. 11). The Conference Board of Canada (CBC) website refers to CBE as the development of employability skills needed to enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work, whether you work on your own or as a team.

In contrast, healthcare professionals view CBE as "outcome-based or product-driven and possessing a framework which commonly separates whole life roles into specific behavioural objectives that are assessed and measured against pre-determined standards" (Schilling & Koetting, 2010, p. 166). It is also viewed as "an educational paradigm" that organizes curricula around the goal of developing the "needed abilities in graduates" [and is] "an outcomes-based approach'' (Taber et al., 2010, p. 687).

CBE allows learners to demonstrate ability, capability, eligibility, and skills to apply knowledge in completing tasks in various contexts effectively (Grant et al., 1976; Lepi, 2013; Ordonez, 2014). Policies and work-related standards can affect how assessments and instructional practices help students master specific skills. Competency-based education (CBE) focuses on the individual learner and considers their prior learning and skill acquisition. It promotes flexible, self-paced learning and does not impose time constraints on task completion. This approach highlights the uniqueness of each learner by encouraging active engagement in the learning process, personalized knowledge acquisition, and the development of skills specific to each individual. CBE is designed to meet the needs of the individual, the workplace, and the economy.

Criticism of Competency-Based Education

Numerous criticisms surround CBE; the most common include: the definition of the concept and related terms (Evans et al., 2020; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Holmes et al., 2021; Prokes et al., 2021); the place and role of knowledge (including traditional methods) within the context of competence-based curricula (Muñoz & Araya, 2017; Pasha, 2019; Prokes et al., 2021), the significant emphasis placed on competence assessment (Efremova, 2021; Holmes et al., 2021; see also Mulder et al., 2009;), and the important role of educators in educational reform

(Datnow, 2020; Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Ordonez, 2014; Prokes et al., 2021). The latter is a driving force for this study.

One of the most common critiques of CBE is concerned with educators' altered role, from conduits of knowledge to facilitators. Researchers question the minute role teachers play in competency learning environments and overall educational reform (Datnow, 2020; Prokes et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2018; see also McCall, 2013; Mulder et al., 2009; Weigel et al., 2007). The lack of emphasis on teachers' beliefs and perceptions can significantly harm educational reform, especially when classroom practices are contested. Davidson (2005) examined how teachers viewed their professional competencies, particularly regarding educational reform and national standards requirements. Davidson reported that educational reform should consider the long-standing traditional methods that have been a part of teachers' academic and professional lives. Such experiences and beliefs do not disappear and cannot be easily replaced when policies change. Pressure from policy advocates should not override teachers' abilities, influence, and time adapting to reform requirements (Davidson, 2005).

Policy deliberations should include educators' perspectives and experiences relative to imposed reform changes (Niemi, 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022; Rogers, 2021; Woolner et al., 2018; see also Bailey, 2000;). Competency-based methods require concise yet detailed instructions to reap positive effects, ensure instructional quality and consistency, and sustain ideas (Mulder et al., 2009). This idea suggests that teachers should intermittently provide feedback and reinforcement for the correct application and execution of new instructional material. The transfer of roles from teacher to students creates a problematic experience for a course that focuses on skill training or vocational programs (Pasha, 2019; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also, Mulder et al., 2009). Instructors are also familiar with how reforms are

progressing in actual practice in real-time. When necessary, adjustments are required, and

instructors have the practical knowledge to incorporate changes to ensure sustainability. Relying

on instructor knowledge and expertise becomes paramount. Thus, college instructors should play

a more active role in decision-making processes relative to reform. Compared with traditional

instructional practices, CBE is viewed as a radical shift for college instructors as they are

required to take on multiple roles (teacher, advisor, mentor, assessment developer, adaptive

coaches) rather than be subject matter experts and primary conveyors of knowledge

(Ramanathan et al., 2022; Burnette, 2016; Prokes et al., 2021; see also, Biemans et al., 2009; De

Bruijn, 2012; Mulder et al., 2009; Ordonez, 2014).

Similarly, as the instructor's role diminishes, there is great concern about the adverse

impact of this on student learning quality in competency-based structured settings. As Paulo

Freire (1972, 2005) indicated in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, effective teachers understand that

the teaching-learning process is a two-way endeavour in which teachers take on the role of

students, and students adopt the role of teachers. Freire (1972) referred to this joint responsibility

as "acts of cognition" and suggested that "liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not

transferrals of information" (p. 3). Freire (1972) demonstrated how powerful and essential

dialogue is for people to be conscious beings who should have a firsthand role in their growth

and learning. The same applies to college instructors, who should be afforded a more inclusive

role in educational policies and decision-making about their workplace practices. The

authoritarian approach to educational reform will not likely produce significant success in

student outcomes. Furthermore, there is scant evidence assessing competency-based programs

from the lens of instructors, their experiences, and their perspectives on how CBE influences

teaching practices (Echols et al., 2017; Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Ramanathan et al., 2022; Rogers,

2021; see also, Morcke et al., 2013). Instructors should be more pivotal in competency-based policies, program designs, and modifications. Thus, exploring educators' viewpoints on CBE and their roles in this learning environment can contribute to the literature on this topic, which I will address next.

Sustaining Educational Reform: Curriculum Changes and Teachers' Agency

Achieving sustainable educational changes has become a significant challenge for educational systems (Barakat, 2019; Tikkanen, 2020; Vilches, 2018; see also, Datnow, 2002). Instructors feel voiceless in pertinent matters concerning their work when implementing CBE (Echols et al., 2017; Lockton & Fargason, 2019; Ramanathan et al., 2022; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2018; see also, Arum & Roksa, 2011 & 2014; Eaton, 2016; Izquierdo, 2008). I hypothesized that more open and democratic dialogue with instructors could help sustain reform efforts. This type of collaboration acknowledges that teacher agency is essential in promoting equitable and sustainable educational change initiatives.

Teachers Involvement in Sustainable Educational Reform

The extent to which teachers are involved in decision-making processes will determine their commitment to sustaining such changes. Teachers must understand these initiatives' value and significance for any successful educational change by embracing their perspectives, concerns, and feelings through more inclusive dialogue. If policymakers find it challenging to market the importance of specific reform measures to teachers and get them on board, they are fighting a losing battle. Teachers' buy-in is a fundamental factor at all stages of educational change (Briggs et al., 2018; Cheng & Huang, 2018; Prokes et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2018). A clear idea of how they view reform will also provide a better understanding of how teachers will implement CBE into their practices. When teachers are actively involved, and their thoughts and

suggestions are acknowledged and valued, they will be more likely to buy in. Otherwise,

teachers may face a crisis of reform policy legitimacy[4] if they feel underrepresented despite well-

structured reform policies. Therefore, involving teachers actively in all stages of reform creates a

"sense of legitimacy" (Niemi, 2021, p. 23).

Exploring the importance of teachers' agency in education reform has become a focus of

international research (Cloonan et al., 2019; Ehren et al., 2021; Prokes et al., 2021;

Vahasantanen, 2015; Zeichner, 2019). Agency is defined as educators' "capacity to act

purposefully and constructively to direct teachers' professional growth and contribute to the

growth of their colleagues" (Calvert, 2016, p. 52). Alexander (1987) defines agency as

individuals having the power to make a difference in the state of affairs. Teachers possess the

power and agency to reach students socially and academically in significant ways. Furthermore,

within the complex nature of CBE reform, Datnow (2012) indicates that "teacher agency has to

be understood in terms of its interplay with the broader context in which it was embedded" (p.

194). In the case of CBE reform, teachers' agency is intertwined "with the structural and cultural

features of the school, local community, the larger policy environment, and marketplace

demands" (Datnow, 2012, p. 194).

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[4] Wheeler-Bell (2017) explains that policy and democratic legitimacy in educational reforms "depends upon teachers collectively feeling that their voice is heard in decision making. A legitimation crisis in curricula reforms means that individuals collectively do not feel that curricula are morally binding; as a result, there is a moral disconnection between the educational policies enacted and the people's acceptance of said policies" (p. 562).

Moreover, I argue that teachers' agency[5] is developed through direct dialogue about their workplace practices as they view and experience them within this definition. Such collaboration allows them to exercise their agency in a more conducive atmosphere, where they are not marginalized and see that their work is significant. The more teachers are collaboratively engaged in the reform process and not just implementation, the more motivated they will be to exert whatever resources necessary for sustainable change. More meaningful and lasting endeavours toward sustainable reform depend on teachers' sense of agency (Tao & Gao, 2017). Thus, educational involvement through a continual engagement and emergence process within contextual conditions will create a meaningful agency (Cheng & Huang, 2018; Priestley et al., 2016; Priestley et al., 2012). Teachers must see their ideas and suggestions embedded in decision-making processes and workplace practices (Zeichner, 2019; see also, Johnson, 2001). Hurley (2004) indicated that "most Canadian educators perceive their roles as implementers of government-initiated policies rather than as active agents of change" (p. 43). Failure to recognize the importance of educators' agency may lead to resistance and the poor implementation of structural and organizational change (Riveros et al., 2012). Teachers' agency is a critical variable in educational changes and "contextualizing teachers' beliefs and views to understand their positionality toward CBE implementation effort" (Torres et al., 2018, p. 7). Therefore, I address the latter point in the following section.

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[5] *Agency*, in the context of my thesis, is conceptualized as acknowledging the importance of instructors' views, beliefs, attitudes, suggestions, experiences, and practical knowledge relative to changes in workplace practices and reform by utilizing their expertise at all levels of educational development policies.

Importance of Teachers' Beliefs and Perspectives

Teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and actions are critical for effective and sustainable educational change. A direct correlation between educators' perspectives about workplace experiences and educational reform outcomes has been found (Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Prokes et al., 2021; Rogers, 2021; see also Anderson & Hendrickson, 2007; de Bruijn, 2012; Priestley et al., 2015; Schleicher, 2011; Seezink & Poell, 2010). Whatever educators deem important as it relates to their experiences and beliefs will be implemented into practice (Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Beijaard et al., 2004; de Bruijn, 2012). For example, findings from a study conducted by Elster (2010) illustrate that educators' attitudes, self-efficacy, and behaviour were primary factors in determining the initiative they would take to implement reform into classroom practices effectively. Other research literature suggests that there is also a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and broader institutional discourse about their workplace practices (Baş, 2021; Cheng & Huang, 2018, p. 286). A similar view prevails as the literature indicates that resistance is inevitable when educational changes do not match teachers' reality of everyday classroom practices (Baş, 2021).

Additionally, the identification of classroom teachers' beliefs and perceptions around the CBE initiative and, importantly, their actual practices of implementation are an underexplored area in research (Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Rogers, 2021; Torres et al., 2018), which further support what contributes to this discrepancy. This discrepancy indicates that attention should be devoted to ongoing collaboration with teachers about their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences, which will reveal discrepancies between their beliefs and actual practices (Baş, 2021; Prokes et al., 2021; Sung et al., 2022; Leijen, et al., 2022; see also, Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; de

Bruijn, 2012; Cheng & Huang, 2018) and provide insights to improve the design of … reforms (Sung et al., 2022, p. 411).

Moreover, it is fundamental to teachers' learning and understanding of their new roles and responsibilities in a competency-based environment to become aware of how such methods shape their lived realities and subjectivities, particularly in the classroom. Findings from a study conducted by Seezink and Poell (2010) indicated that teachers who became aware of the impact that competency-based instructional methods would have on their teaching practices were reluctant to "abandon their current values" (p. 463). Prior research literature suggests that teachers' participation in shaping workplace realities and pedagogical practices is essential for successful reform implementation (Leijen et al., 2022) and maintaining everything valuable in education (Priestley et al., 2015). Once again, this shows teachers' enormous struggle with CBE's impact on teaching values. It also demonstrates the importance of gaining teachers' subjective perceptions of their working conditions.

The literature further advocates that teachers' beliefs and perspectives are important as they shape students' academic behaviour and individual outcomes. De Bruijn (2012) indicated that because teachers' ideas and professional attitudes influence teaching behaviour, their beliefs, in turn, will eventually impact student outcomes. Therefore, whatever teachers deem necessary regarding their "experiences in practice and personal backgrounds" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108) will be transferred to students. For instance, modelling (de Bruijn, 2012) is a significant characteristic essential to competency-based education. The idea of modelling is usually a behaviour the teacher displays to help students better grasp a concept or develop the ability to demonstrate competency. De Bruijn (2012) stated that with competency-based instructional strategies, teachers understand the concept in theory but struggle with altering teaching practices,

indicating their significant role in shaping students' learning outcomes. A similar view was reiterated in Seezink and Poell's (2010) study, where teachers were keen to adopt CBE but unwilling to part from current values and ways of teaching easily.

For over thirty years, results from several studies and the literature have revealed similar significant impacts of CBE on teachers: (i) mixed perceptions of the usefulness of competency teaching (Bliven & Jungbauer, 2021; Efremova, 2021; Monat & Gannon, 2018; see also Anderson & Hendrickson, 2007; Blatchford & Bruhwiler, 2011; Dupuis et al., 2001; Palmer et al., 1983), (ii) doubts about contributing to quality instructional outcomes (Efremova, 2021; Evans et al., 2020; see also, Blatchford & Bruhwiler, 2011; Elster, 2010), and (iii) increased uncertainty, practical tensions, inconsistencies in teaching behavior, as well as professional attitudes and beliefs (Evans et al., 2020; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also, De Bruijn, 2012).

Acceptance of the emerging neoliberal perspective to structuring, developing, and implementing recent educational reforms has not been overwhelming, especially by teachers. Teachers' reluctance is significantly due to how standardized approaches like CBE have practically forced teachers to part from their innate beliefs and values about the purpose of education. Neoliberal education reform measures contradict teachers' beliefs and the norm of classroom practices for them (Anderson-Levitt et al., 2021; Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2018; De Bruijn, 2012). Competency-based reform cannot be taken as an all-good initiative, as such changes were initially developed based on employers' demands in a market-based economy. Understanding why CBE is met with significant objections and what factors challenge educational reform sustainability is essential. According to "advocates of educational improvement, the difficulty of sustaining reform initiatives" (Hubers, 2020; see also, Growe & Montgomery, 2003, p. 24) is discouraging. Historically, the literature continues its

attempts to blame unqualified and poorly prepared teachers (Pawlewicz, 2022; Hodge, 2015; Weingarten, 2014; see also, Marsh, 2001; Walls et al., 2002). However, as cited by Growe and Montgomery (2003), other scholarly discourse argues that an equally or more severe problem is an increased level of teacher detachment and alienation from their work and their students (Aydarova et al., 2021; Hodge, 2015; Metz, 1990; Corcoran et al., 1988). Establishing teachers' perceptions and involvement in educational improvement initiatives are essential to motivating student achievement and, hence, reform sustainability. There was a time when "teachers were viewed as critical to educational reform and student achievement" (Datnow, 2012, p. 194). The following section explores the role of the teacher and power relations in the neoliberal political economy approach to education.

Contextual Forces that Influence Educational Reform

A Neoliberal Perspective of Competency-Based Education

Neoliberal globalization ideologies influence CBE programs implemented in educational institutions throughout Québec. With this new wave of education reform, educational systems are experiencing increased accountability, reduction in funding through austerity measures, more demands for parental involvement, centralization of management and decision-making processes, and emphasis on developing workplace competencies (Aydarova et al., 2021; Portelli & Oladi, 2018; Stewart, 2021; see also, Gordon & Whitty, 1997; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Hursh, 2006; Ross & Gibson, 2006). Neoliberal globalization is "a complex of values, ideologies, and practices that influences economic policies, political, and cultural aspects of society" (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 1). Its goal is to promote the agenda of "free market economic policies by imposing increased measures of accountability and deregulation, that would eventually lead to a

reduction of social programs and State control" (Grimmett, 2018; Savage, 2017; see also, Rossiter & Heron, 2011, p. 306).

Additionally, standardized approaches like CBE are viewed as the way to improve education and, eventually, workplace opportunities. As Waters (1998) maintains, the neoliberal "ideology that influences this movement has often prevented the realization of any notion of an egalitarian ideal, the elimination of inequality, or the improvement of those who are least well-off" (p. 2). Similarly, decades later, Anderson-Levitt et al. (2021) contend that reforms like CBE preserve the dominant view that education's purpose is to address the needs of the economic and market-oriented system, thus maintaining the status quo. One of the salient features of CBE is its permeability to be controlled by interests outside the institutions and practices of education (Hodge, 2007), which "makes it a hallmark of neoliberal educational discourse" (Hodge, 2015, p. 143). The external dominant forces that exert influence over what is happening in educational settings leave teachers with little to no input in formulating their lived realities, justifying their resistance to standardized pedagogical approaches.

Moreover, the historical nature of educational problems and the communities in which these schools exist must be examined (Baş, 2021; Portelli & Oladi, 2018; Weingarten, 2014; see also Noll, 1997). A critique of the neoliberal economic agenda for education revealed how socio-cultural, social structures and political contexts influence the organization and the implementation of reform. This analysis also provided a better understanding of the role of hierarchical relationships in the distribution of educational improvements. Such contexts are directly associated with society's broader political and economic issues (Sharma & Sanford, 2018; see also Waters, 1998). These contexts illuminated the injustice and inequalities generated by neoliberal education policies, including diminished teachers' roles and marginalizing of their

voices. Therefore, as discussed in the subsequent section, examining neoliberal's cultural, social, and structural factors is vital in understanding what makes public education and some communities subject to market conditions.

Socio-Cultural and Social Structural Context of Competency-Based Education Reform

Increasing diversity in schools makes it essential to understand the socio-cultural context that CBE reforms have initiated and how social structures are organized to maintain the neoliberal agenda for education. These factors influence the quality and equity of educational reform programs (Yang et al., 2022; see also Cleary & Beathnach, 2017; Hill & Kumar, 2009). Correspondingly, Datnow et al. (2002) argue that societal structure and culture influence teachers' reform actions. The demand by policymakers for educational systems to adopt a competency-based framework requires a fundamental shift in resource distribution and restructuring of educational institutions, particularly in poverty-stricken schools (Hill & Kumar, 2009; Salinas, 2017). Some of the common socio-cultural and structural elements identified by the literature include socio-economic status, student mobility, attendance rate, race (high percentage of white students), and poor minority students (Brathwaite, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Salinas, 2017).

Implementing standardized approaches like CBE restructures the curriculum, instructional methods, and forms of assessment and determines what outcomes are necessary (Fook, 2011; Hill & Kumar, 2009). The cultural context in which CBE reforms are taking place also explains teachers' continued challenges and students' achievement struggles. Social and economic conditions are known to shape such cultural indifferences. Historically, due to a discriminatory labour market, black workers were not paid based on their educational qualifications, which might have led to black students devaluing the importance of education

when compared to white students (Rothstein, 2004). Additionally, Rothstein (2004) indicated that a distinct challenge encountered in high-poverty schools is addressing society's perception toward education and reform measures. Societies that struggle economically and socially often do not view education as a "great equalizer of conditions of men" (Growe & Montgomery, 2003, p. 23). In these communities, students are encouraged to rapidly enter the workforce rather than acquire advanced academic or professional qualifications. This limited level of schooling lures many students, particularly minorities, into the workforce's technical training and skilled-based areas. Neoliberal-driven reform supports and maintains this status quo; the "policies not only fail to reduce inequality but exacerbate and reproduce existing class and race inequalities in schooling" (Braithwaite, 2017, p. 429). Although a market-driven element of the CBE approach is championed as suitable to prepare a diverse number of students for the workplace, "the equality of opportunity rooted in market values that places the onus on individuals to maximize their success disregards socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic divides" (Portelli & Oladi, 2018, p. 386). This point brings the analysis to discussing how social class and socioeconomic status are key neoliberal strategies to expand market-based ideas and reinforce educational inequity.

Neoliberal Educational Reform and Socioeconomic Status

Neoliberal CBE reform claims to promote quality education by assisting *all* schools struggling with performance and student achievement. Most schools that fall into this category are low-quality, disadvantaged, and located in impoverished areas (Jheng et al., 2022; see also Brathwaite, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003). From the onset, implementing standardized measures like CBE fails to consider the socio-economic status (SES) and culture of students enrolled in low-performing schools. These low-performing schools often have large populations of minorities such as blacks, Hispanics, non-native language speakers, and the poor

predominantly attend these schools (Ali, 2019; Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Brathwaite, 2017). Neoliberal reform measures of increased accountability and standardized testing expose these schools to neglect and inequitable treatment. "[S]chools serving low-income students receive fewer resources, face greater difficulties attracting qualified teachers, face many more challenges in addressing students' needs, and receive less support from parents" (Growe & Montgomery, 2003, p. 23). The reality is that neoliberal CBE improvements experienced by low-performing educational institutions remain substandard.

Furthermore, such reform measures have also significantly contributed to widening the achievement gap between students of different socio-economic backgrounds. This distinction is evident between "students from low-income families, African American, Hispanic, and Native American cultures and their more affluent peers" (Ghajarieh & MirkazemiGrowe, 2023; Jheng et al., 2022; see also Montgomery, 2003, p. 25). Correspondingly, the literature maintains that about half of the achievement gap would disappear "if we only took the simple step of assuring that poor and minority children had highly qualified teachers" (Haycock, 1998, p. 2). Additionally, parental school choice and family socioeconomic status have furthered this educational gap between the wealthy and the less affluent. A meta-analysis discovered that a family's SES influences "the thinking behind school choice and preferences … and determines parents' capability to choose schools for their children" (Jheng et al., 2022, p. 10). For example, "better-off families and those with higher educational levels choose quality schools and their children's classmates of similar SES" (Jheng et al., 2022, p. 10). The idea behind CBE was to give parents an equal chance to choose schools that are better academically fit for their child; however, such neoliberal education practices contradict this. Similar concerns are also at the college level, where students cannot obtain acceptance in the program of choice, and the

upcoming implementation of new language policies will add to existing inequalities. Therefore, as the literature suggests, such practices are "crippling the equalization of educational opportunities" (Jheng et al., 2022, p. 10; Liu & Apple, 2020), thus, continuing disparities among the most vulnerable.

Ultimately, the underprivileged of whom the neoliberal competency-based reform intended to improve educational standards and professional opportunities are significantly oppressed (Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Sharma & Sanford, 2018). The teachers and curriculum used to nurture and assess students' performance are influenced by neoliberal ideologies that make them "marketable in a capitalist economic society" (Growe & Montgomery, 2003, p. 23) for predetermined employment based on social status (Cleary & Breathnach, 2017). Injustices perpetrated by neoliberal reforms are rarely documented in the literature. The lack of research emphasizes the need for research that exposes the reality of competency-based environments. Measures imposed and implemented by CBE fail to help these individuals advance in life and only "succeed" in maintaining their social status while ensuring that the neoliberal economic globalization agenda is unchallenged. Therefore, the changing role of teachers and the dominant hierarchical relation at play reaffirms how neoliberal competency-based reform is thriving.

The Role of the Teacher and Power Relations in the Context of Neoliberal Political Economy

The sociocultural nature and learning process have been significantly modified, thus deteriorating the teacher-student interaction and relationship (Savage, 2017; Yosef-Hassidim & Sharma, 2018; see also; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Once common in traditional classrooms, this interaction allowed teachers to bond with their students and understand what factors impeded their academic success. Research (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Growe & Montgomery, 2003;

Khatoon et al., 2011; Savage, 2017) emphasizes that social impediments must be considered in any educational reform to improve students' personal and professional development. These obstacles include poverty, income status, class structure, and language barriers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The teacher-student relationship promoted by CBE reform provides less support and greatly minimizes interaction. Darling-Hammond (2000) argues that if the interaction between teachers and students is the most critical aspect of effective schooling, reducing inequality in learning must rely on policies that provide equal access to competent, well-supported teachers. Neoliberal reform policies on CBE do not consider teachers necessary to achieve the required outcome or a vital element in the educational process (Khatoon et al., 2011; Grant, 1989). Even though teachers serve as vital agents of social change, CBE has marginalized their voices in pertinent decision-making and diminished their role in the learning process. Teaching and learning associated with neoliberal CBE emphasize the interaction between industry and business providers to ensure that education practices "reflect industry and workplace needs and priorities" (Hodges, 2015, p. 150).

Neoliberal values embedded in CBE reform impact classroom practices and fundamentally alter the redistribution of power (Ross & Gibson, 2017; Vinson & Ross, 2006). Teachers' perspectives are rarely requested during discussions on curriculum and program improvements, resource allocation, and hiring procedures; concerns remain unheard. Teachers' expert practical and theoretical knowledge in these learning environments is intentionally overlooked and deemed insignificant. Neoliberal CBE flourishes on the assumption that curriculum is misguided by teachers who fail to recognize the importance of business interests (Hodge, 2015, p. 144). First, this notion highlights the economic interests central to the neoliberal globalization CBE approach. Second, it demonstrates the contradiction between

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teachers' role as experts in their subject domain and "education constructed according to neoliberal economic theory and the fundamental structure of educator work" (Hodge, 2015, p. 144). This perspective of the competency-based model limits teachers from tapping into diverse methods that would make it possible to reach more students. Hodges (2015) contends that it alienates teachers from doing what they have been trained to do. The economic labour market reform that CBE facilitates reduces teachers' autonomy in the educational process and involvement in decision-making surrounding this subject.

Teachers need to be active agents in educational reform to realize improvements in teaching and learning processes (Datnow, 2012, p. 193). Although decision-making for many schools, including CÉGEP colleges, has been centralized locally, administrative authority significantly excludes teachers' voices and participation. Most school-change theorists argue that teachers' decision-making power has been diminished in the current policy moment (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Even so, teachers remain active agents, either actively engaging with reform agendas, passively accepting them, or rejecting them, often in ways shaped by their social contexts (Coburn, 2001; Olsen & Sexton 2009; Payne, 2008). Such engagement from teachers is not in students' best interests or the effective implementation of reform practices. Educational reform that disables teachers' active involvement in the decision-making process on "school improvement around instructional practices" (Datnow, 2012, p. 195) is often met with increased resistance. A primary goal of the neoliberal perspectives of CBE is "to subjugate teachers" (Hodge, 2015, p. 143).

CBE provides little on-site assistance during implementation and dismantles teachers' agency in challenging the inequity discovered in standardized testing measures. Teachers critiquing working practices and individual consciousness concerning the "democratic purpose of

education [makes them more aware of how CBE reform is contributing to] the production of inequality, and reproduction of social injustice in public schools or the larger social order" (Waters, 1998, p. 2).

Furthermore, teachers are not consulted when determining how to allocate surplus funding; only after changes are made are they informed. This method of authority and control demonstrates that the administration has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of structural powers embedded in neoliberal reform practices (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As Weiss et al. (2002) indicated, educational decision-making at the administration level is made within the "context of political realities" (p. 72), including other external forces. Fuller et al. (2000) describe "outside forces" as those external factors and their pressures on the education system. Regarding decision-making, this distribution of responsibilities demonstrates "elements of hierarchy … in terms of status and power" (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 351). Magee and Galinsky (2008) define power as "control over valued resources [that] transforms individual psychology such that the powerful think and act in ways that lead to the retention and acquisition of power" (p. 351).

The structural context in which CBE is taking place includes power relations at the macro-level regarding who decides what policies should be formulated, how they should be implemented, and the expected outcomes. CBE's structure and educational practices demonstrate "curriculum division and control by interests outside education" (Hodge, 2015, p. 154). Hierarchical social structures can provide order and clarify individual group members' roles, thus facilitating social coordination (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This level of hierarchical coordination demonstrates that social class impacts communication, determines who advances in their social rank and to what extent achievement occurs, and identifies expected behavioural

outcomes in advance. Such characteristics describe the neoliberal agenda rooted in CBE reform practices. Current reforms shaped and influenced by external hierarchical forces focus on economic prosperity and maintaining the status quo. Weiss et al. (2002) add that CBE is being introduced during an era where government decision-making and education policies are informed by "pressures from global competitiveness" (p. 73), which increases both the public's and business leaders' economic concerns. Additionally, Weiss et al. (2002) argue that "influential leaders who view education as the means to attaining stronger economic standards have promoted new accountability initiatives and provided incentives to stimulate improvements in schools" (p. 73). Correspondingly, Weiss et al. (2002) also claim that "corporations and their representatives have become involved in influencing education policy at the local, state, and federal levels" (p.73) in the pursuit of employees who are workforce-ready with the required competencies.

Research indicates that over the past two decades, during educational reform, the achievement gap in schools has skyrocketed (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Ornstein, 2010; Rothstein, 2004). The achievement gap is defined by Growe and Montgomery (2003) as "the disparity between the academic performance of different groups of students. Several such gaps … are largely along economic, racial, and ethnic lines" (p. 25). Such drastic increases could be attributed to failing schools, poorly designed policies, unqualified teachers, and large classes because economic status or skin colour are not contributing factors (Ornstein, 2010; Rothstein, 2004).

Moreover, the above conclusions ignore the significant role of hierarchical social structures in dictating the education structure based on class and economic status. As Rothstein (2004) indicated, it is clear how the collection of social class characteristics in a stratified

society, coupled with income and race, inevitably influences the achievement gap and societal inequality. The same applies to CBE reform, where neoliberal ideology toward decision-making has increased disparity among disadvantaged students. For example, the structuring and implementation of the current competency-based model are controlled by privileged groups who "fracture 'powerful' knowledge, forcing learners to master incoherent, context-bound fragments of knowledge" (Hodge, 2015, p. 156). Hodge (2015) contends that the "working class of whom this educational reform intends to elevate socially cannot access this powerful knowledge or enjoy its benefits" (p. 156). The literature defines this powerful knowledge as "cultural capital defined as a form of symbolic wealth consisting of elite knowledge, dispositions, and skills" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 406). Bourdieu (1977) argues that individuals at the top of the class structure maintain their advantage by transmitting elite knowledge or ideas directly to their children. Thus, cultural capital is "an additional form of inherited wealth. Privileged children are familiar with topics valued by the elite that schools do not directly teach but for which schools do reward students" (Dornbusch et al., 1996, p. 406).

Through standardized methods like CBE, educational institutions are structured, controlled, and monitored to preserve the neoliberal globalization rhetoric for education. Despite the rhetoric of serving the disadvantaged, neoliberal reform practices continue to subject these groups of individuals to significant educational injustice. Ward (2016) argues that "neoliberal reforms are a betrayal of the goals of a liberal education" (paras 7 & 8). Sociocultural factors and social structures inform CBE reforms and play an essential role in "shaping and determining the objective of education and the system of education" (Khatoon et al., 2011, p. 650). Neoliberal globalization policies on education and decision-making continue to perpetuate inequalities through power domination by excluding the vital role of such features in ensuring equal

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opportunity distribution. Khatoon Azeem and Akhtar (2011) contend that neoliberal reform policies modify teachers' identities, beliefs, and roles in the educational process by imposing power relations constraints and structural barriers. This domination type focuses on workplace competency development and restricts emphasis on knowledge and social factors. When teachers are stressed, particularly by institutional forces and outside authorities (Khatoon et al., 2011, p. 650), the quality and effectiveness of reform outcomes are limited. The advancement of economic needs driving educational changes is due to neoliberal values shaping policies.

Sociopolitical Context of Competency-Based Education and Embedded Power Relations

Although numerous debates exist about educational institutions gaining full autonomy in conducting local affairs, such as restructuring and development, government policies continue to interfere with these goals. To understand the "neoliberal state systems of education," examining the sociopolitical context and related power relations within this domain are equally vital (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p. 454). The literature suggests that governments (the State) are organizing schools as "quasi-markets" (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p. 454). These markets are "highly regulated, with the government controlling such matters as entry by new providers, investment, the quality of service (as with the national curriculum) and price" (Levacic, 1995, p. 167). These markets allow governments to relinquish direct responsibility for education while at the same time controlling the supply of goods and suggest that a reduction of government intervention in education will allow schools to run as self-governing educational institutions (Gordon & Whitty, 1997).

Under the current neoliberal competency-based model, no provisions are made to incorporate teachers' perspectives on what knowledge is essential to impart to students since such decisions have already been made (Hodge, 2015, p.154). The neoliberal system focuses on

and evaluates the "success of policy outputs by controlling and monitoring management practices and processes" (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p. 455). Teachers in these learning environments have predetermined realities, with scarce room for voices and concerns to be heard.

Research focusing on teachers' perspectives of this educational reform reveals that they resent CBE (Hodge, 2015, p. 151) and are displeased about how their professional expertise is under scrutiny. For example, a study by Robinson (1993a) discovered conflict between the assessment of competencies and the educator's exercise of 'tacit judgment' (expertise). Another study by Lowrie et al. (1999) reported that teachers viewed CBE "as something imposed from outside and not necessarily related to what they do in the classroom" (p. 53). These research findings still support the idea that neoliberal-facilitated CBE reform has undermined the roles and decision-making of teachers in the learning environment.

Additionally, the State imposes "five main political directives on education reform that fail to consider teachers' presence or professional beliefs: (i) making schools autonomous, (ii) diversity and choice, (iii) involving the private sector, (iv) privatizing provision, and (v) accountability" (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p. 456). Although self-managing schools have shown to be most effective, especially in improvements (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gordon & Whitty, 1997), many educational systems have been hesitant about embracing CBE. For instance, Gordon and Whitty (1997) report that most schools in England, all but three schools in Whales, and several New Zealand schools have been reluctant to adopt this self-governing approach. Many schools fear that they would be blamed for poor management practices (Gordon & Whitty, 1997), which would lead to reduced funding and forced privatization of services.

Promoting the private sector is a key tenant of neoliberalism, as it perceives privatization as a means of retaining quality and more effective services. This notion of privatizing educational services places schools in a state of competition to attract private business funding for maintenance and credibility (Ali, 2019; Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Mintz, 2021; Niemi, 2021). Private businesses and corporations influence educational policies by advising elected politicians on what decisions to make (Weiss et al., 2002). On the other hand, the policy on social choices allows parents to choose which school is best suited to accommodate their children's needs. However, Whitty (1997) indicates that, although the political argument is that all parents have the freedom to choose, by [default] such social choices exclude some groups from meaningful choices. This approach embodies neoliberal theory's idea of free individual choice (Gordon & Whitty, 1997; Kumar & Hill, 2009) that encourages schools to implement stipulations as to eligibility for enrolment, which means preferential selection is likely to occur, creating social injustice (Weiss et al., 2002). Finally, CBE practices have viewed teachers as incapable of making decisions in their students' best interests. The above discussion reveals proposed limits of State involvement in education, distinctly related to the neoliberal model.

Moreover, neoliberal rhetoric promotes educational opportunities for all (Kumar & Hill, 2009, p. 1). The above discussion reflects a "diminishing role of the State as a provider of education" and a threat to the decrease in pertinent resources for maintaining schools (Kumar & Hill, 2009, p. 1). While "economies flourish from neoliberal capital and investments, the deterioration of numerous educational systems from lack of funding persists" (Kumar & Hill, 2009, p. 1). Such outcomes contradict the neoliberal rhetoric for education and "go against the goals of education and teachers as agents of social change" (Kumar & Hill, 2009, p.1). The marketization of education, privatization of schools, and funding cutbacks are all characteristics

of the neoliberal capitalist class agenda that perpetuates inequalities among those already struggling. The initial goal of CBE policies may have been paved with good intentions. Still, the apparent "withdrawal of the State leaves open political space which may be occupied by forces [neoliberalism] which work against the intent of policy" (Gordon & Whitty, 1997, p. 455). Regarding CBE reform, a critique of the political rhetoric compared to practices highlights how imposed policies increase control and monitoring over public education. Education is used as "a device for social control and legitimizing power differentials" (Dornbusch et al., 1996, p. 406), thus reproducing the values and personality characteristics necessary for a compliant and efficient labour force (Mintz, 2021; Niemi, 2021; see also, Hurn, 1978).

Teachers' voices have been marginalized in the literature on CBE reform and alienated from their role in the educational framework. Power dominance monitors and controls educational processes and institutions rather than promoting equitable treatment (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011; Vinson & Ross, 2006). To maintain equity and achieve effective outcomes and sustainability, reforms must be flexible enough to adapt to existing cultural and social contexts in which CBE is implemented. Educational systems in Québec have endured actions taken to reduce funding, particularly at the college and university levels, through austerity measures. Educational institutions experience increased accountability through funding mechanisms based on student enrolment, college completion rates, and, most recently, the elimination of most school boards and a comprehensive evaluation of all CÉGEP curricula. The political context expedites the neoliberal ideology for educational reform, which, from a long-term perspective, is not in the best interests of the masses, especially teachers and students. The age of accountability has significantly shaped the culture of teaching and teachers' agency without the intention of success and opportunities for the students it serves (Datnow, 2012).

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Further, CBE research is warranted on teachers' role, identity, and voices in the context of a neoliberal market-driven educational change (Ali, 2019; Cleary & Breathnach, 2017; Lasky, 2005; Hill & Kumar, 2009). The literature suggests important issues and concerns about the current neoliberal competency-based model imposed on educational systems. This model exploits disadvantaged students and contradicts teachers' agency in education, forcing them to negotiate between fulfilling an economic agenda and doing what is equitable for students. The competency-based model claims to accommodate the underprivileged, but the training offered reflects a broader social dynamic by which privileged groups maintain control over powerful forms of knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007). In truth, CBE intends to make controlling labour easier for dominant groups (Hodge, 2015, p. 156). Teachers are not given significant opportunities to contribute to the education reform model's development and implementation. They are viewed as incapable of knowing how to meet their students' needs and, by extension, the workplace. The argument substantiates my research's valuable contribution to addressing the extremes of neoliberal dogma in education. Moreover, it further illuminated the need for discourse that adds voice to teachers' experiences and perspectives of working in these learning environments.

Current Gaps and Anticipated Contributions of the Research

My research explored neoliberal CBE reform, and the various inequalities embedded in these practices. CBE's goal is to improve educational standards. However, achievement gaps between the rich and poor continue to expand. Teachers' perspectives and experiences relative to educational changes and their work are pivotal influences for educational improvement and sustainability. The literature emphasizes the necessity for further research focused on this subject. It underscores disparities between (i) educational reform, classroom practices, and teachers' lived realities about CBE, (ii) discussions of students' outcomes and performances in

competency-based settings and the processes that lead to such success stories, and (iii) a lack of scholarly discourse investigating the circumstances under which neoliberal reforms like CBE are taking place and the injustices these practices perpetuate for the most vulnerable. An underexplored area in research was the exploration of teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding the CBE initiative and, importantly, their actual implementation practices (Rogers, 2021; Torres et al., 2018). As a result, more research addressing the subjectivities of educators working in these settings is of vital importance (Niemi, 2021; Rogers, 2021; Torres et al., 2018; Brathwaite, 2017; Cheng & Huang, 2018; Eaton, 2016; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Ordonez, 2014;).

The fragmented and isolationist manner in which reform efforts have been implemented makes it highly unlikely for reforms to be sustained (Olson & Rothman, 1993; Phan & Hamid, 2016; Scott, 1994). College teachers' perspectives on workplace practices and curriculum reform can help address this issue. Doing so requires teachers to be afforded leadership roles throughout educational change. Limited research studies have explored educators' subjectivities in settings mediated by mandated educational reform measures. Teachers' perspectives and experiences are vital to educational reform (Earl et al., 2003; Woolner et al., 2018). Furthermore, the research literature generally indicates a persistent gap between imposed policies and the realities of workplace and classroom practices. This inconsistency is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.

Educators play an essential role in implementing educational reform (Datnow, 2021; Niemi, 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also, Day, 2002; Elster, 2010; Fives & Buehl, 2008; Roehrig et al., 2007; Seezink et al., 2010; Forbes, 2011). Their beliefs, views, attitudes, values, and knowledge, viewed as symbolic tools, can better inform policy mandates (Baş, 2021; Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Roehrig et al., 2007) and decision-making processes and can also impact students

learning (Lip-owsky, 2006; Seidel & Shavelson, 2007; Wayne & Youngs, 2003). However, the linkage between teacher perception, experiences, and students' learning often is not investigated systematically (Kliem, 2006).

Current literature has overlooked that teachers' capacity and willingness to implement reform measures successfully correlate with their dispositions and attitudes toward such practices. Therefore, my study made teachers and their voices central throughout the research process, as education equality and sustainability cannot be attained in isolation. The usefulness and effectiveness of reform measures alone do not account for their durability in educational institutions (Datnow, 2002; Niemi, 2021). Instead, teachers, administrators, and policymakers are vital in the longevity of educational changes. Hence, a goal of the methodological perspective (critical ethnography) informing my research study is to encourage a platform that would illuminate [teachers'] voices in pertinent matters that concern their work practices and experiences (Carspecken & Walford, 2001; Kohn, 2001). To better understand the contradictions and inequity between teachers' agency relative to competency-based reform (Cheng & Huang, 2018), the objectives of my research study can potentially provide insights into their past and current experiences.

Summary and Conclusion

Over the years, educational institutions have implemented many policies to address various delinquencies, ranging from reducing dropout rates to emphasizing student success. However, the literature pointed out that political initiatives and interference in reforms affect local leadership and teachers' work (Gunnulfsen, 2017; Ball et al., 2012). Focusing on the vital role of teachers' beliefs and contributions in reform illustrated the complexities that reform can pose for teachers and students, especially when they have no substantial participation in how

these changes are developed and organized. Hence, the literature reviewed highlighted significant weak links between reform demands and the reality of practices in college environments.

This chapter's extensive surveying of the literature further revealed how competency-based concepts and demands embedded in reform policy initiatives establish colleges as market players in supplying economic and workforce needs. Additionally, such revelations grounded in existing research on competency-based education and neoliberalism, which teacher participants later supported, signalled the neoliberal language silently dictating and controlling educational changes and teachers' work. As argued in Chapter One, such practices adversely affect the democratic nature and role of the educational process. A neoliberal-informed competency-based approach increases tensions, uncertainties, and discrepancies, thus resulting in inequitable instructional practices. This chapter further argued how the neoliberal agenda in education forms the basis and conceptual support for my study and research arguments.

Based on the above discussion, the challenges encountered are linked to the divisive practices of power relations taking place with a top-down approach to reform. This limitation leads to a lack of understanding, inadequate prerequisite knowledge, and professional development training of reform policy demands among teachers. Enhancing and sustaining educational changes requires that the expertise of the implementers (teachers) is considered and reflected in these initiatives, thus representing a collective understanding and agreement of policy intentions.

Chapter Three

Conceptual Framework

From a critical perspective, I view CBE as an approach driven by economic, social, and political elements that seek to establish and preserve power dominance. From this perspective, CBE can be seen as an ideological tool to perpetuate the exploitative nature of work initiated by neoliberal market economies (Ali, 2019; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Torres, 2009). Therefore, I incorporated two analytical perspectives as the conceptual frameworks of my research to explain and highlight the injustice and contradictions embedded in CBE. First, I drew on critical theory, which seeks to emancipate people from oppressive circumstances (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010). Second, I used insights from critical pedagogy that promote resistance to the status quo by providing teachers with strategies and techniques to raise consciousness (conscientization) and produce political agency (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2009; Shor, 2009).

Critical Theory

Neoliberal educational practices like CBE continue to be shaped by unilateral decision-making, thus promoting and increasing disparities in the quality of education. For example, education reform continues to be structured in isolation and against the people on the ground (educators) rather than in collaboration with them. Such practices show a lack of respect for educators' work and the invaluable contributions they can make to improving the education network. Furthermore, critical theory sheds light on how incorporating neoliberal ideologies in education is another way to reassert hierarchical social structures and rely on coercion. Critical theory suggests that the process of reform should be a democratic process that recognizes the valuable input of teachers. Drawing from the thoughts of critical theory is essential for critiquing contemporary society, uncovering existing injustice and helping to shape a better society. This

theory provides insights into examining the democratic process of education and understanding how practices that may be deemed as 'good' for the disenfranchised and disadvantaged are simply tools to advance the elites' interests. As proposed by Wheeler-Bell (2017) "a critical theory of the curriculum … explains why curriculum decisions are unjustifiable and fail to meet the standard of generality" (p. 569).

Although most of this analysis of critical theory will represent the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School, the objective is not to address each theorist's contributions but instead to discuss how the perspectives of critical theory can help frame a better understanding of societal structures and how to resist the embedded dominating practices. Critical theory requires "self-conscious critique" and is an essential component of social transformation and emancipation discourse (Giroux, 2009, p. 27). Additionally, in undertaking this analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge that much of this institution's thoughts emerged from Karl Marx's theoretical perspectives.

A Brief Overview of Philosophical Background

Marx's foundational work led to many critical theory perspectives developed by scholars of the Frankfurt School. It is known as the Frankfurt School because the Institute for Social Research was based at the university in Frankfurt. In rejecting the reductionist approach promoted by Marx and Engels in this body of work, the Frankfurt School ideas emerged to go beyond the economic determinism of Marxism analysis of society. The quest to reduce the capitalist economic and ideological control reinforced the Frankfurt School to object to Marx's reductionist beliefs (Giroux, 2009). Giroux (2009) noted that the Frankfurt School criticized Marx for failing to acknowledge the relevance of consciousness and the human subject in the equation of his capitalist approach. Nevertheless, the Frankfurt School, a group of critical

theorists, acknowledged Marx's valuable insights into capitalism and class struggle; they raised concerns about certain aspects of his theories. They criticized what they saw as Marx's economic determinism and the reduction of social phenomena to purely economic terms. They believed that Marx's framework did not sufficiently account for the role of culture, mass media, and individual subjectivity in perpetuating social oppression. They aimed to refine Marxist thought by incorporating critical theory, sociology, and psychology elements to provide a more comprehensive understanding of modern society and the complex interplay between culture, ideology, and power. Furthermore, Frankfurt school scholars focused on what shapes subjectivity and how culture and everyday life create a new domination domain (Giroux, 2009). Through this lens, I will present the fundamental tenets of the Frankfurt School's critical theory.

Central Tenets of Critical Theory

Critical theory examines and critiques how society structures the everyday conditions under which people live. It examines and exposes oppression and exploitation ingrained in social structures such as class systems and political practices (Giroux, 2009; Thompson, 2017). Its goal is to provide people (especially oppressed and marginalized) with the theoretical tools necessary to develop self-consciousness to help them critique society's exploitative historical nature and improve it. In rejection of Marx's economic reductionism, critical theory suggests that unmasking and challenging power structures require a critique of media, culture, language (communicative action), power, and human emancipatory interests (Giroux, 2009; Horkheimer, 1974a; Taylor & Harris, 2008). Therefore, critical theory is marked by its ability to critique all facets that shape people and "social life and the social processes that constitute them" (Thompson, 2017, p. 1). Below, I briefly elucidate some of the central tenets of critical theory.

The Media Influence on Democracy

Critical theory aims to interrogate some of the most compelling societal issues and questions (Thompson, 2017) that go unchallenged and unanswered. However, the media objects to this critical approach as it presents messages containing hidden ideologies, thus reinforcing the dominant culture in society. The media is a method of persuasion used directly and indirectly to exercise and reinforce power and acts as a conduit for freedom of speech. Since the media's independence is grounded in a political and economic context, mass media also has a central role in perpetuating and reinforcing a system of dominance in a capitalist society. For instance, the ruling class's ideas are transmitted through various media outlets to mentally shape and produce a society that can be controlled and exploited. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) believed that the underlying role played by the media is "manifestations of capitalism's infiltration of everyday life" (Taylor & Harris, 2008, p. 62). Due to the media's significant role in maintaining dominant ideologies, Frankfurt theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer stressed the urgency of developing a sociology of "mass culture" (Held, 1980, p. 77).

Newspapers and other media sources promote, commercialize, and advertise capitalist interests. Therefore, viewers and readers should not easily and readily accept what appears in the media as accurate; no matter how good and authentic it may seem, there is always an underlying motive that must be questioned and critiqued. Adorno and Horkheimer's articulations on media suggest that "the media does nothing to emancipate the masses from the hypnotic spell of capitalism but instead traps them in a sophisticated, technologically facilitated version of Marx's *false consciousness*" (Taylor & Harris, 2008, p. 63). The media is "one of many capitalistic tools to maintain the ruling elites' hegemony and dominance over subordinate classes" (Taylor & Harris, 2008, p. 111). One of the media's intended goals is to repress the working class's

consciousness and reduce any challenge to the status quo (capitalism). For example, culturally, it has become common to be bombarded by the news or individuals to rely on various media outlets to obtain information, not realizing its impact on their beliefs, imagination, choices, or ability to think critically. As the media produces visual and verbal content conveying dominant ideas and meanings, society is left to interpret and create meaning from what has been presented, thus connecting to personal values, beliefs, and experiences. As such messages (beliefs) presented are left unquestioned and unopposed, they become accepted and deemed 'natural' by society, thus becoming the norm. Subordinate classes, therefore, become listeners and observers deprived of the freedom to dialogue and accept the ideology imposed on them by the elites (Fuchs, 2014).

Moreover, the media, through advertising and promoting political views, aid in shaping the consciousness and assumptions of the public further to advance the interests and agenda of the power elites. This regulation of mass consciousness diverts society from focusing on important issues that warrant attention. These dynamics feed into the neoliberal or capitalist self-interest and do not promote the betterment of all individuals. Although the media presents a democratic front, its underlying practices perpetuate domination, suppressing people's ability to resist control. The media is simply another medium operating to manipulate individuals and feed the needs of economic ideologies. Critical theory creates an awareness of such undermining and exploitative practices. Therefore, this theory suggests that social change is viable when we better understand how these processes shape our ways of thinking and everyday lives. Achieving this level of democratic change requires the working class to oppose the dominant elite ideology. More importantly, they need to develop a consciousness that empowers them to fight for their well-being, thus unmasking their false consciousness. Hence, critiquing and challenging

capitalist hegemony will empower the working class to participate in knowledge production that promotes "democratic language, values, and work" (Finley, 2009, p. 440).

As the above discussion demonstrates, the media presents messages that do not represent reality or facilitate communication. This theoretical perspective asserts that society and the messages conveyed are full of contradictions that reinforce ideologies of the dominant class culture. Critical theory supports that liberation is possible when people are active agents, communicating, participating in knowledge construction, questioning, and critiquing. This reciprocal communication and participation level builds awareness, empowerment, and emancipatory actions. Therefore, the subsequent section further emphasizes the relevance of collaboration and dialogue in promoting critical thinking and creating emancipating actions that challenge and resist societal and structural injustices.

Communicative Action and the Dialectical Thought

Habermas (1971) deemed communicative practices a vehicle to ignite a new pathway in critical theory by proposing communication as a new form of social action and unmasking false consciousness. He posited that this critique of language and communication provides a platform of equity and mutual consensus. Habermas (1984) termed this communicative action "discourse ethics," which involves a critique of existing practices to create a capacity to produce a new and more democratically rooted ethical and political consciousness and norms. Habermas's (1987) communicative action explains how hierarchies and lack of communication can create divisive practices. Wheeler-Bell (2017) referred to Habermas and the element of communicative action as follows:

> [They are] oriented towards mutual understanding in which speakers engage in the
> intersubjective process of giving and taking reasons to each other with the intent of

collectively coordinating social action. Communicative action has three functions-

reaching understanding, coordinating action and the socialization of individuals-all of

which contribute to the reproduction of the life world and a democratic society (p. 569).

His perspective underscored the importance of collaboration and the shared dedication to mutual

"goals to achieve [equitable] educational change" (Niemi, 2021, p. 19). Hence, he believes such

change is inevitable because social agents can achieve mutual agreement through discourse.

Critical theory's notion of critique and action are connected to dialectical thinking, an essential

feature of the Frankfurt School's vision (Giroux, 2009). The dialectic notion's essence is that

knowledge, truth, ideas, and facts cannot be presented in isolation, as they are culturally,

socially, and historically constructed (Gibson, 1986). Habermas (1984) believed that through

language, our social life unfolds, and based on the insights from Marx, "humans are both social

beings and producing beings. It is this dialectic "production that results in the creation and

sustenance of structures that [reflect teachers] logics and are dialectically mediated with the

economy" (Fuchs, 2022, p. 250). Therefore, as Fuchs (2022) asserts, "non-economic realms and

practices" can democratically coexist in society (p. 250).

Frankfurt School theorists suggest that only "in an understanding of the dialectic

[between teachers and the workplace that the magnitude of inequity internally and externally]

could be open to modification and transformation" (Giroux, 2009, p. 41). Within the

communication process, dialectics reveals the contradictions, inconsistencies, insufficiencies,

and non-democratic nature embedded in both the neoliberal and capitalist practices and uncovers

the "power of human activity and human knowledge as both a product of and force in the

shaping of social reality" (Giroux, 2009, p. 34). As Marcuse (1960) elucidated:

Dialectical thought starts with the experience that the world is unfree, meaning that man and nature exist in conditions of alienation, exist as "other than they are." Any mode of thought which excludes this contradiction from its logic is faulty logic. Thought "corresponds" to reality only as it transforms reality by comprehending its contradictory structure (p. 446).

Habermas (1984) contended that there should be no limitations on exchanging equal communication among individuals involved. He argued for a platform encouraging free, equal, and democratic communication. Social discourse should represent all individuals' undistorted, non-manipulative and transparent communication. In the context of education, teachers should consistently have opportunities to participate in discussions and decision-making about their everyday work, free from constraints imposed by unequal power relations. Open and uncoerced communication should be a democratic right and not viewed as a privilege. Therefore, all people, not just the powerful, privileged, and wealthy, should have equitable opportunities to participate in knowledge construction that does not contradict their reality. As shown here, a participatory approach by teachers in workplace practices is necessary to create emancipatory knowledge that can reject the dominant knowledge shaping educational systems. Consequently, as the proceeding analysis highlights, the latter sustains the inequitable "accumulation of decision-power" (Fuchs, 2022, p. 255) in social institutions like education.

Power Relation Dynamics in Social Structures

The above discussion on media, communicative action, and dialectical thought confirms how pivotal it is for educators to understand the relations between knowledge and power. Critical theory contends that understanding "how power operates to dominate and shape consciousness" (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2011, p. 290) is essential for self-empowerment and emancipation.

Historically, knowledge is considered essential for individuals to advance educationally and professionally but rarely understood as an instrument of power and control. According to Giroux (2009), "knowledge is always an ideological construction linked to particular interests and social relations; [thereby, minimal emphasis is placed on it] in teacher education programs" (p. 449). Due to the existing hierarchical nature of knowledge, teachers need to understand what knowledge students should receive and develop to "engage the world around them" and challenge the status quo (Giroux, 2009, p. 449).

Furthermore, Giroux (2009) asserts that teachers must recognize how power relations infiltrate school knowledge in "both ways that distort the truth and produce it" (p. 449). This view suggests that how knowledge is constructed, presented, or facilitates social reality significantly impacts people's everyday lives. Therefore, educators must understand the influence of knowledge on people's daily experiences, as knowledge that misrepresents reality creates inequities. Critical theorists agree that "power is a fundamental constituent of human existence that shapes people's oppressive and productive nature" (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2011, p. 290). As the ruling class uses power as a controlling entity, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is central in this context. He indicates that [under hegemonic conditions, power exertion] is not by "physical force; people's consent to domination is obtained through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church" (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2011, p. 290). Kincheloe and Mclaren (2011) contended that this "natural and inevitable" (p. 290) approach is used to obtain consent and minimize resistance.

Hegemonic actions cannot be separated from ideology, as both are used to maintain control over subordinate groups. Hegemony is the means to gain consent; ideological hegemony "involves the cultural forms, the meanings, the rituals, and the representations that produce

consent to the status quo and individuals' particular place within it" (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2011, p. 291). The focus on ideology reiterates how the school, politics, the media, and other social structures manipulate people to accept oppressive meanings and knowledge. This insight prepares critical researchers to understand better how dominant practices shape people's lives and maintain the status quo agenda through social reproduction.

The existing power relations between politics and certain social groups and classes fuel hierarchical power and domination. These dominating practices are visible in neoliberal educational reform on CBE. For example, like the working class in a capitalist society, teachers who perform the labour are rarely or never included in the planning and decision-making processes. Critical theory postulates that political consciousness is essential in mobilizing the working class, the marginalized, and the oppressed toward actions of social change. This level of self-consciousness provides individuals with "the capacity to be able to reflect and critically comprehend the system of which they [are] a part" (Thompson, 2017, p. 1), a social system that they did not create, but one that has been historically and culturally forced upon them as an act of control. A significant and essential revelation from Marx's capitalist analysis is that economic factors cannot be separated from other oppression and exploitation elements (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Gibson, 1986; Kincheloe, 1995, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). As with capitalism and labour, the economic factor constitutes neoliberalism's relational power over educational reform to produce employable individuals who can meet workforce demands. Therefore, any emancipatory action must continuously acknowledge and reflect on the contradictions embedded in reform practices to not perpetuate the dominance such notions intend to challenge and resist.

An Emancipatory Approach

Critical theory concerns human progress and liberation through action and challenging the status quo that hinders these outcomes. Emancipation "refers to freeing those outside established structures of power from the constraints that hold them back from realizing their potential" (Fierke, 2010, para. 42). An essential objective of emancipation is to question and challenge hegemonic representations that permeate people's daily lives. Through self-consciousness, liberation is sought by those who seek to gain control of their lives in a democratic and just society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). In this case, critical research aims to expose dominant neoliberal forces that prevent teachers from shaping the decisions and practices that affect their daily lives. The key insight of critical theory is "… to unravel the contradictions that already exist in society; to make evident an emancipatory insight into the very fabric of what we take as given, as basic to our social world" (Thompson, 2017, p. 3).

Moreover, as the critical theory approach aims to end social injustice, the interest of the emancipatory element is to help demonstrate how knowledge is a liberating and ethical entity that can be used to resist acts of domination. However, the emancipatory process must recognize the social reality of all participants to incite change in educational structures and reform practices. Additionally, understanding teachers' lived realities from their perspectives can help set the stage to build awareness and challenge oppressive elements. In support, Lather (1991) states:

> Rather than the illusory 'value-free' knowledge of the positivists, praxis- oriented inquirers see emancipatory knowledge … [which] increases awareness of the contradictions distorted or hidden by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation (p. 52).

From an educational perspective, critical theory could guide the charge to developing emancipatory ideas and mobilization efforts. I incorporated strategies from critical theory to ensure that my research brought voice to teachers' lived narratives, establishing them as subjects of their knowledge. This pedagogical discursive can help uncover stories and practices of domination concerning hierarchical power roles and teacher-student interaction. Teachers can, therefore, use this knowledge in the classroom to not perpetuate dominant power relations but rather create a more dialogical, participatory, and equitable experience for students.

Critical theory envisages a society where all individuals can collaborate on important matters and participate in decision-making without being dominated or subtly silenced. Neoliberal educational reform like CBE in Québec significantly reduces teachers' role in policy and implementation measures and marginalizes their voices. Correspondingly, "embracing liberating perspectives will allow them to participate democratically in a meaningful way" (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011, p. 690). Rexhepi and Torres (2011) argued that critical theory promotes "a liberatory education that empowers [individuals], ignites a sense of curiosity and critical thinking and provides a means for crucial successful bottom-up, top-down engagement" (p. 684) in education. The way to sustainable changes includes educators' involvement in policy formulation and decision-making.

Critical theory suggests that social change must come from the consciousness of those oppressed for real emancipation and transformation. However, critics indicate that "no one is ever completely emancipated from the sociopolitical context that has produced him or her" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 289). Some resistance is necessary for the status quo to be challenged or problematized by those living under such conditions. As argued by Fierke (2010), "emancipation begins with critique and is primarily about the act of freeing, whether from the

assumptions that blind us to alternatives or from the structures of power that constrain human potential" (para. 42). Critical theory, therefore, aims to dismantle the dominant relations and forces that continue to exploit and oppress individuals.

On the other hand, critical pedagogy suggests that action and application of critical theory perspectives are necessary to empower students to reflect, critique, and act to challenge oppressive practices. The subsequent section discusses how critical pedagogy proposes that teachers incorporate critical theory's ideas into classroom practices to help students resist the exploitation imposed upon them.

Critical Pedagogy in the Context of Neoliberal Education Reform

Neoliberal educational reform like CBE continues to be implemented globally in schools and higher education. Consequently, understanding and revealing the embedded injustice in these practices is vital for any form of education transformation and democratization. It is believed that the means to fighting for democracy is achieved "by linking education to modes of political agency that promote critical citizenship" (Giroux, 2004, p. 118). I drew on the ideas of critical pedagogy advanced by Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren to explore why competency-based practices cannot be accepted as a good deed toward improving education. This critical lens also provides strategies that teachers and students can use to unmask the underlying inequities of neoliberal reforms and empower themselves to become agents of social change by challenging and dismantling the status quo.

Educational improvements intended to advance and liberate the disadvantaged should consider and reflect the context in which such changes are made. Market-driven demands influencing CBE reform policies fail to consider existing social and structural constraints encountered by the schools and students they intend to help. Instead, inequalities are perpetuated

by reducing funding and pertinent resources and increased intervention by private corporations. Such measures force schools to compete among themselves for resources and quality teachers. These measures go against the values, beliefs, and goals that education aims to uphold regarding quality education as a human right, not a privilege (Freire, 1998; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Ward, 2016).

Neoliberal ideologies are incorporated into the structure of educational reforms, and economic and political agendas dominate and accelerate these false improvements. Additionally, the literature suggests that if this domination persists, teachers' roles will be limited, and inequity within pedagogical practices will thrive (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2012). To understand the rationale for applying critical pedagogy to neoliberal education reform, it is essential to define critical pedagogy (CP hereafter) and briefly describe its fundamental tenets in more practical terms.

What is Critical Pedagogy?

Critical pedagogy (CP) is premised on the philosophical principles of critical theory. Critical pedagogy is a pedagogical framework that challenges and opposes any form of social oppression and strives for an "emancipatory culture of schooling" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 5). Shor (1996) defines CP as:

> Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (p. 129).

Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2012) define CP as an approach to teaching and curriculum that seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and develop pedagogical practices that aim to change education's nature in broader society (Pennycook, 1990). Such contextual critiques are necessary and essential, as education is a means for "personal and social liberation" (Gibson, 2017, p. 177). Integral to CP is a theoretical and practical perspective that challenges students to be critically aware of daily happenings in school and society and the elements that contribute to their existence. This level of self-critique provides students with a "critical understanding of society, power, inequality, and [their] own personal power to change their statuses or roles" (Alegria, 2003, p. 99). Critical pedagogy thought states that education is pivotal to liberation, transforming inequalities and injustices. Additionally, CP questions society about the role of education (Freire, 1970 & 2005; McClaren, 2009). In this respect, CP contends that transformation must begin within people for educational change to be effective (Darder et al., 2009, pp. 3-4).

Freire's work on critical pedagogy provides ideas and guidelines for fostering social change. As Giroux (2021) explained, Freire underscores this type of change requires resistance to address the constraints perpetuating injustice. This struggle against injustice is not only necessary for liberation but also to attain "shared [educational] democratic values" (Giroux, 2021, para. 5), which is a crucial goal of his pedagogical approach. For instance, emancipation, an essential concept in the CP framework, aims to liberate the disenfranchised from oppressive social relations in their daily activities and interactions (Kincheloe & McClaren, 2005). Scholarly research suggests that domination, coercion, and inequality mediate power relations between students and teachers or college teachers and their superiors. Thus, CP advocates that social

critique constitutes social change (Freire, 1970; Darder et al., 2009; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2003 & 2011).

Tenets of Critical Pedagogy

The following are some of the main tenets of CP (Freire, 1970 & 2005; Foley et al., 2015; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2003 & 2011; McLaren, 1988 & 2009): democracy and education, hegemony and ideology, the reproductive role of schools, culture, banking method, and liberatory education, dialogue, problem-posing, and conscientization. Neoliberal education improvements challenge and transform these essential components.

The Democratic Nature of Education: A Humanizing Pedagogy

Critical theorists believe education is fundamental to pursuing a democratic and just society (Foley et al., 2015; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). The literature indicates that although education is used as a control mechanism to shape individuals, once transformed, as proposed by CP, it can also become a tool of emancipation (Freire, 1998). Abrahams (2005) argued that education is transformative when teachers and students acknowledge a change in perception. Such educational transformation empowers individuals to challenge and reverse any acts of oppression that marginalize them.

Furthermore, CP suggests that the production and democratization of knowledge deteriorate through the influence of competing for economic or materialistic interests (Freire, 1998). For example, economic influence over CBE reform forces schools to perpetuate the dominant class's cultural values, knowledge, and privileges by placing a select group of students within distorted power relations replicating these elements. As education is inherently political (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1997; Shannon, 1992; Shor, 1992), individuals must understand how schooling is used to marginalize, dominate, and exploit. Additionally,

understanding how the school system works from a place of politics and power will help to reveal the hidden form of control and economic oppression that threatens the democratic nature of education. In other words, rather than helping people realize their potential beyond the workforce, the value of education is restructured on purely economic benefits. It is a political practice that controls language and consciousness and subjugates individuals and groups to their superiors (Freire, 1970). Therefore, as CBE practices propose to provide equal educational access and opportunities for all, CP challenges the authenticity of this neoliberalist claim.

Furthermore, crucial to addressing and challenging the dehumanizing practices imposed by dominance lies in the awareness that something is wrong. Once this level of consciousness is sparked, then "educators can attend to the subtle and insidious ways that [dominant discourses] invade our workplaces, our schools, and our assumptions about human nature and education" (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 2). In a society influenced by market-driven (neoliberal) demands, Kincheloe (2011) asserts that education must be examined in this context. He adds that "to view educational goals and teaching outside of this larger context is to misunderstand the forces which direct educational policy" (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 3). Therefore, neoliberal practices that inform education reform have "led to a concentration of economic and political power in the hands of small minorities" that impose dominance on the masses (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 3). The extent of this power has stunted the development of independent thought, limited freedom, and placed constraints on human behaviour. One of the first critical steps to humanizing individuals is transforming the dominant educational approaches that suppress teachers' and students' voices.

Hegemony and Ideology

The dominant classes use hegemony and ideology to impose control over marginalized or subordinate groups. *Hegemony* is a "struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those

who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their oppression" (McLaren, 2009, p. 67). Hegemonic domination is not exercised by force but through consensual social practices [like CBE], social forms, and social structures produced in the church, schools, political system, and family (McLaren, 2009, p. 67). Its purpose is to preserve the existing dominant power relations. Educational reforms like CBE are promoted as being in students' best interests and uncontested. The dominant culture's hegemony is preserved in schools when teachers willingly accept and incorporate reform practices requiring little to no educator consultation. McLaren (2009) explained that inequitable relations of power and privilege embedded in daily instructions and mandates remain hidden, making dominating practices challenging to resist and contest. Therefore, to maintain the status quo, hegemony must involve "active structuring of the culture and experiences of the subordinate class by the dominant class" (McLaren, 2009, p. 67).

On the other hand, *ideology* is entrenched in all aspects of social life that we accept as normal and part of our daily practices. McLaren (2009) defined the concept as the "production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and [how] they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups" (p. 69). Such natural daily practices that shape our embodied self are often tainted with inequitable relations of power and privilege, known as "ideological hegemony" (McLaren, 2009, p. 69). This ideological framework is essential, as it helps humans make sense of the world's social and political systems. However, such ideological perspectives are structured to pre-determine who receives certain ideas and knowledge and who does not. Such ideological determinations are a direct act of domination and inequality that privileges some groups over others through established power relations.

Due to its emphasis on skill development and alignment with workforce needs, the oppressive policies rooted in educational approaches like CBE are challenging to recognize and

oppose. CBE practices are sustained and largely funded because they propose to give everyone equal opportunities for success. CBE purports to offer better pedagogical experiences to meet all students' needs despite socioeconomic status or academic ability. Therefore, such claims legitimize a standardized neoliberal approach as just and equitable. The dominant culture disguises the "hidden curriculum's truth" that only students from privileged families will significantly benefit from CBE (MacLaren, 2009). Due to the subtle nature of the dominant culture in education, it is essential to examine how schools are structured to perpetuate social inequalities.

The Social Construction of Knowledge: The reproductive role of schools

Critical pedagogy suggests that the political nature of education establishes power and control inside the classroom, school building, and community (Abrahams, 2005; Freire, 2009 & 1970). Knowledge is never objective or interest-free; there is always some underlying agenda or pre-imposed outcome. According to McLaren (2009), to claim that "knowledge is socially constructed means that it represents a consensual agreement between individuals who live out particular social relations (of class, race, and gender)" over different timeframes (p. 63). He added that to have this notion of knowledge suggests that the "world is symbolically structured through social interactions with others, and is significantly dependent on culture, context and history" (p. 63). Everyday experiences and realities of people are discredited and seen as invalid. The knowledge deemed legitimate is more powerful and serves the interests of the power brokers who negotiated it (McLaren, 2009). This type of knowledge leaves many individuals marginalized as it does not consider those who are disadvantaged due to gender, class, or race. Since knowledge is socially constructed, critical reflection is necessary to avoid the burden of exploitation and dominant ideologies.

Scholarship in the field also contends that this distinction and validation between forms of knowledge reinforces inequity and "masks unjust power relations among certain societal groups" (McLaren, 2009, p. 64). McLaren (2009) presents three categories of knowledge: *"technical knowledge*, which is quantifiable; *practical knowledge, which* shapes everyday actions; and *emancipation knowledge,* which reveals how power and privilege distort social relationships" (p.64). He alleges that educators use "technical and practical knowledge to sort, regulate and control students" (p. 64). They replicate elements of CBE and mainstream education that perpetuate the economic agenda of the elite. Hence, emancipation knowledge creates the conditions needed to end domination and exploitation and creates a platform for equity and self-empowerment. Additionally, the following points discussed on culture are vital as they provide insights on how teachers can transform classroom practices to promote learning that fosters social justice, "and develop a pedagogy that embodies forms of experience in which teachers and students display a sense of critical agency and empowerment" (Giroux, 1985, p. 23).

Culture

Culture is another vital component of CP and can provide insights into the disparity between people, schools, society, and the knowledge produced. McLaren (2009) defined culture as:

> The particular ways in which a social group lives and makes sense of its "given" circumstances and conditions of life; and a set of practices, ideologies, and values from which different groups draw to make sense of the world (p. 65).

Culture reflects the everyday experiences and the elements that help shape our lived realities. Culture is the domain used to impose dominant ideological hegemony and substantially contributes to shaping our daily behaviour, thinking, and constructing knowledge. These

pedagogical practices allow students to evaluate how dominant cultural ideologies shape their lives. McLaren (2009) contended that "cultural questions help us understand who has power and how it is reproduced and manifested in the social relations that link schooling to the wider social order" (p. 65). Through questioning and critiquing, students realize that the cultural reality in which they live is not their own.

Moreover, Bourdieu's (1986) analysis reveals a direct link between culture and power, as disadvantaged students' cultural capital is not acknowledged as valid. Culture encourages students to explore the broader social relations that dictate the type of knowledge ascribed to individuals based on social class and cultural capital. Additionally, "individuals' ability to express their culture is related to the power certain groups exert in the social order" (McLaren, 2009, p. 65). Their collective power determines the expression of values and beliefs by individuals who share certain historical and societal experiences (Lee, 1985). Critical pedagogy is committed to developing and promoting a culture (in school and the workplace) that "supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 10). Such an approach seeks to transform classroom structures and practices that perpetuate acts of domination and oppression. This tenet is essential in bringing awareness to how "traditional knowledge and practices can impede or inspire emancipatory actions and humanizing culture of participation, voice, and social action …" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 10). Culture also provides a lens for individuals to understand how inequalities are maintained, how individuals are marginalized, and what actions are necessary for emancipation.

The Cultural Role of School

Critical pedagogy emphasizes that school knowledge must be viewed as a product of conflicts and negotiations between different groups in and outside education (Bourdieu, 1986).

One of the areas in which conflict and negotiations take place is that of different cultural capitals that students from different class backgrounds bring to school. Capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1984), refers to "the set of actual usable resources and powers" (p. 114). He asserted that there are multiple types of capital, in this context, the most essential of these are "cultural and economic" (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 117-120). Bourdieu (1986) acknowledged the value of "cultural capital," which he explained as:

> A culturally-specific "competence," albeit one which is efficacious, as a "resource" or a "power" in a particular social setting. In highly differentiated societies, two social agencies are primarily responsible for "inculcating" cultural capital: the family and the school. Its most fundamental feature lies in the fact that, because it is embodied, its acquisition requires an investment of time (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 244-246).

Cultural capital signifies the "cultural background, knowledge, language, disposition, and skills passed on from one generation to another" (McLaren, 2009, p. 80). Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes the importance of cultural capital in education. He explained that cultural capital could be "objectified" in material objects or an "institutionalized" form representing an embodied competence. He indicates that the latter's existence is certified by an official agency, that is, in the form of educational credentials. The literature suggests that cultural capital's hereditary nature places students from lower and working classes in disadvantageous situations in schools and the workplace. As indicated by Weininger (2002), Bourdieu argues that the hereditary perspective of cultural capital can significantly contribute to the inter-generational reproduction of the distribution of individuals across class locations since "the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Bourdieu indicated that "cultural capital represents ways of talking, acting, modes

of style, moving, socializing, forms of knowledge, language practices, and values" (McLaren, 2009, p. 80).

Moreover, McLaren (2009) suggested that class status and family socialization provide distinct experiences, languages, and opportunities, resulting in varied cultural capital qualities. Cultural capital symbolizes "the social structure's economic force and becomes in itself a productive force in the reproduction of social relations under capitalism" (McLaren, 2009, p. 81). Bourdieu explained that "students' cultural capital from the subordinate class is diminished" (McLaren, 2009, p. 80), while schools reinforce the dominant cultural capital and reinforce its centrality in the teacher-student educational encounter (Bourdieu, 1986). Critical pedagogy suggests that "when schools devalue the cultural capital of disadvantaged students, educational inequalities perpetuate unequal relations" (Foley et al., 2015, p. 118). As Bourdieu (1986) contends cultural capital is an essential component in an unequal and unjust society that must be consistently focused and critiqued for perpetuating inequity.

The Banking Model Approach to Education

Freire (1970) emphasized the differences between banking education and problem-posing education. With the banking education approach, he criticized traditional education methods for depositing the ruling social class's dominant language, ideas, and knowledge into students. This approach's objective nature of knowledge replicates an oppressive society's structure (Freire, 1970 & 2009) as it constitutes students as receiving objects waiting to be deposited into and told what to do. The more the masses accept the dominant group's prescribed knowledge, it diminishes their critical consciousness to critique, question, and challenge. Freire (2009) described this type of instructional practice as "a narrative relationship between the Subject (teacher) and listening objects (students)" (p. 52). This approach provides no opportunity for

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students to reflect, question, analyze, critique, or engage in teacher-student dialogue. Thus, the banking education method cultivates passive learners, perpetuating the dominant class's established neoliberal ideologies.

Furthermore, the banking concept of education has become an act of depositing, in which students are the submissive receivers. There is no communication or interactive engagement between teacher and student. A culture of silence and teacher versus students is endorsed. Students become subjects of the realities and conditions that influence their everyday 'world,' shaping who they are and what they communicate. In response, CP urges teachers to create opportunities for students to discover that "there is no historical reality which is not human" (Freire, 1971, p. 125).

Moreover, neoliberal competency-based policies continue the practice of domination, emphasizing highly skilled workers and economic competitiveness. For example, through manipulation, students are trained with skills and filled with the necessary knowledge to meet the labour market economy's needs and demands. A neoliberal CBE proposes that all students, regardless of socioeconomic constraints, will adequately be trained with the competencies for employment. Such propositions serve the ruling class's interests, which dictate the ascribed knowledge. Freire (1970) "denounced the neoliberal position that promotes the false notion of the end of history and the end of class" (p. 13). Although we cannot claim that all human struggles are class-related, he contends that "class is an essential factor in our understanding of multiple forms of oppression and the conditions that lead to them" (Freire, 1970, p. 14).

Dialogical Relations

Freire (2009) argued that the move towards a liberatory education must involve transforming the teacher-student narrative. This process must start by "reconciling the

contradiction between the teacher-student [during the learning process] so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 2009, p. 53). Freire (2005) believes education should be a liberating experience that gives students power and control in the learning process; however, the reality is that most classrooms reproduce acts of oppression. The contradiction is that the teacher is not modelled as an educator and learner. Teachers control and micro-manage all instructional activities, and students are empty vessels. For example, students are subject to long lectures and dictations by teachers that leave little to no room for thinking, questioning, discussions, and interaction. These classroom practices reduce creativity, individuality and communication with others and neglect the relevance of students' everyday life experiences as critical to learning.

The banking concept contradicts students by limiting their freedom and establishing them as objects rather than knowledge contributors in the learning process. In this form of education, the teacher-student relationship is one of oppression that assumes students know nothing and the teacher holds the dominant position. Freire (2005) posits that treating students as passive receivers of knowledge does nothing to emancipate them. He proposes in his problem-posing concept that these contradictions in pedagogical practices must be interrogated by dismantling traditional hierarchical relationships through exchanging information and asking questions like "why" and "how." Freire suggests that when this disruption occurs, the dialogical character shapes teacher-student relations, students can develop problem-solving skills, and liberatory education can ensue. The teacher-student relation must encourage reciprocal dialogue where "whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning." (Freire, 1998, p. 31). Therefore, it is crucial to legitimize students as knowledge builders; in this

sense, teachers are part of those in a position to empower students and "function on the side of freedom, not against it" (Freire, 2005, p. 328).

Moreover, this type of liberating education cannot be offered by the banking model of education that objectifies students as submissive objects and reflects an oppressive society. Transforming the teacher-student relationship starts with students' refusal to comply with the banking concept of education and developing a critical consciousness about their lived realities. To achieve this end, Freire (1970, 2009) proposed a form of education that establishes a dialogical relationship between the teacher and student. This interactive process between the teacher and student is more than a method, "the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process" (Freire, 1970, p. 17).

Within this context of learning and knowing, teachers must create the pedagogical conditions that engage students toward liberation. In the classroom setting, learning situations must encourage students to question and critique daily happenings in school and the world and propose potential solutions. This reciprocal dialogue between teacher and student has the potential to change their thinking and reduce the likelihood of falling prey to dominant situations. Freire (1970) asserted that:

> If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing (p. 19).

Teachers must constantly collaborate with students to engage in critical thinking and participate in educational practices that dismantle the dehumanization of the masses. Such approaches negate the banking education's understanding of teacher-student relations, as "the role of student

among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation" (Freire, 2009, p. 54). Freire (2009) contended that now is the time for both teachers and students to forge a partnership to critique the "banking notion of consciousness and what constitutes true knowledge" (pp. 54 & 55).

Furthermore, CP challenges the contradictory and unjust CBE reform neoliberal economic policies promote. Freire (1970) suggested that we must reject similar practices, informed by the ethics of the market working to benefit a dominant minority at the expense of the majority. Nothing about market-driven pedagogy is in the best interests of teachers and students. Critical pedagogy is student-centred and views teachers and students as agents of social change. Students can embrace who they are and identify and resist ways that do not reflect their lived realities (Macedo, 1994). Thus, CP supports marginalized individuals and provides them with strategic tools to self-emancipate (Alegria, 2014).

Similarly, critical theory argues that rejecting neoliberal reforms starts with teachers transforming their roles to nurture a teacher-student dialogue that establishes students as subjects and creators of knowledge. Critical education initiatives require teachers to adopt a political perspective that encourages *all* students to freely state their demands and critique the existing social and political organizations that shape their futures (Kincheloe, 2008). The knowledge students create and the language they are encouraged to speak will empower them to view the world critically, transform consciousness and lead to emancipatory education (Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1991a & 1994b). Therefore, teachers hold the power to "develop an academic environment where students think critically and begin to transform their education" (Alegria, 2014, p. 103). This notion represents education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994a).

Problem-posing Approach

Education can be used as an exercise of domination or liberation; for the latter, liberators must reject the banking concept and accept people as "conscious beings" (Freire, 2009, p. 56). Herein lies the distinct difference between Freire's problem-posing and the business-oriented notion of problem-posing promoted by CBE. In Freire's version, the oppressive reality needs transformation and is not a mere business problem to be solved. To achieve the former, the oppressed must refuse the deposit-making educational approach to learning and embrace a problem-posing narration with the world. According to Freire (2009), "problem-posing education responds to the essence of consciousness, intentionally rejects being communicated to, and embodies communication" (p. 56). Moreover, this liberating practice propels individuals to be agents of social change. Problem-posing education fails when the teacher-student contradiction is negated. Ending dominating educational practices requires a new dialogical encounter between "teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 2009, p. 56). With problem-posing, the teacher is no longer the depositor of knowledge but engages in "dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach" (Freire, 2009, p. 56).

Although CBE also professes a problem-solving approach, there is a difference between the Freirean problem-solving. The latter is social and political, and CBE-based problem-solving is an appropriation. For instance, two distinct features of the Freirean approach are dialogue and problem-posing. In this dialogical relationship, the teacher and student confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a genuine two-way communication (Freire, 1973, p. 52). With this pedagogical encounter, the teacher provides and/or exposes the dominant knowledge, and students share their cultural realities. This approach creates the atmosphere for reciprocal communication, critiquing, questioning, and identifying contradictions between the two forms of

knowledge. Students comprehend how their daily experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are fundamental to acquiring factual knowledge. Freire's proposition is liberating; it seeks to dismantle traditional hierarchies of teaching and learning and develop critical consciousness among teachers and students. Problem-posing, therefore, aims at upending oppressive social structures that dominate subordinate groups.

On the other hand, with CBE problem-solving, the teacher independently identifies students' learning problems and challenges; it is a priori knowledge, and no dialogue or problem-posing exists. In response, the teacher designs pedagogical practices that provide students with the relevant knowledge to solve the problem. With the CBE problem-solving approach, rote learning is promoted, no teacher-student engagement occurs, and student passivity in the learning process is encouraged.

Freire (1970) theorized that "the oppressive reality imposed upon us must be accepted as a problem to adjust and solve" (p. 32). Through dialogue and problem-posing, students can better understand personal and social reality and embedded contradictions (Freire, 1970). As Freire (2009) suggested, the "constant unveiling of reality provokes self-consciousness, which leads to students questioning and critically dissecting their reality" (p. 57). Students are no longer submissive listeners and learners but are involved in active dialogue with the teacher. The teacher-student pairing is dedicated to collectively challenging the status quo and transforming the learning environment. By remaining in dialogue with the embodied Subjects, problem-posing educators' goal is to challenge and end the oppressive construction and delivery of knowledge. Problem-posing education must start with a dialogical encounter that incorporates students' realities, initiates questioning, and stimulates critical thinking. Therefore, this liberating educational practice leads to what Freire (1970) called the awakening of conscientization.

Conscientization

The key to understanding the philosophy of CP is valuing the social and contextual relevance of knowledge construction (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy contends that self-empowerment and emancipation are only possible when students reconstruct knowledge grounded in their subjective experiences (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2014; Apple, 2006). Compared to the banking method, to critique and transform the relationship between students, teachers, and knowledge, Freire (1970) proposed a problem-posing education. This democratic alternative leads to critical consciousness or conscientization. Conscientization or what Freire termed "*conscientização*is" is defined as:

> The process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their capacities to recreate them (Darder et al., 2011, p. 14).

Freire (1970) advocated that the problem-posing approach that focuses on the learner "empowers individuals to critically perceive how they exist in the world" (p. 112) and how their existence is being shaped daily. Conscientization occurs when teachers incorporate educational practices that raise students' consciousness about their political, economic, and social structures. Consciousness-raising is essential in challenging power relations and collectively acting toward a change and just society (Giroux, 2014; Freire, 1998). This level of consciousness-raising increases self-realization and political agency and should lead to social change (Freire, 1970a).

Additionally, employing such a liberating approach to education helps teachers and students to realize that they have the right to question, criticize, and propose solutions to address problems where "the teacher listens to the students, and [together they construct knowledge] and control the educational process" (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011, p. 79). In this learning experience,

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students are not static beings or objects needing to be shaped or developed, but "both students and the teacher are *subjects* in this learning process" (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011, p.79). This awareness or consciousness is critical in that students or individuals realize that the words they must share are meaningful, and they can now give voice to those words. They refuse to merely be objects, responding to changes occurring around them (Freire, 2000, p. 33), but rather challenge and work to transform neoliberal structures of education and society, which have served to exploit, oppress, and dominate them.

Critical theory provides the means to challenge unjust practices by creating the framework to understand and critique how history, politics, and [class systems] shape and give meaning to college instructors' lived realities and "their constructions of what is perceived as truth" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 10). CP promotes a teacher's role in society as an agent of social change, raising questions about what education can do to reduce wealth and resource disparities. Such a critical view of teachers further explains why they resist the neoliberal approach to restructuring education reform. CP provides insights to critically examine competency-based restructuring and challenge CBE as a neutral, apolitical, and all-positive initiative.

Critical ethnography and CP acknowledge the relevance of social critique and negotiating power relations in fostering social change. In the case of my research, critical pedagogy provides the emancipatory and liberating strategies that can potentially be employed by critical ethnographers when dialoguing with the disenfranchised (teachers). More importantly, both perspectives are committed to rejecting dominant discourses and privileging the embodied knowers when sharing their experiences, thus aligning my research with critical pedagogy. Informed by CP, critical ethnography is an appropriate methodology and strategy as it provides the practical framework and a suitable platform to help raise consciousness in "challenging

systemic inequities and consider what could be otherwise in inequitable relations but is not"

(Anders, 2019, p. 1). By employing a critical ethnographic methodology, I probed fellow

instructors about their views on CBE reform and how it shapes or contradicts their lived realities

and ideologies. Critical ethnography advocates for the emancipation of marginalized groups

(Thomas, 1993). Therefore, emancipation starts when ethnographic methods, discussed in the

following chapter, interrogate these meanings and understandings.

Additionally, revealing how instructors' everyday practices are permeated with

dehumanizing elements and, thus, "sustain asymmetrical relations of power" (Darder et al., 2009,

p. 10) is essential in this process. When more teachers embrace CP and critical ethnography's

notions of emancipatory education, a revolution to overthrow the oppressed situations endured

daily can begin. Any education that cultivates critical awareness and challenges the fragmented

perception of reality will hinder oppressors from maintaining power and control. Democracy,

hegemony, and conscientization will be used to interrogate the inequitable nature of CBE.

However, the notions of *conscientization* are central to my investigation of teachers' role in the

CBE reform. Freire's (1970) CP provides the concepts and tools to transform the world from its

oppressive state. At present, teachers and students are the most viable agents for change to start

and lead this liberating movement. Due to its emphasis on lived experience, social critique, and

conscious raising, this resistance version of critical theory and CP connects with critical

ethnography to fight for the empowerment and liberation of individuals. Critical ethnography,

the methodology used to monitor the representation of others and to avoid the perpetuation of

hegemonic practices, is discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

Summary and Conclusion

As neoliberal market-based policies dictate the direction of educational reforms, my thesis aims to substantiate the importance of collaboration and the presence of teachers' voices in reform policy demands and development. This chapter details how critical theory and critical pedagogy provide sound philosophical underpinnings that explain the conditions facilitating inequitable educational change. This discussion demonstrates how hierarchical hegemonic relations dominate institutions like schools and marginalize individuals from pertinent discourse that impacts their everyday lives. Additionally, exploring both theoretical perspectives identifies the potential risks of not understanding how to challenge the power structures that support the status quo.

Moreover, examining critical theory allowed me to provide the foundational knowledge necessary for understanding how schools, through reform policies, reproduce structural inequalities. For instance, as discussed in chapter three, this theory's principles examine the practices and decision-making that subtly perpetuate individual oppression. It provides guidelines on how people can critique conditions that shape their everyday lives, thus raising a level of self-consciousness that has been subdued to accept things as they are. On the other hand, critical pedagogy was applied as it proposes a critical approach to teaching by analyzing, questioning, and critiquing the current state of education practices. As discussed in the above chapter, Freire's (1970) CP outlines strategies and offers practical tools that can be instrumental in consciousness-raising, recognizing what is wrong and gathering collective resistance to the dominant view of what education should be. This theory provides insights into what teachers can incorporate in classroom practices to encourage critical thinking and collective knowledge

construction. Therefore, such classroom methods can potentially be influential in starting critical discussions that challenge neoliberal policies in education.

Finally, as educational institutions are permeated by policy-making bodies (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 131), Freire (1998) advocates that schools are the starting point for identifying societal struggles and extending equality and justice. This chapter brought together the ideas and guidelines of two critical theories that provide the possibility and hope to imagine and construct a society driven by the democratic process. Therefore, exploring critical theory and CP led me to employ critical ethnography, a proposed empowering research methodology discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter Four

Philosophical Underpinnings, Methodological Orientations, and Data Collection

This chapter justifies the relevance of adopting a critical ethnographic position by discussing the broader considerations that led to this decision. My methodological stance for this research on exploring the complexities and contradictions of CBE that marginalizes teachers is situated in a critical ethnographic framework. Education reform at the CÉGEP level, especially recently, has become an isolated initiative with little to no consultation with teachers. Although some consultations occur, as discussed later in the analysis, this is usually limited, and perspectives garnered are unrepresentative of most teachers as the availability of resources determines the selection of those involved. My decision to employ this methodology stems from the belief that sharing teachers' lived experiences is critical to bringing any real and equitable change to education. I sought a methodology that would (i) embrace my theoretical perspectives (critical theory and CP) and produce narratives that embody research subjects and (ii) employ strategies that are non-oppressive, liberating and would engender the possibility of change.

Additionally, before presenting my methodological framework, I briefly discuss traditional (conventional) ethnography to highlight why it was deemed inadequate for application in my research. Then, I discuss my chosen research methodology in detail. In this chapter, I also address philosophical issues and my positioning in the research process regarding power, voice, and my role as the researcher. I also explain and justify the methods employed, such as sample selection and data collection techniques, namely semi-structured interviews. I conclude this chapter by laying out the steps for data analysis, coding, and organization and addressing ethical research concerns.

Research Methodological Orientation

Choosing a suitable research methodology is critical for designing and executing a research study. I aim to choose a methodology that would contribute to the collaborative deconstruction of the dominant discourse on CBE and empower discourses on this subject. I started by exploring the perspectives of conventional ethnography that are associated with the field of anthropology. Doing so also led me to discover the methodology of critical ethnography; however, as previously stated, I will briefly discuss ethnography to justify my choice of the former approach.

Conventional ethnography is a qualitative research method mainly employing participant observation and interviews to collect data when exploring a group or organization's social and cultural aspects and practices. Although its meaning can vary depending on context, ethnography is defined as:

> "The first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic features of the ethnographic approach" (Atkinson et al., 2001, pp. 4-5).

However, Madden (2010), on the other hand, describes ethnography as "a way of writing about people, a way of being with people, and in combination, a way of theorizing about people" (p. 7). Within ethnographic work, the researcher participates "overtly and covertly for an extended period" in the daily lives of those under investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). Ethnographic work involves the following key features (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3):

1. "People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts rather than conditions created by the research, such as structured interview situations (the latter being as in the case of my research).

2. The necessary data are obtained from several sources: participant observations, informal conversations, and documentary evidence.

3. The data collection process is unstructured, not following a fixed research design prepared beforehand. Secondly, the categories used for interpreting what people say or do are not built into the data collection process through observation schedules or questionnaires. Instead, they are generated out of the process of data analysis.

4. The research process usually involves a few participants to facilitate in-depth study.

5. Data analysis involves interpreting the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices and how these are implicated in local and perhaps broader contexts."

The above features mainly differ from critical ethnography in that conventional ethnography takes a "more open-ended and exploratory approach" to conducting research. For example, the researcher investigates some aspects of participants' lives by inquiring about "how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). The data collected are used to refine existing research questions further and formulate new ones focused on and grounded in participants' experiences. Another data collection process follows this initial stage to retrieve more accurate answers to the research questions. This interview approach is a strong characteristic of ethnography as the final questions developed are more "structured or strategic" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 4).

On the other hand, unlike interviews, with participant observation that privileges the body as a site of knowing (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180), the researcher must become immersed in the field, thus meaning that some level of negotiation must take place with the people being studied (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Conquergood (1991) referred to Bronislaw Malinowski (1922 & 1961), a significant pioneer in establishing ethnographic work, who recommended bodily participation in addition to observation as a mode of intensifying cultural understanding (pp. 21-22). Such a recommendation also demonstrates the importance of accurately articulating participants' views. Similarly to critical ethnography, there is no automatic access to the research field, even if you are a member of the study site. So, access must be obtained in the cases of interviews and observations. As in the case of ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that this step can also involve several rounds of negotiations with participants. Furthermore, conventional ethnography requires "decisions to be made in conditions of considerable uncertainty; data is sought to illuminate research questions and later analyze to produce research knowledge" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 4). Moreover, ethnography's exploratory and unstructured nature can be time-consuming and arduous, especially for research student ethnographers. Conventional ethnographic research provides valuable insights into the daily lives and actions of others by documenting participants' experiences. However, a limitation is that ethnography often does not give the people being studied a voice. Naidoo (2012) contends that "when people within a group or culture are studied, they are invariably being 'represented,' and this raises the moral and ethical issue of the purpose of ethnography" (p. 2). However,

ethnography adopted an etic[6] rather than an emic approach, where the views of the people being studied are not considered in knowledge construction.

Additionally, as cited in Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003), Malinowski emphasized the importance of including participants' views when he incorporated their voices in his research accounts and stated that "the researcher must immerse himself in the culture so that 'they' become 'we' (p. 216). This level of immersion within a culture prepares researchers to understand the significance of a blink [emic] over a wink [etic], thus creating the 'thick' description of ethnography (Rosen, 1991). The importance of 'thick descriptions' is that they represent an understanding of the culture by all those involved in the research. Furthermore, 'thick descriptions' signify the respective positionalities of the subject and the researcher. As Geertz (1986) asserts, "there should not be any privileging above the rest in ethnographic text" (p. 103). Therefore, a 'thick' ethnographic description is only possible by rejecting "hierarchical discourses and identifying with those being studied" (Naidoo, 2012, p. 2) by illuminating their voices through all research processes.

Moreover, at this point, I acknowledge the shortcomings of conventional ethnography and, in the subsequent section, advocate the relevance of applying critical ethnography to explore and better understand teachers' lived realities. Although conventional ethnography shares several important features with critical ethnography, such as engaging participants, some essential elements are missing. For instance, I was "encouraged by the possibilities of [critical

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[6] An etic approach to knowledge construction uses the researcher's interpretation and understanding of participants' perspectives. On the other hand, emic uses collected information and direct quotes to construct participants' perspectives.

ethnography to help me forge a respectful and mutual relationship with instructors] and develop a deep understanding of their everyday lives" (Powell, 2022, p. 20) by gaining insights into the "processes of unfairness and injustice" (Madison, 2012, p. 5) imposed by conditions under which they work and thus advocate for equitable practices. My shift to critical ethnography also emanates from the fact that conventional ethnography describes a culture as is, whereas, according to Madison (2005), critical ethnographers have a moral obligation to contribute to changing oppressive practices by bringing awareness to power imbalances that disenfranchise many people. Consequently, ethnography lacks praxis, which is critical to constructing new knowledge about the culture that reflects the embodied knowers (teachers in the case of my research). Therefore, the critical ethnographer aims to ignite the feeling of self-empowerment by "resisting domestication and moving from 'what is' to 'what could be'" (Naidoo, 2012, p. 3).

An Emancipatory Methodology

What Does Critical Ethnography Do?

Two main principles guided me in selecting my research study's methodology and methods. Firstly, as Freire (1972) emphasized, I wanted to encourage a dialogic and democratic discourse between participants and myself. However, this practice can sometimes be difficult, as in my case, I wanted to avoid the 'outsider' or 'researcher' labels and demonstrate a vested interest in helping to improve things. The goal was for teachers to accept me as an active co-partner, committed to adding to and bringing out participants' subjective stories through my dissertation's documentation and publication. Secondly, a fundamental principle of my research is not to replicate the current norm of teachers' workplace realities that marginalize them from participating in major decision-making processes. Additionally, maintaining this stance required an open, transparent dialogue where teachers' subjective experiences dominated the discourse

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and final analysis. This notion contradicts the traditional view of ethnography in which the researcher's interpretive and descriptive narrative dominates the ethnographic text and is included as legitimate data, while participants' authentic voices are "isolated from the story being told" (Geertz, 1988, p.135). This approach is problematic for my research as the ethnographer possesses a privileged position, and those observed and questioned are labelled research objects and "considered as essentially passive participants" in the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 46). Therefore, Smith (1978) and Olesen (1994), as cited by Coffey et al. (1996), argue that "ethnographic texts privilege the voice of the author's accounts and experience over other members of the culture and may give visibility to dominating groups in that culture" (p. 4.2).

On the contrary, I wanted to better understand from teacher-participants what they are experiencing and what forms of action are necessary for change, regardless of my perceptions. Therefore, I employed a methodology that would guide me in structuring and maintaining an emancipatory framework for my research. Compared to conventional ethnography, a critical analysis of participants' perspectives and experiences reveals the reality of inequitable practices by giving agency and voice that tell the stories of all those involved (Gallagher, 2008 & Creswell, 2012). This "critical" approach also adds an advocacy perspective to ethnography in that the researcher advocates for the emancipation of marginalized groups (Creswell, 2012, p. 467). My research aimed to privilege teachers by using their authentic voices to uncover workplace conditions in competency-based environments. Critical ethnography offers strategies to question and critique existing practices and challenge unequal power structures prevalent in these contexts. This critical stance is crucial because, as I argued, neoliberal ideologies significantly shape educational reform in competency-based settings. Thus, it suppresses

teachers' voices and participation in pertinent matters concerning their work. The ethnographer is no longer an objective observer but rather positioned as an "advocate for change to help transform … society so that people are less oppressed and marginalized" (Creswell, 2012, p. 467). This point of departure influenced my theoretical framework and my choice of a critical ethnographic methodology for my thesis.

Moreover, "critical ethnography must make an effort to disrupt the traditional power of the researcher by making as many features of the research as possible open to equal negotiations between all those affected by the project" (Carspecken, 2003, p. 1036). To accomplish this, I ensured all research aspects involving participants were flexible and respectful of their needs and created a self-empowering atmosphere. I made an effort to give up my authority and control as the researcher by highlighting to the participants that they have the freedom to set the schedule and duration of each interview session, select which questions they prefer not to answer, and choose how much detail to provide. Teachers were also informed that the data collected would not be modified and that editing would only be done for clarity while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. This level of assurance gave me access to more sensitive details as participants felt comfortable sharing personal experiences related to inequity and repression. As the researcher, I was obligated to demonstrate my commitment to challenging the status quo, which required "self-reflexivity and self-awareness of my role" and how research findings were reported (Creswell, 2012, p. 467).

Furthermore, this methodology requires self-reflection; therefore, after each interview conversation, I reflected on the process and assessed my level of communication and understanding with each research participant. I reflected on my position as an outsider and my power as a researcher. I critiqued how such interactions could affect power dynamics and the

local relevance of the findings. Also, a paramount position in critical ethnographic research is to privilege the voice of participants to establish a democratic research process and dismantle hierarchical structures between the researcher and participants. Additionally, the decision to place teachers' voices and experiences at the center of my research study disrupts the norm, in which their voices are often excluded from discourse and research about workplace practices. These practices deviate from the conventional ethnography approach in that the researcher is a co-participant who positions oneself as a "participant in the group or simply an observer" (Creswell, 2012, p. 462). Therefore, in this research, I applied Madison's (2012) perspective of critical ethnography, according to which:

> Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain … the critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control (p. 5).

My research emphasized speaking and listening to challenge existing power relations that detach teachers from decision-making about their work. Since conventional ethnography privileges observation, participants risk being marginalized, as the ethnographer's account, interpretation and understanding of the embodied knowers' stories construct the ethnographic text. Teachers' lived experiences needed to be the subject matter shared in their voices to dismantle dominant cultural narratives on CBE and educational reform. Critical ethnography upholds the commitment to interrogating structures of domination, oppression, and marginalization (Hamera, 2000). It was also crucial that findings authentically represented participants' embodied knowledge as shared during the research process. As Markham (2005a)

indicates, the power of the method is the power of representing others. Therefore, the nature of the research warranted an approach that encouraged a collaborative discussion and did not reproduce, perpetuate, and sustain the constraints that participants had already encountered. However, Thomas (1993) argues that critical ethnography possesses a political purpose. The political purpose underpinning my critical ethnographic research focused on exploring the broader conditions that shape CBE by understanding teachers' lived realities in these environments.

Moreover, observations and interviews are standard ethnographic data collection procedures; my objection to the former "had to do with the power relations obtained in the conduct of "participant observation" itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 49). Hence, interview conversations were the only method I used to collaborate and dialogue with teacher participants to expand my understanding of their everyday experiences. Ethnography avoids "identifying too closely with participants so that they could write an "objective account of what they saw and heard" (Creswell, 2012, p. 462). Biesta et al. (2011) explain this in connection with the critical theory roots of CE:

> Deepening and broadening understanding of everyday interpretations and experiences. The task for theory here is not to describe what people are saying and doing but to make intelligible why people are saying and doing what they are saying and doing. The primary interest of critical theory lies in exposing how hidden power structures influence and distort such interpretations and experiences (p. 226).

The critical perspectives I adopted in my research are "committed to unveiling the political stakes" that control and dictate the everyday practices in these cultural settings (Conquergood, 1991, p, 179). Incorporating a critically reflexive approach to conducting my research allowed

me to participate in an engaging and empowering dialogue with participants. It allowed me to advance my analysis of teachers' workplace realities and better understand how their experiences, perspectives and decisions are products of power that produced and reinforced domination through educational policies and structural changes. It also revealed how dominant cultural narratives on CBE and educational reform disenfranchised their voices in discourses about workplace changes. This collaborative component was essential in producing narratives that shaped a better and more accurate account of teachers' lived experiences.

Both critical theory and CP offer a framework to assess power, domination, privilege, and inequity issues in social institutions such as educational settings. Critical theory and CP provide directions and support for the methodology that I use in this research. I also discovered that grounding my methodological approach within a theoretical framework is necessary, especially in the case of conventional ethnography, which addresses multiple forms of data presentation (Denzin, 1997). As a result, conventional ethnography is criticized for undergoing a crisis of representation and legitimacy[7]. Therefore, applying a methodology that rejects embedded hierarchy and power relations in educational reform discourse was vital. Furthermore, a critical methodological perspective was needed to challenge the hegemonic decision-making and educational changes in competency-based environments. Additionally, I aimed to use an approach involving research participants to understand their workplace experiences better,

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[7] Crisis of representation refers to the fact that participants' experiences must be subjectively represented in the written report, and the researcher cannot solely articulate the experience of the multiple voices involved. The crisis of legitimacy addresses issues related to validity, reliability, and objectivity and calls for a re-evaluation of such principles being applied in qualitative research.

critique how they reinforce dominating practices in their classrooms and promote self-empowerment to resist such inequity. For these reasons, I used critical ethnography as the methodology in my research, which is discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.

Application of Critical Ethnography as a Research Strategy

As CBE practices are market-driven, teachers' role in the reform's ongoing decision-making is deemed insignificant. Such a response is a social injustice, as teachers' added value exposes the reality of education and exactly what changes are needed. However, teachers' perspectives are subordinate to the hegemonic ideologies that mainstream education promotes in schools. Hence, inequity continues as neoliberal educational reform diminishes teacher-student relationships and disempowers students by transmitting powerless knowledge. For example, competency-based mandates and ministerial assigned competencies dictate to teachers the objectives to be formulated and the content that students should learn to achieve the specified outcomes. Therefore, I employed a critical ethnographic lens to probe and understand teachers' perspectives and subjective experiences on neoliberal CBE reform and evaluated how it contradicts their lived realities and ideologies. My methodological stance for this research is situated in the epistemological foundations of critical theory and CP. Theorists in this critical domain have made clear their contentions against acts of oppression, domination, manipulation, and ongoing disparities toward subordinate groups. As Thomas (1993) states, "critical ethnography emerges when members of a culture of ethnography become reflective and ask not only 'What is this?' but also 'What could this be?'" (p. v). Consequently, nine key tenets guide the practices of critical ethnography (May & Fitzpatrick, 2019, p. 8):

- Attention to issues of power, injustice, and inequity
- Meaningful question setting

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- Relationships and reciprocity

- Positionality, reflection, reflexivity

- Social theory and power

- An attempt to understand the cultures

- Time in the setting, "deep hanging out"

- Qualitative research tools

- Creating change and challenging inequities

In explaining my methodological framework, incorporated in this section and rationale for using critical ethnography, I discuss below some of the above-listed tenets, precisely issues of power, reciprocal dialogue, challenging the status quo, and reflexivity. Then, I describe how critical ethnography strategies incorporated critical tenets proposed by critical theory and critical pedagogy to interrogate CBE from teachers' perspectives. This chapter also unfolds my positionality in the research process and voice representation concerns, mainly as I wrestled with my position as an outsider/insider and my reflexivity regarding concerns of being a minority teacher and woman of colour conducting this research.

As a methodological toolkit, critical ethnography provides the lens to understand the dominant discourses of neoliberal CBE and its impact on teachers' lives and lived realities. The term 'critical' is essential because it describes the movement toward challenging oppressive power structures (Creswell, 2012). This methodological perspective compels teachers to address [neoliberal] ideological questions that inform their teaching (McLaren, 2003) and redress embedded power inequalities. This methodology provides the means to critically evaluate the injustice facilitated by CBE practices and guide teachers in critiquing how their decisions,

perspectives, and experiences are shaped. Therefore, employing critical ethnography helped

address the question proposed by Bohman and Edward (2016): How can we make things better?

Critical ethnography is the most appropriate methodology for this study because it

initiates a critical dialogue with college instructors. This approach draws attention to pertinent

issues and raises self-consciousness to help teachers deconstruct the practices and experiences

that shape their lived realities. With the emphasis on participation, collaboration, and conscious

raising, critical ethnography encourages this type of involvement that allows participants to

contribute to knowledge construction and promote positive change and self-empowerment

(Carspecken & Walford, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Thomas, 1993). Due to my goal to

disrupt and challenge the status quo, existing hierarchy power relations that dominate decision-

making and reform practices that do not reflect the realities of colleges, a critical ethnographic

approach is necessary to investigate how neoliberal policies inform CBE reform practices.

As advocated in the existing research literature (Aydarova et al., 2021; Datnow, 2020);

see also; Giroux, 1985; Ham & Dekkers, 2019;), a liberating form of education must incorporate

instructors' voices and subjectivities in CBE reforms. Voice in this context further recognizes

college instructors' subjectivities and experiences as a democratic approach to achieving

sustainable educational changes. Critical ethnography seeks to understand participants and their

culture and the essential role they play in constructing accurate knowledge, the knowledge that is

not based on theories but developed from actual experiences and lived realities (Spradley, 1979).

Generally, this theoretical perspective advocates for the voice of participants to dominate the

research process, as such an approach will empower college instructors to "go beyond common

sense to begin to discover the reason for the facts" that shape their everyday practices and

experiences (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 751).

My study did not position instructors as objects but rather situated them as subjects throughout the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A critical ethnographic approach to research maintains that the added value and importance of an individual's presence, experiences, and stories of their lived 'worlds' cannot be reduced to quantifiable interpretations. Critical ethnographers view both the object and subjects as fundamental to the research process and acknowledge their perspectives as essential to the overall research outcome (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical ethnography represents an appropriate methodological approach as it promotes research oriented towards understanding people's reality and advocates for the active participation of those individuals in the research process. As critical theory and critical pedagogy propose praxis-oriented research to provoke emancipatory action, this methodology complements both theoretical frameworks as it provides the platform to execute the epistemological ideas and strategies. Critical ethnography, examined in the subsequent section, is the theoretical framework used to inform the selection of data collection methods, structure the analysis, and explain and understand the conditions under which education reforms are implemented into practice.

The Rationale for Using Critical Ethnography

I employed critical ethnography as my study's primary method of inquiry for several reasons. Firstly, due to the methodology's emphasis on the importance of culture (Carspecken, 2001). In my research, the study of college instructors' culture,' that is, their lived realities implementing neoliberal CBE practices, is one of the main foci of investigation. Additionally, focusing on culture involves studying how dominant power relations and social structures marginalize teachers and increase inequalities. Despite the importance of studying culture using a critical ethnographic method, no commonly shared definition exists. However, two definitions

of culture capture several significant perspectives of my research. Gall et al.'s (1999) definition
refers to culture as:

> A particular group of people who live together and thrive through a system of shared
> meanings and values, but that same system also may lead them to oppose or oppress
> groups with different shared meanings and values [and]certain aspects of human culture
> have a particularly strong influence on individual and group life (p. 331).

Similarly, Masemann (1976) defines culture as:

> The shared understandings, the social grouping, the interactions, overt and covert norms,
> myths, rites, and so on that are part of the culture of the school (p. 374) and the degree to
> which groups share mutually understandable perceptions of the enterprise in which they
> are engaged (p. 376).

Masemann (1999) also viewed culture as "concerned with actions, ideas, artifacts, which
individuals in the tradition concerned learn, share, and value. Culture as mental, social,
linguistic, and physical aspects" (p. 115). Masemann's perspective of culture is powerful as it
emphasizes shared experiences, understandings, and interactions among individuals in their
natural setting. Every aspect of social group experiences and practices contributes to culturally
constructed knowledge. This notion of culture clarifies how individuals' social lives can be
mediated with power and domination without them being aware of whose reality they perpetuate.
Gramsci (1988) refers to this uncoercive ideological means of imposing control upon subordinate
groups as cultural hegemony. Critical ethnography emphasizes that the researcher immerses
herself in the culture under investigation and obtains rich and extensive data that reflect teachers'
subjectivities, making it distinct from conventional ethnography. In support, Masemann (1976)
states that ethnographic studies allow for "deeper insights into the actual social realities," thus

establishing the framework to advance research in this domain and providing "a more secure basis for comparative studies" (p. 380).

Secondly, critical ethnography focuses on a dialectical view of knowledge, a dialogical process, social critique, reciprocity, and ideological disclosure that could result in bringing about change (Carspecken, 2001; Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 1970 & 2000; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2009; Tricoglus, 2001). Critical ethnography aims not only to understand and critique people's concerns and lived experiences but also to achieve emancipatory action. Founded on the work of and informed by both critical theory and critical pedagogy, several principles (dialogue, dialectical logic, ideology, hegemony, and emancipation) influencing critical ethnography are shared by these theoretical perspectives (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 1970 & 2000; Giroux, 2009). I believe these attributes make critical ethnography an appropriate methodology to explore college instructors' perspectives and experiences relative to the enactment of CBE reform and its impact on their lives. It, therefore, offers a lens to understand and critique the social structures and power relations that facilitate their workplace practices and disclose the inequities that suppress instructors' voices and alienate them from their work.

Thirdly, employing this critical theoretical framework can potentially encourage the involvement and presence of educators' voices in these discourses (Cheng & Huang, 2018; Noblit et al., 2004). Critical ethnography's concept of reciprocal dialogue supports the involvement of college instructors as essential contributors.

A reciprocal dialogue (dialogical thought and dialectical logic) approach encourages ongoing engagement in which participants are actively involved in the "construction and validation of meaning" (Spradley, 1979, p. 22). Thus, the researcher's and the researched own

experience matters when generating and conceptualizing a research study (Campbell & Gregor, 2008).

Moreover, one of the central aspects guiding critical ethnographic inquiry is that social life is constructed in contexts of power (Powell, 2022; see also, Noblit et al., 2004). The dialectical logic and dialogical thought emphasize this notion of power. The reciprocal view of critical ethnography demonstrates the value of teachers' voices and perceptions. Critical ethnography emphasizes the impact of power relations on teachers and how power relations between the researcher and teachers (i.e. the research subjects) can influence the research procedures and findings. Furthermore, employing these dialogical techniques helps avoid reinforcing dominant power relations and acknowledges instructors as key subjects in the research process. Therefore, critical inquiry must commence at the contextual level to see how external dominant forces are embedded in the particulars (Lather, 1986) of the instructors' daily happenings. Such reciprocal dialogue will also help reveal how neoliberal ideologies influence instructors' views and experiences of education reform. Hence, a central aim of conducting critical inquiry requires understanding participants' everyday 'world' from their perspectives.

Researchers acknowledged that there continue to be inconsistencies between educators' perspectives on workplace practices and the policies that inform these changes (Cheng & Huang, 2018; de Bruijn, 2012). Critical ethnography's reciprocal and dialogical processes help me to collaborate with and engage instructors in my research. This engagement level could illuminate discrepancies between educational changes and college instructors' subjectivities. Such an approach that elicits instructors' perspectives emphasizes the importance of their agency in reform development and implementation. Agency in this context refers to "the concept of self-study, or deeply reflecting on one's experiences, ideas, and beliefs" (Meyer, 2011, p. 219).

Teachers' agency is "their active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions for the overall quality of education" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 624). The literature suggests that educational reform and structural changes do not consider the importance of teachers' agency (Kincheloe, 2003; Meyer, 2011; Palmer, 1998).

Critical ethnography as a methodological framework seeks to avoid isolating knowledge construction from the embodied knowers by valuing their agency in the research process. It acknowledges that teachers' perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and values are essential for democratic and equitable educational practices. Adopting a research methodology that values teachers' agency is essential to expose the impacts that dominant hegemonic ideologies have on educational systems. In support, Kincheoloe (2003) asserted that this critical research approach "alerts teachers to the ways dominant myths, behaviour, and language shape their view of the teacher role and the curriculum without conscious filtering" (p. 52).

Embracing teachers' agency in discussing their experiences at work reveals existing power dynamics and unfair situations. Critical ethnographic investigations "require an examination of how power intersects with the ways educators make meaning of ourselves and the contexts in which our teaching and our identities are embedded" (Meyer, 2011, p. 219). My chosen methodology's liberating and non-suppressive nature challenges the political, economic, and cultural forces that condition individuals' activity (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) indicate, although "this may not be enough to restructure the social system and [end all injustice], it is certainly a necessary beginning" (p. 10).

The "revelation of existing contradictions must emanate from participants' understandings or their ability to penetrate through cultural contradictions, which, however, provides the entry point for ideological critique" (Spradley, 1979, p. 23). Based on what

instructors said and did, the nature of these concepts allowed me first to understand and then critique the social structure that mediates their workplace practices. This non-coercive conversation helped me recognize the dominant forces at play in restricting instructors' agency in reform decision-making. Correspondingly, Carspecken (1996) indicated that this communicative process allows the researcher to discover how instructors' social actions (ideology) contribute to the reproduction and perpetuation of the dominant relations and social structures that coordinate their daily work practices. Furthermore, using the critical ethnography lens provided further insights into critiquing social structures based on instructors' embodied experiences. Such approaches, however, lead to a practical understanding of how individuals are oppressed, which can then empower them to take action to change oppressive forces (Seiler, 2013; Palmer & Maramba, 2011), or as Paulo Freire (2009) indicates, to take praxis (political action).

Fourthly, critical ethnography emphasizes emancipating people who are being oppressed and experiencing forms of domination in their culture (Carspecken, 1996; Seiler, 2013). Critical ethnography asserts that this process is essential for college instructors to counteract the perpetuation of oppressive social structures. Emancipation starts with understanding the self and what dominant forces are a part of one's everyday life. Based on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, critical theory contends that participants' subjectivities must be central in the research process to understand how they are oppressed and for social critique to be possible (Silva, 2001). Critical inquiry stimulates a self-sustaining critical analysis process and enlightened action (Lather, 1986, p. 268). Employing critical ethnography is a call for ongoing dialogue between the researcher and participants, which encourages "reciprocity as a means to empower the researched" (Lather, 2017, p. 23). Critical ethnography aims beyond understanding

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the impacts of social domination or how to challenge the status quo. It also seeks to challenge and reject inequitable conditions through emancipating experiences for teachers and students (Carspecken, 1996; Darder et al., 2009).

Additionally, the dialogic and reciprocal nature invokes researcher reflexivity and leads to a social critique of contradictions and oppressive social structures. According to Comstock (1982), the researcher's task is to "stimulate research participants into a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action" (p. 387). Reciprocity has become a central ethical principle that "guides ethnographers in considering equalizing the exchange between themselves and those who agree to participate in their studies" (Figueroa, 2016, p. 9). Such an approach further advances the emancipatory efforts and empowers human subjects.

College instructors are crucial in providing essential guidelines for more effective implementation and sustainability of reform efforts. With the proposed dialogic process, emphasis is placed on "illuminating the "naturalness" of social structures, to challenge such arrangements so that [instructors] can see both the constraints and the potential for change in their situations" (Lather, 1979, p. 22). This level of openness and democracy encouraged throughout the research process allowed me to understand better instructors' agency within decision-making processes relative to workplace changes. It further explained why instructors feel disempowered and marginalized, disclosed what forces dominate their everyday practices, and illuminated how they perpetuate such domination.

Furthermore, "critical inquiry provides an environment that invites participants' critical reactions to researcher accounts of their worlds" (Lather, 1986, p. 268). Critical ethnography ensures that the research environment maintains an entirely democratic process. It is a process that allows participants to critique the researcher's account of their 'world' or lived experiences

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in the workplace. In the subsequent section, I critically examine methodological issues that may surface during the research process. I also discuss issues related to voice representation (my voice and research participants' voices).

Philosophical Issues and Underpinnings

Based on the ongoing debate centred on validity, legitimization, and 'crisis in representation' in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I felt it necessary and essential to address some philosophical concerns related to my power and position. Hammersley (1993) indicated that understanding the researcher's position as an insider and outsider to the culture being studied is essential. Also, the effects of the researcher's position on the research process must be addressed beforehand (Hammersley, 1993). I regarded this process as essential to ensure that I did not impose the same constraints and injustice on participants that this research study intended to reveal and dismantle. As an insider/outsider to the research, I frequently reflected and critiqued my position regarding what I said and did to ensure that they were liberating and emancipative. The application of a critical lens to my methodology kept me cognizant of my researcher position by maintaining a "continuous, reflexive process, one that encouraged a critique of research methods and a negotiation of issues of power, positionality, and privilege" (Powell, 2022, p. 18). Critical ethnography helped disrupt the status quo and ensured that I established an ethical stance in acknowledging participants as valued and significant members throughout the research process. Such a stance requires me to report interview data that authentically represent the shared knowledge of instructors' workplace lives and their voices.

Issues Surrounding Object, Subject, and Voice

Examining the object-subject relationship and voice in the context of my inquiry is the key to ensuring that research participants benefit and remain at the center of the research process.

In the context of my thesis research, referring to participants as "subjects" does not view them as subjective (attributes) but rather as "human beings who are producers of their historical form of life" (Horkheimer, 1993b, p. 21). They represent living individuals actively participating in this discourse (Stoddart, 2007, p. 2010). Nevertheless, the "subject" within the "object and subject" relationship can become quite complicated. For example, participants' subjectivity is not a subject; it is an object as well, and the subject is then a part of the world (Adorno, 1998). Therefore, the subject-object is intertwined and cannot simply be separated.

Moreover, we do not create or invent language but use it to express our subjectivities; therefore, language (object) gives us existence in the world. Due to this subject-object relationship, we cannot share our subjectivity without talking about the objective state (self) (Adorno, 1998). Therefore, our (subjective) experiences, perspectives, and ways of knowing are all intertwined with the world and culture (object) we live in and communicate with (Adorno, 1998).

On the other hand, voice has become a problematic concept, mainly because its purpose and meanings are multifaceted and perceived by researchers differently. Voice does not simply refer to the representation of spoken or verbal expression/utterance, but as Madison (1995) explained, it is "the representation of a historical self, a full presence that is in and of a particular world" (p. 173). As voice is linked to history and experience, the possible value of that voice in constructing knowledge that can transform oppressive conditions cannot be denied or silenced (Hertz, 1997). As it relates to research subjects, they need to be listened to, and this giving back helps them affirm their existence to others and themselves (Madison, 1995). However, it also signifies that "the self is reciprocally joined to other selves (or souls) for its being and creations" (Madison, 1995, p. 173). The subject-object relationship is essential to illuminate any research or

discourse exploring human participants. Voice, however, cannot be distanced from the culture being studied or the text constructed from such lived cultures and experiences (Madison,1995). Critical inquiry must embrace and account for multiple voices and perspectives to maintain a dialogical nature and emancipatory agenda.

From a pedagogical standpoint, voice generally means the school and community's values, opinions, experiences, perspectives, and socioeconomic and cultural background (McLaren, 2007). Therefore, the researcher should not attempt to detach his or her voice from the realities the texts create because, as Geertz (1988) indicated, the authorial voice is rarely genuinely absent or even hidden. McLaren (1994) acknowledged that the purpose of critical research is to serve and engage those who are marginalized. This notion of critical research means that participants' voices must be accurately represented in the text. As I considered presenting the subjects' voices, I reflected on not perpetuating the dominant ideologies my research sought to address. In presenting participants' voices, I incorporated the dialogical approach proposed by critical theory and CP. Through this lens, I needed to combine multiple approaches to adequately represent the researcher and participants' voices in a non-dominating manner.

Acknowledging that I cannot detach my voice from the constructed text, I employed narratives (Creswell, 2012; Weis & Fines, 2000) and dialogue (Madison, 2005; Weis & Fines, 2000) to present the participants' voices. Using long narratives to present chunks of data allowed me to critically analyze participants' voices better than producing individual gaps in their experiences. On the other hand, a dialogue demonstrates an interactive process between the researcher and subjects to avoid dominant knowledge and perspectives reflected in the text. However, "by acknowledging the problem of power imbalances between researcher and

participant" (Powell, 2022, p. 23), this reciprocal approach allowed me to listen to participants and have them listen to me; they became the voices I entered a dialogue with. Bhavnani (1993) asserts that multiple methods demonstrate a deep commitment to engaging in differences between the researcher and participants. He adds that this approach to presenting the researched voices avoids:

> [Researchers from being] complicit with dominant representations which reinscribe inequality. It follows from a concern with power and positioning that the researcher must address the micro-politics of the conduct of research, and … given the partiality of all knowledge, questions of differences must not be suppressed but built into research (Bhavnani, 1993, p. 98).

Throughout this process, I was reflexive in avoiding, interpreting and distorting subjects' voices (Creswell, 2012). Listening to teachers' experiences constituted unoppressive and non-dominant ways of accessing and reconstructing knowledge.

Role of the Researcher

Critical ethnography avoids the "privileging of the ethnographer" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 402). This view does not imply that the role and expertise of the researcher are irrelevant. However, it suggests that the researcher's "expertise should not be privileged but set alongside whatever skills, experience and knowledge other participants bring to the pedagogical encounter" (p. 402). This perspective justifies the importance of researcher reflexivity, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

A critical ethnographer is morally obligated to research subjects to add voice to their stories by "merging the text with the world" (Madison, 2005, p. 172). However, whether acting as a researcher, insider, or outsider, the dialogical encounters with subjects directly link the

researcher to research subject experiences, in which the researcher becomes a subject in the "contested space" (Madison, 2005, p. 174). Thus, this approach can be perceived as "indwelling" (Conquergood, 1991; Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994; Madison, 1995; Lugones, 1994). By indwelling, the authors mean "to live within … being at one with the persons under investigation, walking a mile in the other person's shoes, or understanding the person's point of view from an empathic rather than a sympathetic position" (Tricoglus, 2001, p. 23). Only such immersion into their culture gives the researcher the privilege to write their narratives and tell participants' subjective stories.

Nevertheless, caution should be taken when adopting a dual role in critical ethnographic discourse. Tricoglus (2001) indicated that when a researcher must fulfill a dual role in the research process, some issues or concerns must be addressed relative to bias that can dominate dialogue or skew the lens through which I visualize text representations. In the research process, Ball (1990) advocated for "rigour and contended that the basis for this rests solely in [my] awareness of what is possible to say based on the data that was collected and data that was not collected" (p. 40). In other words, he suggests that the researcher's reflexivity and ability to monitor my role in data generation and analysis constitute the required rigour. I employed Ball's criteria of rigour in qualitative research, which is also based on an internal critical process: in the form of the researcher's self-awareness and reflexivity, positionality, the role of the researcher, and making available the research for external scrutiny and review (Phillips, 1989 & Tricoglus, 2001).

Researcher Reflexivity

In the context of this research, I negotiated my multiple identities as a minority teacher, a woman of colour, a Ph.D. student, and a researcher. In critical ethnography, reflexivity aims to

resolve the dual nature of contemporary social theory: object/subject, theory/practice, and action/structure (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Hammersly & Atkins, 1983). Reflexivity affirms that "the research act and its product are constitutive of and not separable from the everyday world" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 394). As Jordan and Yeoman (1995) confirmed, "it represents the researcher's dialectic process, the research process, and its product" (p. 394). I had to be aware of and reflect on the biases I brought to the research process and the effects my presence could have on the collected data (Hammersley & Atkins, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, as I also brought my texts to the research process from either previous readings or social relations, I understood that the perspectives that I integrated into the research are not my own as they are all retrieved from what Anderson (1983) referred to as our "interpretive communities" (p. 255).

Positionality: The Insider/Outsider Position in the Research

Positionality is essential in understanding and acknowledging our power, privilege, and epistemological grounding as we seek to dismantle the power structures that disempower our subjects (Thomas, 1993). Although the study is not based on my exclusive interpretation and experiences, it is first grounded in my (the researcher's) perspectives of the problem under investigation. The literature suggests that critical ethnographic inquiry begins and ends with the researcher's biography. After being privy to the existing domination and power relations in educational decision-making, I had to be reflexive and position myself as qualified to conduct this research study. I had to reflect on my insider/outsider position, history, and background, thus demonstrating an invested interest and commitment to see the research to its end. Creswell (2011) indicates that:

Reflexivity involves the researchers positioning themselves in qualitative research. This means that researchers convey their background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, history), how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study (p. 47).

Once in dialogue with subjects to better understand their lived realities, I had to consider aspects of my everyday life. This level of reflexivity helped me decide which position to adopt if I am to join forces towards emancipation. As Wolcott (2010) said:

Our readers have a right to know about us. And they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we stand to gain from our study (p. 36).

My biography as a researcher significantly determined the direction and outcome of the research. As discussed in the next section, my history and experiences as an outsider situate me in the research process. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) refer to researchers as a "multicultural subject" (p. 12) and view history, traditions, and conceptions of self, ethics, and politics as a starting point for inquiry. Moreover, my interest in this type of research and choice of methodology emanated from my experiences of growing up and working in a post-colonial country. From the outset of considering employing critical ethnography as my research methodology, I found it challenging to identify my position and relation to the research. This uncertainty was significantly attributed to my possible position as an insider (college instructor) and outsider (woman of colour and Ph.D. student) in the research process. Insiders are members of specified groups and collectives or occupants of specialized social statuses. Outsiders are non-members (Merton, 1972, p. 21).

Insider/Outsider Struggle

For some time, I struggled with my outsider/insider position and whether I should address this concern. I doubted my eligibility to conduct this research as a minority teacher, a woman of colour, and a non-Québécoise. I deliberated intensely about addressing this outsider position to avoid being seen as marginalized. Although I do not feel or view myself as inferior to my colleagues, considering my outsider position, I still questioned whether I should be conducting this research. In my outsider position, why did I feel this way? Reflecting upon scholarly work in black feminist research perspectives, I historically understood why I must confront and be reflexive about this feeling. Only when I start to deconstruct myself can I share others' truth. Dillard and Okpalaoka (2009) affirmed that "black women or women of African ascent could not isolate their experiences and feelings from the persistent consequences of colonialism" (p. 150). Whether it has been an act of experience or not, Collins (2000) contends that oppression and domination are universal practices and take on varying forms from one geographical context to another. Even though it is not a physical action of control, the underlying feeling of domination was somehow evident. Therefore, it may be an inherent feeling from my ancestral colonial roots. However, I desperately needed to disclose how I felt both as a woman of colour and a female working in a predominately white college institution. How could I collectively join voices with my colleagues if I could not acknowledge and be transparent about my outsider position? To help transform the social and political power relations that mediate our work toward equality, I had to confront the realities of what I feel as a woman of colour and a minority teacher in the CÉGEP college system.

Moreover, this level of transparency was essential to demonstrate my commitment to illuminating participants' voices in this research. This reflection also revealed that I am

emotionally invested in the participants and improving *our* culture. My understanding of being a part of a subordinate culture, my professional relationships, and the purpose of the inquiry gave me an advantage in the research process. Developing this research awakened my self-consciousness by reminding me that this is precisely the subordinate and inferior feeling I intend to challenge. However, I realize I must ask questions and listen to teachers' experiences for change to occur. Without rapid change, at least a level of awareness and consciousness-raising would have occurred, thus leading to discussions on addressing power relations, domination, and inequalities.

Furthermore, due to my outsider position, I wrestled with the thought of being viewed as someone who did not understand. Reflecting on my research and the position or role I desired, I was torn between being an insider and an outsider. I asked myself, 'Is it possible to be both throughout the research process?' Madison (2005) would probably say 'no.' Madison (2020) contends that "critical ethnography must take up the charge of life-sustaining knowledge and restorative justice; it must also take up the charge of positionality" (p. 6). Here, Madison emphasizes the researcher's positionality and the importance of disclosing what stance will be taken when representing the Other. As a college instructor teaching in this system, I am an insider, and it is in that position I was propelled to pursue this research. Fine's (1994) three qualitative research positions helped me make this decision. As a starting point for understanding how one's insider position can advance or stagnate the research process, I present three positions that qualitative researchers can use to situate themselves (Fine, 1994, p.17):

1) The *ventriloquist*, whose desire is not to provide information to promote transformation. The ethnographer's position is practically invisible at this point.

2) The positionality of *voices* places the subjects and their voices at the center of the research process, and their voices carry forward … meanings and experiences that reflect their reality and "oppose dominant practices. The ethnographer is vaguely present but not addressed."

3) With the *activism* approach, the ethnographer is explicit about his or her goal to end hegemonic practices and … expose the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives.

The *positionality of voices* position guided me in assuming the role of an insider. In critical ethnographic inquiry, dialogue is not just important, it is crucial, especially with those being researched. This aspect of critical ethnography underscores that our position, focus, and decisions should always consider the Other and their potential impact. Furthermore, this consideration necessitates us to be transparent about our position, thereby revealing our subjectivities. My subjectivity is no longer centred on myself "but is in relation to the Other, it is shaped by and shapes dialogue and representation of the Other" (Madison, 2005, p. 9).

Moreover, as I negotiated about adopting an insider or outsider position, I reflected and was conscious of my difference and perceived power position among participants. For instance, my researcher and student roles are also essential as they helped me distance myself from participating in the research as I reflected on each interview conversation. My outsider position is not an objective stance. However, it reminds me of my moral obligation to protect participants, promote equity and ensure that my research study does not perpetuate an oppressive experience. My outsider position further demonstrates that I am not superior in this research, and subjects are the experts as their voices will dominate the narratives contributing to knowledge construction. The nature of my dual role is subject to shifting simultaneously throughout the research process.

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Due to this potential change, I maintained an insider role as much as possible to relinquish power to participants in directing the flow and mood of interviews and determining the depth of knowledge to be constructed. My advantage as an insider, in conjunction with my outsider position, gives me the privilege to understand how neoliberal conditions influence reform policies in competency-based settings. It allows me to critically examine and reflect on teachers' narratives and critique how they perpetuate such practices.

At this junction, I reflected on some important questions: How do I discuss my position about those I speak of and represent? Should my voice be included to reveal their stories if I listen, dialogue with, and observe research participants? If yes, when is an appropriate time to do so? If not, why not? Is my voice and position under the influence of neoliberal domination and inequality? I struggle to balance my voice with the research subjects. It is here that I embraced Madison's (2005) notion of "resist domestication" by "using the resources and privileges (my position) I have to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defence of the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach" (p. 5). In other words, I had to use my privileges to foster open and uncoerced communication that allowed me to critique how social relations among college instructors are mediated with elements of control and inequality. I used my position to "leverage less powerful voices to speak back to the powerful about their understanding of what [equitable education reform is and should look like]" (Vanner, 2015, p. 3).

I decided to use critical ethnography as my methodological approach to be a self-reflexive process. I am an instructor within the culture under investigation. The participants are my colleagues; therefore, I see myself as a part of this struggle to end domination. I am also a researcher who works under various pressures and struggles, such as constant funding cutbacks,

the threat of job security, the constant restructuring of education, and the demands of austerity. Here, I positioned myself as a critical educator committed to making society and educational experience more just and equitable for all students (and teachers). I committed with participants to reject unfairness and "dismantle systems of domination" (Vanner, 2015, p. 3). Hence, I reflected on casual interactions with colleagues during departmental meetings, office chats, and, most recently, sessions attended during our pedagogical day (professional development). In the trenches, I encountered social conditions that became the foci of my research (Thomas, 1993).

Furthermore, reflecting on an appropriate methodology, I asked myself: How can I make the research process an everyday experience for those involved? How can I ensure that participants' voices are echoed throughout the research rather than having the researcher's voice dominate? How do I design a research strategy that is for them? How will participants feel empowered to transform their conditions? I constantly grappled with these questions and realized that it is vital to address these issues beforehand. As an instructor and researcher, I understood how and what elements of power relations mediate instructors' daily social relations. It also helped me to reveal the hidden agenda behind policymakers who are overseers and enforcers of neoliberal education reform that shapes instructors' subjectivities of their workplace experiences.

Moreover, in "recognizing that research remains an inherently hierarchical process" (Vanner, 2015, p. 3), I realized it was important to reflect on my positionality continuously and how that may have impacted the research process, participants, and data collection. The use of "self-reflection and a reflexive approach is both a prerequisite and an ongoing process for the researcher to identify, construct, critique, and articulate their positionality. Thus, reflexivity informs positionality" (Gary & Holmes, 2020, p. 2). This level of reflection requires me to disclose and abandon any "preconceived notions of how I might contribute" (Vanner, 2015, p. 3)

and focus on participants' needs and concerns. Therefore, my position should positively contribute to providing insights on enhancing current educational reform methods like CBE and the conditions under which they are happening. In the following section, I justify my research design, which includes a description of the research site, sample selection, participant recruitment, data collection instruments, and a discussion on data organization, coding, and analysis.

Data Collection: Justification of Techniques and Methods Employed

The research's overall aim was twofold: Based on the perspectives and experiences of instructors, first, I examined the conditions under which neoliberal CBE reform is being implemented in classroom settings, and second, I critiqued and exposed how neoliberal-influenced reform practices contradict instructors' lived realities. According to Hopson, Rodick, and Kaul (2016), "a critical educational ethnography … centers on research questions derived from those with less social power, and in relation with the researcher" (p. 195). Therefore, critical ethnography allowed me to examine the perspectives of college instructors, who are my colleagues, more carefully. Based on the notion that knowledge is socially constructed, critical ethnography and critical theory contend that participants' subjectivities must be central in the research process to understand how they are oppressed and for social critique to be possible (Silva, 2001). Therefore, the research questions and data collection techniques align with a critical ethnographic framework's perspectives and beliefs. The aspects of reciprocity, dialogue, participation in knowledge construction, collaboration, and conscious raising are elements encouraged by critical ethnography to expose injustice, resist domination, and collectively achieve praxis (social and political change). As a result, I used semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002; Vanner, 2015).

Research Sample

The sample, also called participants and subjects, was recruited from the regular day program within the CÉGEP college. The critical ethnographic approach suggests targeting individuals with vocal discontent and concern regarding issues explored in my study. However, I used a purposive sampling method that allows "the researcher to intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central [problem]" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). A qualitative purposive sample was selected based on the research's methodology, design, and objectives to obtain more detailed accounts of instructors' perspectives and experiences. In support of using a purposive sampling approach, Patton (2002) indicates that it will help me gain deep insights into the investigated phenomenon.

Purposive selection or "criterion-based selection" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 67) is typical in qualitative research to include participants who can help answer the research questions (Baarda et al., 2009; Creswell, 2009). Identifying individuals who could provide diverse and extensive knowledge about their perspectives and experiences as instructors was essential to obtaining concrete and accurate responses to the main research question. Thus, the number of participants obtained is not essential compared to the quality of knowledge and understanding they can provide specific to the issues under investigation (Morse, 1995). Creswell (2012) also indicated that in "qualitative research, [selecting] a few individuals to study is typical as the goal is to present the complexity of the site or the information provided by individuals" (p. 209). Therefore, "the researcher's ability to provide an in-depth analysis diminishes with each new individual added" (Creswell, 2012, p. 209).

I employed two sampling selection strategies in line with the purposive sampling method: maximal variation sampling and snowball. Employing a maximal variation sampling before data

collection allowed me to target individuals based on varied characteristics. This approach also helped me to obtain "multiple perspectives" (Creswell, 2012, p. 207) from instructors based on several factors: position (tenured, non-tenured, leadership), race, years of teaching, and gender. Once three to four participants of interest were recruited, they helped identify additional individuals. This strategy is known as snowball sampling, which involves the "researcher asking participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled" (Creswell, 2012, p. 209). This sampling strategy was adopted once the data collection process had started. Both sampling approaches uphold the beliefs of critical ethnography to actively include participants throughout the research process as much as possible.

Participant Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria

A total of ten participants from the regular day program were recruited to participate in the interview process because it is consistent with ethnographic and qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006). The regular day program was chosen because a more diverse selection option regarding disciplines, employment status, and experience was available and represented. In addition, the richness of diverse participants' experiential accounts (Sevigny, 2012) provided me, as the researcher, the ability "to discover actual connections" (Campbell & Gregor, 2008, p. 89). During the research process, I recruited four participants of interest by word of mouth. These individuals led me to identify the six additional people of interest. The selection completion of the ten research participants was followed by an electronic distribution of my participant recruitment email script (see Appendix D and Appendix E) and a demographic and professional information form (see Appendix F).

The sample comprised eight instructors teaching at an English-speaking CÉGEP and two other college personnel. The following inclusion criteria were used for the selection of study

participants: (i) instructors and college personnel who are currently working at an English-speaking CÉGEP in the regular day program, where CBE practices are being enacted and are a part of their job description, (ii) have been teaching or working in the CÉGEP college system for a minimum of two semesters and are willing to take part and give informed consent, iii) all participants are representative of both novice and veteran employees (ranging from three years to 43 years of experience), respectively, as well as part-time or full-time employees, (iv) The study was open to individuals of all genders, ages, teaching levels, and work experiences. The inclusion criteria also required participants to be willing to participate in a three- to four-hour interview over several sessions. The exclusion criterion was also based on conflict of interest; participating CÉGEP instructors in the department/discipline of Geography were not invited to participate in the study. This decision was made to avoid bias and maintain research credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) since I am also a Geography instructor.

Most of the participants in the final selection were academic track professionals and not from a vocational background. The number of years teaching at the CÉGEP level ranged from three and a half to forty-three years, demonstrating a wealth of experience. Regarding their educational level, six participants have a Ph.D., and four have a master's degree. The purpose of the criteria relative to teaching experience sought to capture the potential differences in knowledge gaps and perspectives regarding time spent teaching. Secondly, using an instructor's status (part-time and full-time) as a part of the inclusion process allowed me to examine if this aspect influences how they experience conflicting CBE practices and how they discuss their subjectivities relative to this aspect.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In keeping with critical ethnography's notion of reciprocal dialogue and as my primary data source, in-depth semi-structured ethnographic interviews presented a more feasible, non-dominating way to generate data to address the research objectives and associated questions. Interview sessions took place on Zoom at a time that participants scheduled. Interviews were conducted on Zoom due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the requirement to adhere to health safety protocol. In addition, all participants participated in multiple individual interviews, which were recorded to maintain accuracy and transparency during discussions of research findings. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, and participants could choose whether to be recorded. To investigate and understand instructors' lived realities of working in a competency-based setting, a semi-structured interview (Hodge, 2014a; Patton, 2002; Vanner, 2015) or a standardized open-ended interview, as Patton (2002) called it, was employed. Also, to ensure that the interview embodies a liberating process Patton (2002), questions for the semi-structured interview were formulated in connection with the research questions and objectives. This approach ensured that participants' responses reflected their voices and lived experiences. Using interviews that followed a critical ethnographic structure allowed me "to tap into areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible, such as people's subjective experiences and attitudes" (Perakyla & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 529).

Hodge (2014a) adds that using a semi-structured interview approach would allow me to obtain data on instructors' perceptions of implementing CBE and how these practices contradict their role as agents of social change. Similarly, Bernard (2002) states that, although this interview process includes a pre-formulated "list of questions that need to be covered in a particular order" (p. 205), "semi-structured interviewing follows the open-ended approach that is

characteristic of ethnographic and qualitative research" (Creswell, 2012; Whitehead, 2005, p. 17). This interview process is consistent with the beliefs of critical ethnography to ensure that the researcher "elicits answers fully from the perspective of the study participant and attempts to gain a greater understanding of the context and meaning of those responses through various forms of probing" (Whitehead, 2005, p. 17). In qualitative research, open-ended questions are ideal "so that participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher …" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

The interview approach used was practical as it allowed me to collect in-depth data that was relevant and focused and generated new questions during the interview process. The interview format helped to uncover the meanings that participants constructed about their culture and understand how these meanings are organized and embedded with injustice. Therefore, the reciprocity notion held by critical ethnography, as well as critical theory and critical pedagogy (Adato, 2007), guided me in not viewing participants as objects waiting to be told what to do but rather as active social beings who have a lot to offer in this struggle to end domination.

Data Organization and Analysis

Once all the interviews were completed, the initial stages of the data analysis were organized along the critical theory and critical pedagogy conceptual frameworks. As Paulo Freire (1970, 1998 & 2005), Henry Giroux (1985, 1997 & 2004), and Peter McLaren (2009 & 2011) advocate, incorporating ideas from these theoretical perspectives is essential since they emphasize challenging unjust educational practices and resisting neoliberal education reforms. Furthermore, the analysis approach adopted is committed to providing an accurate account of participant data. This process helped me better understand the data collected concerning the research questions. As indicated by DeGregorio and Davidson (2011), "qualitative analysis is a

process that requires the exploration, organization, interpretation, and integration of research materials (data)" (p. 628). More specifically, Hatch (2002) states that "analyzing means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories" (p. 148). Both perspectives helped guide me with the data analysis process.

To guide the overall data analysis framework, the discussion that follows includes a combination of strategies adapted from LeCompte and Schensul (1999 & 2013) and several research studies (Carspecken, 1996; Carspecken, 2001; Hansen, 2001; Horn, 2001), some of which employed the critical ethnographic methodology. Before organizing and analyzing the interview data, I reviewed the literature in chapter two. I identified themes and explored patterns that emerged. This process was then used to compare similarities and differences between the themes found in the existing literature and the interview data. Like most qualitative research, themes, categories, and patterns (Ellingson, 2011; LeCompte & Schensul, 2013 & 1999) are commonly constructed approaches during the analysis process. As Carspecken (2001) indicates, critical ethnographic data analysis must be "facilitated by three core concepts: meaningful action, culture, and social systems" (p. 10). Generally, emergent themes that occurred most frequently and have some relevance to the research questions and overall goals were used throughout the analysis process. Therefore, emergent themes and corresponding data concerning each research question were analyzed and discussed.

The analysis process also included two adapted approaches from the hermeneutic reconstructive analysis. First, as the direction of this research emanated from instructors' concerns relative to changes and decision-making about workplace practices, "it is within the nature of qualitative research to allow research directions to develop out of research data"

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(Hansen, 2001, p. 208; LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). Additionally, rather than determine specific research objectives in advance, this study was developed around existing research literature, preliminary observations, and casual conversations based on instructors' concerns. Since my study's major goals, coupled with critical ethnography, include revealing oppressive practices, reducing signs of domination by dismantling power relations, and encouraging self-empowerment, every aspect of the research process must reflect these beliefs. Employing this reconstructive approach also meant that research objectives and questions may have to be modified throughout the analysis process.
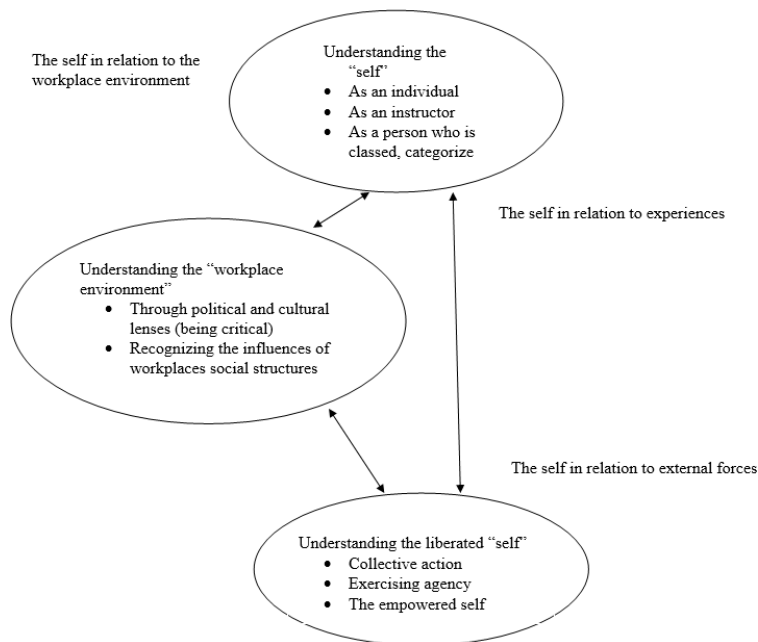
Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews: Preliminary Data Analysis Stage

Firstly, at the onset of the analysis process, the data collected was reviewed, chunked into large parts, and coded based on areas of interest relative to the present research study. Since the data was entirely qualitative (interviews), LeCompte and Schensul (2013) indicate that these must be organized into "big clumps or pieces, … that represent a particular phenomenon of interest in the study" (p. 80), which is referred to as chunking. Secondly, coding the data was adapted to the general coding approach suggested by LeCompte and Schensul (2013). Coding "involves organizing data into categories related to the conceptual framework and/or the questions guiding the research to provide evidence supporting analysis and interpretation (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013, p. 81). When starting this process, I did not have any "prespecified codes, [but instead decided to develop a more] general coding [approach] … to let the data suggest initial codes" (Punch, 2014, p. 174).

Based on suggestions proposed by LeCompte and Schensul (2013), the initial stage of organizing data involved uncovering underlying general themes (deductive), later stages focused on identifying more explicit themes and patterns concerning specified research questions

(inductive), as well as repeated analysis and comparison between both (recursive). LeCompte

and Schensul (2013) referred to this approach as general coding and specific coding,

respectively. Additionally, this demonstrates using an inductive, deductive, and recursive process

during data analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). The authors explained this as researchers

using "a top-down approach (deductively, using predefined coding categories for analysis), then

a bottom-up (inductively, developing newly identified codes/analytic categories) and in a third

strategy (recursivity, moving back and forth between the two) (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013, p.

83). Since the theoretical and methodological perspectives informing my research are based on

emancipation and empowerment, I employed an adapted version of the *Model of emancipation*

knowledge (Vadeboncoeur, 1998), as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Deductive and inductive emancipatory strategy model

The self in relation to the workplace environment

Understanding the "self"
- As an individual
- As an instructor
- As a person who is classed, categorize

The self in relation to experiences

Understanding the "workplace environment"
- Through political and cultural lenses (being critical)
- Recognizing the influences of workplaces social structures

The self in relation to external forces

Understanding the liberated "self"
- Collective action
- Exercising agency
- The empowered self

The above model demonstrates the importance of instructors questioning and being

critical about their work conditions and understanding how their various selves are being shaped

and contested in the workplace. Using a modified version of the three interconnected circles

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(Vadeboncoeur, 1998), I visualize achieving the goals of my study as being directly linked to participants' understanding of the self in relation to [neoliberal reform] experiences, the workplace environment, and the external forces. The circles referred to as bins by Vadeboncoeur (1998) constitute perspectives grounded in the research questions and theoretical framework guiding this study. Codes emerged from the data to begin the organization and transcription of data collected from individual interviews. As LeCompte and Schensul (2013) explained, this "rough coding will allow me to closely examine the data" (p.84) and organize it into themes that are relevant to the overall interests of the research study. The following section discusses the coding and analysis steps in more detail.

Final Data Coding and Organization Stages

First, after all the interview audio recordings and transcripts were uploaded to Max Weber's qualitative data analysis (MaxQDA) software, I edited and organized the data into more structured conversations. This process was helpful in accurately identifying codes and formulating themes of the text data. A thematic approach was used for data organization; this process was conducted in three stages. The analysis process started with coding the interview transcripts. The primary purpose of this step was twofold: (i) to extract essential phrases in participants' language and (ii) to discover the main themes that would accurately capture teachers' perspectives and experiences of working in a competency-based environment. While editing and organizing the data, I extracted reoccurring phrases and perspectives each interviewee emphasized. There were also cases where detailed responses from interviewees were used to formulate single and multiple codes. The decision to apply single or multiple codes depended on the clarity of responses to the question. These verbatim phrases from participants were used to manually develop a preliminary code list organized in a Word document table.

Therefore, an essential benefit of initial coding was that it allowed further data exploration (Saldaña, 2009).

The second stage involved a more diligent review of each transcript in MaxQDA, where the data was recorded directly in the software interface, and labels were assigned to the codes. During this second round of code identification, they were examined and compared for similarities and differences with the ones created manually, where several additional codes were identified. This step also led me to identify general themes from participants' repetitive responses and record them in the MaxQDA memo feature. Throughout this process, I used in vivo codes based on recommendations from Creswell (2015), who states that this approach allows "you to start building codes and later themes that resonate with your participants. He notes that "in vivo codes are best because they move you towards the voices of participants, which you want to reflect in your… final report" (p. 160).

As a result of coding and recoding, I further examined participants' phrases at the final stage to refine the codes and create specific themes around the codes listed. The themes and codes were compared with the ones extracted from the literature review to identify similarities and differences. This approach allowed me to evaluate the contributions my research would potentially add to existing scholarly work in this area and to illuminate, from teachers' perspectives, the conditions under which competency-based structured educational environments thrive. The coding and recoding or breaking down of the data are essential because analyzing it and taking it apart allowed me to "see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell, 2015, p. 156). Since the primary purpose of this research is to preserve the meaning of participants' perspectives and experiences, I have refrained from providing detailed input during the interview conversation that could influence the coding

process. This decision, made to avoid establishing power dynamics and asserting dominance in the ethnographic text, ensures a fair and equitable research process. Instead, I have integrated my voice from the interview into the analysis and discussion as opening statements, emphasizing the relevance of the interviewees' insights.

<div align="center">**Ethical Considerations**</div>

The ethical principles concerning "informed consent, non-deception, privacy and confidentiality, the commitment to collecting and presenting reliable" and [accurate findings, and participants' rights and welfare] (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 22; Creswell, 2012) for undertaking research are acknowledged to be critical throughout my research process. Moreover, applying critical ethnography promotes an ethical framework as it suggests that research "texts should generate social critique against injustice and lead to resistance, empowerment, social action, and positive change in the social world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 22). Therefore, my research had three ethical responsibilities to resolve before commencing data collection: (i) access to the research site and participants, (ii) planning data collection schedules that accommodated participants' preferences and (iii) reporting and publication of research findings.

Furthermore, researchers must consider and propose a plan to address possible ethical concerns or issues whenever research involves human participants. Consequently, information on counselling and support services (see Appendix J) for participants was made available. However, for this study, there were no risks for potential participants. This claim was further vetted by Concordia University's human research ethics committee (office of research), which approved the study (see Appendix B). Before obtaining university research ethical approval, I was required to complete the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) course, after which certification of ethical acceptability was granted (see Appendix A).

Completing this course was a mandatory prerequisite to obtaining ethical clearance to commence

data collection. As the research study complied with the ethics requirements of the participating

college's Institutional Policy on Research and the Tri-Council Statement (TCPS2) involving

humans, further approval was obtained from the research site (see Appendix C). Furthermore, in

keeping with the belief that critical ethnographers should promote emancipation and self-

empowerment, steps were taken to ensure confidentiality and that participants' voices are

optimized throughout the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, to ensure the

privacy of participants in this study, the names of those involved have been replaced with

pseudonyms.

Firstly, informed consent (see Appendix G) was obtained electronically from all research

participants. College instructors were informed about the study's overall purpose and told they

had the right to decline participation in any aspect of the research and withdraw their

participation at any time. They were also informed that all data collected would remain in the

researcher's possession, in a locked cabinet in the case of signed consent forms, until one year

after the research had been completed. I also informed participants that all transcribed data will

be electronically stored on a password lock and finger-recognition access laptop for at least five

years and can be reviewed upon request.

Secondly, steps were taken to ensure that participants' responses were confidential.

Several precautionary measures discussed in this section were used to maintain anonymity,

confidentiality, and privacy in the research. I explained to participants that their names and

identities would be kept confidential and that no information revealing their identity would be

disclosed. I also confirmed in writing to participants that confidentiality of the information

shared will be maintained. Furthermore, it is also essential that power relations between key

stakeholders (administrators) and participants be considered. While direct quotes from interview transcripts will be included, I have decided to take on the instructors' perspectives and did not disclose any information in the data and analysis section that may place informants at risk. Also, no personal information that could be traced to any individual informant was included. The names of research subjects and personal characteristics were not used in any aspect of my dissertation or any specific notation to the courses they lecture to further guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Special attention is paid to maintaining anonymity in all interview field notes, analysis, and discussion of findings. In the study, I changed "minor personal details of participants and used pseudonyms and codes for the [narrations]" (Hupkens et al., 2019, p. 1734). For participants, pseudonyms and generic references to them as employee(s), curriculum designers(s), [instructors/teachers] or professionals [were] used (Norstedt & Breimo, 2016).

Furthermore, I requested permission to record the interview before each interview session. Also, since the interviews were held on Zoom, participants were automatically allowed to accept, or decline being recorded once I selected the recording option. For each interview, permission to record was given by all participants. They were also reminded that their participation was voluntary, that they were under no obligation, and that they could terminate the session at any time. I reiterated to participants that if they felt uncomfortable about responding to a question at any time during the interview, they could refuse and stop the interview.

Thirdly, conducting the study in a researcher's capacity may cause concerns about power differences between myself and the research subjects. Participants were reminded throughout the research process and in the informed consent letter that the basis of this research study is to preserve participants' voices and ensure that their presence remains central throughout the inquiry. More importantly, the agency is transferred to college instructors to empower them to

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openly share their perspectives and experiences of education reform workplace practices without feeling disempowered or intimidated. I also attempted to reduce risk or possible victimization for their honest responses by having participants review a one-page documentation of the major themes and perspectives that emerged and would be discussed in the final thesis. These measures ensured that the knowledge produced was written through the research participants' lens.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter illuminated the methodological framework that informs my thesis and the method used to construct knowledge with participants. I justified the latter's usefulness as an appropriate methodology by exploring traditional and critical ethnography. As critical ethnography takes the stance to promote and sustain justice and equity, in this chapter, I needed to disclose my positionality and discuss how I would position myself concerning representing the Other (teacher-participants). Additionally, as examined in chapter four, power issues are usually a concern; reflecting on my positioning in this research study kept me conscious of how I treated and communicated with participants, and I would later present their contributions.

Furthermore, teacher participants are positioned on the margins as they struggle to do what is in the best interests of students' overall development and fulfill reform policy demands. As a result, critical ethnography helped me not to reproduce this experience by exploring teachers' lived realities through their voices. I have included how semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection method in this chapter. This method provided an equitable and emancipating research conversation where teachers articulated responses to questions and questioned the researcher. This reciprocating ethnographic interaction aligned with the perspectives of the theories and methodology embraced in my research study.

This chapter describes the sample, the recruitment process and the inclusion criteria applied. Also presented is a detailed discussion of how the data would be organized and analyzed. Finally, as critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility (Madison, 2012), this chapter presents the ethical considerations and practices used throughout the research process to protect participants' rights and welfare. Therefore, keeping teachers' voices and perspectives at the forefront of my research study, the following chapters show extensively how the chosen methodology influenced my data analysis and discussion of findings.

Chapter Five

Data Presentation and Analysis of The Themes with Research Questions

This chapter presents the data analysis and main findings from the thematic analysis of the ten individual semi-structured interviews. The data analysis, guided by the research questions, is a comprehensive process centred around the themes. It is followed by an overall discussion connected to the literature review and themes generated, reinforcing the confidence in my study's methodology.

In keeping with the qualitative research approach and an ethnographic methodology, a small sample of ten participants was chosen for my research. Conducting in-depth interviews was essential to have participants disclose and disrupt hidden neoliberal ideologies embedded in their everyday work practices. A purposive sampling method was applied to select participants to gain extensive insights. In applying this method, two selection strategies (maximal variation sampling and snowball) were used to recruit a more diverse sample of participants. This process involved selecting the first three to four participants to identify the remaining participants. As explained in the previous section, several inclusion criteria were specified to ensure that the relevant sample was chosen. The only exclusion criterion was that participants from the geography department of the participating English CÉGEP were not recruited since I am also an instructor in the same discipline.

On the other hand, to maintain my commitment to promoting an emancipatory and liberating experience for teachers, all quotes incorporated from interviews are presented verbatim and have not been edited to accurately and authentically represent teachers' voices. More specifically, this chapter reveals the existing inequities of neoliberal reform policies through the authentic voices of research participants about their subjective experiences in competency-based

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educational environments. In analyzing the data, insights from Creswell (2015) influenced my decision to focus on eight themes:

> I try to code all my text data (whether a small database of a few pages or a large one of thousands of pages) into about 30 to 50 codes. I then look for overlap and redundant codes and start to/reduce the number to, say, 20 codes. These 20 codes then collapse into about five to seven themes that become the major headings in the findings section of my qualitative report (pp. 155-156).

Through these themes, teachers' voices shed light on four essential questions to contextualize the final discussion: (i) What is wrong with this social reality? (ii) How did it come about? (iii) Whose interests are being served? and (iv) How can we make things better? (Bohman & Edward, 2016).

Consequently, based on the coded data and themes generated, seven key themes informed by the research questions have been selected. However, after a second examination of the interview transcripts, one additional theme emerged: unrelated to the research questions. The findings are based on eight themes derived from teachers' perspectives and experiences while working in a competency-based structured environment. The themes and how they correspond with the research questions are listed below:

Theme 1: Policies, procedures, and power

Theme 2: The role of education

RQ-1: What are the goals and aims of competency-based education and the broader working conditions/environment?

RQ-2: How do and in what ways do the goals of CBE contradict or conflict with instructors' lived realities?

Theme 3: Constraints of competency-based education

Theme 4: Challenges for educators

> RQ-3: What are the outcomes of standardized approaches like CBE, and how do teachers
>
> view CBE results in terms of equity and social justice?

Theme 5: The need for resources and training

Theme 6: Credibility and success stories

Theme 7: Challenging the status quo

Theme 8: Amplify faculty voices and empowerment

> RQ-4: What changes/modifications in the current CBE model could lead to more
>
> equitable and sustainable reform efforts?

Each theme will be examined, and the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with teacher participants will be discussed. The thematic analysis for each extracted theme is organized into several sub-categories (subheadings) to better structure the discussion. The labels of the subheadings are formulated based on the interview dialogues and the research questions. To maintain participants' anonymity, the title teacher and a letter and number combination (teacherA01) are used to create pseudonyms. This chapter's analysis and discussion focus on the eight themes identified. More specifically, it draws attention to the working conditions, challenges, discrepancies, and inequalities experienced by teachers in competency-based environments.

Theme 1: The Interplay of Policies, Procedures, and Power in Educational Reform

Competency-based education is a curriculum model that continues to be adopted by educational systems and the workplace. Although there is much to recognize about this pedagogical approach, such as its flexibility to accommodate learners' needs and provide diverse

life-long skills, research suggests that CBE practices alienate the interests and perspectives of educators by limiting their input in the curriculum development process (Datnow, 2012; Hodge, 2016c). In addition, teacher participants generally believe that many external influences impede decision-making, faculty members' professional growth and the college's overall advancement. Moreover, many research participants echoed that various "policy climates in education" (Datnow, 2012, p. 193) do not always welcome their input in reform or support their belief of what changes are in the best interests of students and the learning processes. Exploring the broader working conditions that shape this approach is essential to understand better how CBE contradicts instructors' lived realities. This influence encompasses various power dynamics, including social, political, and neoliberal economic ideologies. Such a workplace environment structured within a CBE framework emphasizes preparing students to fulfill social, economic, and market-based demands that are almost normalized (Apple, 2005; Ball, 2013; Macrine et al., 2010). The context of CBE and the current program revisions that are taking place in local college environments make it a compelling starting point for understanding the ideological systems influencing and shaping pedagogy. Therefore, the analysis and discussion presented under themes one and two address the first two research questions: (i) What are the goals and aims of competency-based education and the broader working conditions/environment? and (ii) How do and in what ways do the goals of CBE contradict or conflict with instructors' lived realities?

A significant theme from the interview data was that teachers' perspectives and experiences in competency-based environments must be understood regarding the larger structural and social context of the college in which they are embedded (Priestley et al., 2016; Hodge, 2016c). Teachers shared similar perspectives when asked about their involvement in the

decision-making process of the recent reform of the competency-based framework at the program level. For example, results revealed that educators have little agency in curriculum reform design and development, even when consulted. A research participant who has experience working in both public and private educational systems in Québec shared:

Faculty think that they have input into the design, they really do not. The design is already set up, for example, if I look at the new Social Science program, yes, we have committees being released to do work on it, but the program has already been dictated by the government. It is there, if you look at the competencies, they are laid out in a specific way that actually tell you which courses go first and in which semester they will be offered. There are recommendations as to which disciplines can teach the courses and restrictions on the number of hours and so on. So, the design at the level of a program is actually very limited. At the level of a course design, there is a lot more input on the part of faculty that can be done provided the mechanism are in place to support them developing the courses and continuously renewing the courses (TeacherA01).

The above excerpt blatantly neglects to acknowledge instructors' expertise in their disciplines to competently contribute more concretely to reform changes at the most important level. The notion that teachers can significantly improve the education trajectory for all students, especially from grassroots communities, is valid; however, little freedom is provided. Echoing teacherA01, teacher02 added that:

There is a government mandated competency that is attached to every program and course that is created and delivered in the CÉGEP system. These manuals are given to each college and then the departments, they sit and create a program based on those criteria on competencies defined by the government manual. And then they must go

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through an approval process from the college, then after that the program is created. So

that is how a course design or program is designed from start to finish.

College instructors face challenges with adequate opportunities to participate in educational

structural changes. For example, when questioned about whether teachers have adequate input in

educational reform, teacherA02 further stated:

In short, the answer is no because the developmental process starts from the consultation

that the government has with the teachers. And to have those guidelines issued to the

colleges there has to be consultation that are happening with the teachers and to what

extent those consultation happens and what is the population of teachers who are

consulted and who do they represent? Do they represent the majority, and do they also

represent minority teachers? These are questions that we do not have answers to.

This perspective is also maintained by teacherC01 who said:

I don't think there's much involvement. I think that more needs to be done. I don't think

that we're completely excluded, because there have been, if I recall some consultations.

But I think the consultations happen once a process is already well underway, you know

what I mean, like I'm not sure that the consultation happened. There always seems to be

consultation but it's like they happen once, after all the stuff has been done, you know

what I mean. We're at the final stage and we're being consulted now, so that's what my

impression is. I think that it is very similar at the college level. For me, it seems like

certain people are consulted you know. Perhaps if you're on certain committees, or

certain people who are very involved with regards to pedagogy or Performa, perhaps

those people are consulted but I don't think faculty members as a whole.

Although consultations with and involvement of key stakeholders in any process are essential, educators echoed that this is not happening. Interviewees' contributions demonstrated that the structural and cultural norm of reform at the college level provides minimal opportunities for teachers to have extensive and ongoing input in the process of educational change. For the most part, interview findings support the argument that teachers' voices are either unheard or marginalized in competency-based learning environments by limiting their agency in such decision-making processes. Clearly, "the agency of teachers is part of a complex dynamic, interwoven with the structural and cultural features of the school, [economic needs], and the larger policy environment" (Datnow, 2012, p. 194). Research shows that teachers' involvement is vital for the reform's successful implementation and sustainability (Datnow, 2020; Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also; Datnow, 2012; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; McCully, 2006; Towers, 2012). The literature suggests that "the implementation of change is highly undesirable if teachers' core values such as their well-being and [educational beliefs] are diminished" (Hubers, 2020, p. 7). Nevertheless, teachers' participation seems constrained to ensure that certain interest groups can retain a monopoly and dictate how and where to make educational changes. An insightful point made by a veteran teacher indicated this in the following way:

> There has been some improvement when compared to the last major reform that occurred some 20-plus years ago, where the average teacher had no input in the process. She also warned that even with academic autonomy, teachers must understand between statement of the competency, an element of a competency and an action. These competencies are a government declared policy, they are owned by the government and gives teachers the freedom to effectively incorporate them in their course, but they cannot be changed.

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Many teachers lack a deep understanding of the competency terminologies (statement, the element and performance criteria), which presents a roadblock to effective implementation (TeacherB02).

Such feedback illustrates the constraints imposed on teachers. Even if they recognize that a competency will not be effective in reality and cannot be implemented, they cannot modify it. This setback is coupled with the language used in formulating competencies that can sometimes be misleading in terms of teachers misunderstanding the extent of their academic freedom to modify the application of competency to accommodate students' needs. The working conditions under which competency-based practices are implemented cannot be overlooked as they suppress teachers' voices and deter them from engaging in curriculum reform endeavours. Many teacher participants are demotivated and view it as a waste of time because their work in this regard is hardly ever considered or used. The following excerpts explain some participants' frustration and views of how their participation in educational changes is considered irrelevant. Therefore, participants shared why they rarely participate in any undertakings related to reform or revision.

Partly due to my conflict with institutional educational ideologies and I tend to stay away from those fights and debates. And it's just not a healthy sort of space for me. So, I focus on my students and my work. So, with regards to program review I just sort of say there's nothing I can do in that process without exerting an exorbitant amount of emotional energy. So, I'm just not going to do that I have a lot to deal with. I'm just not, it's not something that I see as a place that's going to be productive for my, you know, what can I contribute to that, you know, and they're not gonna listen to me kind of a thing (TeacherC02).

Similarly, teacherB01 frequently engage in various decision-making work but believe teachers are generally not involved enough. One of the main concerns is that teachers participate in reform work and develop many educational change initiatives, but the outcomes are not used in meaningful ways.

> There were issues in the past; they were brought to Ped Days, teachers were put in groups, and they were consulted. We made posters, we made group work, brainstorm and mind maps. And what have you? And then all these things just kind of disappeared. The same goes for the EESH projects that me and a lot of other teachers made, you know, I can make a proposal, and these EESH projects they have to be good for, you know, the student success and etc. and, to conform to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) standards and what have you and we do these things and these projects, and then they kind of nothing, I mean, they're done, and then nobody will ever hear about them. To work with teachers on actual pedagogical implementations of like what you said, like the competency-based stuff like to really talk about that I think that a lot of times things disappear in committees, and maybe sometimes that's intentional. So, you form a committee, you go like you deal with this important thing and then you never hear from that thing again (TeacherB01).

All the participants in the individual interviews emphasized the importance of teachers' contributions to educational change and involvement in decision-making about their work. However, participants mainly mentioned the lack of consultation earlier in the major reform process and that those consulted did not accurately represent faculty members whose insights and experiences are crucial for successful educational reforms. The following excerpts share some of the other participants' views of involvement and consultation about educational

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changes, particularly concerning the recent Social Science program revisions, the

implementation of which started in the fall semester of 2023.

> I would say that the teacher's voice and participation are very limited. There may be
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> representatives of departments or programs to represent a voice. There can be some
>
> individuals who bring that forward or those sharing higher-level decisions down to the
>
> department members. But this is not widespread, so you'll have representatives at
>
> programs, so like program revision. Then there was this fiasco around our academic
>
> calendar which significantly affects our teaching. For years it's been the individuals
>
> elected to commission of studies and the commission studies body that makes that
>
> decision. And this year there was this uprising of frustration around not having a voice
>
> (TeacherC01).

The literature recommends that the "diversity of participants [contributing] to reform is

important" (Niemi, 2021, p. 19), as teachers feel that they are not adequately represented. Two

additional teacher-participants emphasize this issue below.

> There are so many things that our college needs to work on but there isn't really that
>
> possibility to hear from everyone. And so, there's like a tension, that there isn't that voice
>
> being heard and so there was a frustration around that, and I think we're trying to express
>
> ourselves on these important issues. But it's extremely challenging when there's a lot of
>
> things to voice and a lot of decisions to be made. So, it's a tension there and mostly it's
>
> not participatory (TeacherD01).
>
> Not a great deal, really, I don't feel like we've been consulted sufficiently. There hasn't
>
> been a lot of consultation, there has been collecting of information, but not necessarily
>
> consultation in terms of our feedback as moving forward. I know that there are

committees, but how often they are in contact more with the frontliners, I don't think it's a lot. So, I would say no, based on my experiences, no not a tremendous amount of consultation, minimal (TeacherD02).

TeacherE01 believes there is some involvement since the committees are comprised of teachers. However, this teacher suggested that consultations could occur more often.

But then like the overall, like those who are actually in classrooms, and sometimes it feels like there's not much comments coming from them and it's a matter of time I mean you don't have time to sit a full day at a round table to discuss because you're teaching. So, it's hard like to really get to put your input in there. I mean, yeah, so it feels like well, yes, not like as a single teacher, I don't think I've been consulted that much but I mean it's a long process. It involves tons of people, and different fields, and like there are so many factors to take into account. I cannot figure out how it could yeah, it could be more. But maybe more often instead of like here's a draft? What are your comments? Maybe looping with a few teachers, different ones, and like changing the committees at different steps (TeacherE01).

Similarly, as shared below, another teacher not involved in the process believed insufficient teachers were invited to participate in reform consultation procedures.

Well, I think that with me personally, of course, I was not consulted, but it seems to me that very little in some sense. I have the sensation that even here at the college when we talk about these things, we have the general idea that who wrote these things, someone, who, now but seriously, because I know it's given to me by someone who has never stepped into a classroom. I have the sensation that there is like this gap between people who studied pedagogy, and people who actually are teaching. And because sometimes I

read some stuff, and I say, well, this doesn't really make much sense. I cannot do this in my class right or it's very vague. What do we have to do? I think I can seriously say that even now that I see the reforms in the programs for the Social Sciences, I kind of feel we haven't been consulted enough, because there's a new course which is 10 plus hours shorter, and while some things have been eliminated, but, for example, in my opinion, it's still too much. Just too much material, with less hours, so and it's not only my opinion, but it's you know kind of all my colleagues. So, it seems to me that sometimes these reforms are a bit, you know, to sell these certain kind of programs, right? Make everybody happy except they're short, then you go to teach those things, you realize that you actually can't in the time, that it's not feasible. These changes, it doesn't seem to me that they are profitable for anyone (TeacherE02).

Summary and Conclusion

Findings validate that the CBE framework is being transformed to prepare students to meet the demands of the job market. This framework is utilized to reshape education, primarily emphasizing economic benefits. From a critical pedagogy perspective, the objectives of the CBE model represent a political practice that controls language and consciousness. As participants suggest, such practices do not always welcome their input in reform. Teacher participants' voices indicated an apparent disconnect between imposed reform policies and workplace realities. Teachers' limited involvement in pertinent decision-making processes about their work contributes to this gap. Furthermore, broader working conditions confirm that practices intentionally restrict teachers' involvement and open dialogue about educational changes, undermining the conditions necessary for productive discourse. According to participants, updates are not always forthcoming, even during consultations with department representatives.

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Although participants understand that those in leadership positions cannot listen to each perspective, many echoed that their concerns are mostly left unheard. The findings of this research justify its relevance and contribution to the existing literature and why there must be a sense of urgency to have teachers more actively involved in competency-based reform. Unfortunately, such reforms have shown to be inundated with and fueled by policies, procedures, and power structures where teachers' presence and voices are significantly invisible.

Additionally, societal structure and culture influence teachers' reform actions (Datnow et al., 2002), further suppressing their agency in educational change. As demonstrated, teachers are generally willing to participate in educational change; however, local and external responses to their input and initiatives have not been positive. These interview findings suggested that teachers' willingness to participate in educational change activities will continue to diminish, as there is little systematic support and value for the contributions made.

Theme 2: The Role and Expectations of Education: Subjective Philosophy versus Reality

Currently, the limitations of a market-oriented structure and the imposition of language restrictions plague local educational reforms. This issue is evident in the discrepancy between teachers' workplace realities and mandated educational changes. Teachers' interview narratives disclosed the inconsistencies and inequitable practices exhibited in competency-based learning environments. As such, it is essential to emphasize educators' values, beliefs, and motivations to examine how CBE contradicts their lived realities. Therefore, all participants were asked: *What is your philosophy of education? What should education look like for students?* This level of insight helped me better understand their objection to the status quo and how change is inevitable through their work demonstrating what education *should* represent for *all* students.

Educational reform that results from curriculum changes is significant in structuring and developing the society we all envision. However, educational institutions have failed to implement and sustain these changes (Weingarten, 2014). As Datnow et al. (2002) and Datnow (2012) argue, such critical changes in education cannot be effective and sustained when key stakeholders are acting in isolation. Furthermore, "the legitimacy of reforms can be only achieved if … policymakers, teachers., students, and parents, are invited to be partners from the preparing phase of the reform, and they are heard in different phases, and they are aware of the goals of the reforms" (Niemi, 2021, p. 29). Understanding and valuing teachers' views, beliefs, and classroom practices are fundamental to sustaining meaningful educational changes. The "sustainability of reform cannot be limited to teachers as it is partial, incomplete and biased (Hubers, 2020, p. 6); however, they play an integral role in the equation of successful" change processes" (p. 6). Donovan and Henley (2010) suggest that no matter how practical reform is, it would be unsustainable if teachers cannot identify that changes reflect their beliefs, and the purpose of what education should replicate. Thus, teachers validate personal and professional stakes in ensuring the sustainability of reform programs by seeing their ideologies reflected in educational changes.

It is equally important that such perspectives reveal existing barriers and discrepancies of CBE that conflict with teachers' subjective experiences and educational beliefs. When asked about their educational philosophy, all participants emphasized three key aspects: partnership, community, and student improvement. Many participants interviewed for the research viewed the role of education as a means for the betterment, development, and enrichment of students, both individually and collectively. According to participants, this purpose of education allows students to realize that it is acceptable to make mistakes while discovering their niche within the

learning experiences. Research participants shared that this was a vital purpose of the CÉGEP college system for its flexibility and accommodating structure to provide students with diverse opportunities to discover their professional and individual paths. An impactful view shared by teacherleaderA01 expressed this in the following way:

> I am a huge fan of informal education and love the Quebec educational system, especially the idea of a CÉGEP. It is unique, brilliant, and used to allow for the emergent adults who emerge and use to allow students to make mistakes. So, I start this part; I experiment with it a little bit and discover part of the way through that I am not made to do this. The penalties in the CÉGEP system are so high; the risks are so mitigated that a student has to be on the right path from the beginning and is not allowed to mess up. If they mess up, the penalties are just too big, and we have become more of; I do not want to call us a factory, but there is pressure for us to output and not necessarily output the right product we are using. For me, this is sad. From my perspective, education has become less about facilitating learning and affecting people's lives in a way that better them.

Furthermore, the perceived potential educational opportunities and democratic experiences for students inspired teachers' philosophies. Despite limited participation in decision-making about their work, teachers' educational beliefs demonstrate that they believe the necessary change is inevitable through their voice and classroom practices. As another participant expressed:

> I would say it is a contribution to society on a larger level, especially in a democratic liberal society; the keyword, of course, is critical thinking. But on an individual level, it's contribution to the individual students' development. It's about helping them figure out how to navigate this world, this reality and their personal lives. You know, whether it be in this specific society like now we're in Quebec, Canada, or wherever else they want to

go in life, right? It's supposed to give them, I don't like the word tools it's like a wrench or a hammer so but like the intellectual but also emotional kind of skills to figure out what they want, how to get it, how to evaluate it. In my discipline, it's about widening horizons. But it's also about morals it's about being able to put yourself in other people's shoes, and it's about experience. I would like to make them aware that our reality is made up of and shaped by narratives that we tell each other, that they tell you to tell yourself and it's about understanding that in being able to analyze it and shape it right and diagnosed it (TeacherB01).

As a competency-based structure mandated by the government informs the CÉGEP curriculum, local educational reform and improvements' current culture and social structure inherently contradict teachers' beliefs and subjective realities. A proposed goal of CBE was to provide equal opportunities for all students, including working adults, who wanted to return to school to improve workplace competencies. The claimed role of educational institutions is to be the greatest equalizer; instead, according to Collins (2009), "… they reinforced the inequalities of social structure and cultural order in a given country" (p. 34). Teachers shared philosophy of education emphasized nurturing the overall well-being of students. This educational experience gives students ownership in their development and fosters citizens who can contribute to maintaining an equitable society. However, students cannot experience this type of development if teachers' agency in reform is invisible. Thus, teachers' voices and presence are paramount in challenging and changing this status quo.

Self-Reflection of Teaching Practices

While passionately sharing their philosophy of education, teachers felt this question: *What is your philosophy of education?* allowed them to reflect on their practices, particularly

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regarding equity and providing the best possible experiences for their students. They all believed that improving students' learning experience and calibre significantly relies on their beliefs, practices, and methods. TeacherC01 shared a good example of the role of education.

> I see education as a way of enriching my experience and students' experiences, just like learning opportunities, right? How can we prepare students to be good citizens, like active participants in the world. So, there is this theoretical component, obviously, to education, right? We gain knowledge, we share our thoughts, our viewpoints with others. But I think also, it's this idea of, for me like building community with students enabling different people to have their voices heard, their opinions shared, and just sort of preparing them to be active participants in society.

Education should not be an authoritarian experience or a tool to impose control and create division. TeacherD02 believes that education involves a "collaborative experience where the exchange of ideas takes place, and learners are encouraged to bring their pre-existing knowledge and experiences from where they have come." On the other hand, teacherD01 is of the notion that education is a change agent, as a "sort of future-oriented approach to education so that education can be seen as the possibility to bring about societal change" is adopted. As pointed out by all participants, the educational process is a partnership or a relationship; in this vein, teacherC02 indicated that in the classroom, "a sense of community of inquiry is created, where we're on a journey together to explore a set curriculum, and they have their journey within that process." Both teacherD02 and teacher C02 believe that educational settings should be inviting and safe places for all students to learn and share, despite the social backgrounds from which they come. Furthermore, teacherE02 views education as a tool of equality, as stated:

I see education as the only tool to reach everybody, where people from different social

classes can be together, learn together, accept each other, and know each other, even

before accepting each other, know each other, see each other.

As teacherC02 and teacherB02, along with several other participants, foster a community

of inquiry in their classrooms, the latter convincingly indicated the stance against hierarchy

practices and emphasized: "community because we don't learn alone, we learn in community

with others." Furthermore, through classroom practices, teacherC02 promotes equity and raises

awareness among students by creating a learning environment for:

Listening and sharing where people feel safe to throw their ideas out there into the pot

and have people react to that. So, in that formal way, I think of it as a relationship that

helps us reveal power structures in our world, how we understand the formation of our

identities, and potentially point out, you know, serious problems in our society, both

culturally, economically, even socially, and to potentially look at opportunities to change

those structures or to resist them.

Summary and Conclusion

Teachers' voices substantiate that a new posture in reform decision-making and structural

changes must be adopted. Stimulating this change requires that teachers' suggestions are equally

considered and respected, addressing divisive power relations and increasing professional

development opportunities for teachers to engage in reflexive practices (Roud, 2001). This level

of reflexivity will help them to "take students as far as possible, through quality learning that

leads to the exercise of creative, critical thinking" (Capacchi et al., 2022, p. 157). Research has

confirmed that when teachers adopt this approach, students are shown to achieve curriculum

requirements (Capacchi et al., 2022). Teachers shared stories illustrate that enhanced and

equitable educational practices require fostering partnerships and non-hierarchical dialogues. Consequently, when "partnership in education does not consider the inequality of relationships between each other and existing [inequities] among the beneficiaries [students] of their work, it leads to widening educational inequality rather than reducing it" (Otrel-Cass et al., 2022, p. 4).

Data analysis suggested that teachers' feelings about the relevance of reform are directly connected to their perceived philosophy of the role of education. Generally, whether it is reform, improvements, or the learning experience, teachers view education as a partnership, creating a sense of community and a safe place. However, CBE's objectives do not align with instructors' fundamental beliefs about the essence of education. Overall, the findings emphasized a pressing need for alignment, confirming a contradiction between teachers' beliefs and philosophy of education and imposed neoliberal CBE changes. There is a gap between the mandated goals of CBE and instructors' expectations of implementing such changes. Therefore, imposed CBE reform conflicts with instructors' actual working conditions.

Educational practices should not replicate social hierarchy and power relations. As such, social relations create division and perpetuate injustice and oppression based on class structure. Nevertheless, interference from the government and mandated policies that are not doable for the reality of workplace practices and students' needs continue to inform educational changes. As suggested by participants, such mandated changes promote injustice and are not in the best interests of students. Therefore, to challenge the norm and be the voice of change, teachers must continue participating in similar research and promote their educational philosophies in pedagogical practices.

Themes 3 and 4: Constraints and Challenges of Competency-Based Education

First of all, my decision to combine the two themes is based on multiple reasons: first, to avoid repetition, as there were many cases in which participants' responses were similar, and both themes addressed overall obstacles teachers faced, and second, realizing that the combined findings obtained would provide a more in-depth and substantial analysis to address the same research question: *What are the outcomes of standardized approaches like CBE, and how do teachers view CBE results in terms of equity and social justice*? Based on interview conservations, this thematic discussion outlines teachers' constraints and challenges with CBE and how such practices result in inequitable outcomes.

Research participants' perspectives on whether they could effectively incorporate competency-based requirements into practice varied from possessing the skills and training to having confidence. Although some teachers felt that CBE has much good to offer if structured and implemented around student success, many had reservations about why it is not in the best interests of students. As the literature suggests, with the potential benefits of CBE come numerous constraints and challenges for teachers, particularly regarding effective implementation (Hodge, 2016c; McCall, 2013; Mulder et al., 2009). Responding to my questions, educators shared similar perspectives and experiences, explaining their objections towards CBE. Findings discussed earlier revealed an ongoing hindrance due to teachers' limited agency in educational reform decision-making processes. If teachers are isolated from the reform process, then, of course, the overall academic and professional well-being of their students are impacted. When educators "control the whole process of curriculum construction using [CBE], satisfaction and educational benefits may be claimed" (Hodge, 2016c, p.146). The current CBE model that informs local college education alienates and promotes political and economic

agendas, as suggested by participants. Therefore, compared to the reality of these pedagogical environments, teachers' definitions of CBE revealed alienating and inequitable features.

Teachers' Definitions and Understanding of Competency-Based Education

Generally, students' success and well-being were fundamental to teachers' definitions and understanding of CBE. Such accounts demonstrated their commitment to upholding equity in teaching practices and student opportunities. Some common themes that emerged from teachers' definitions of CBE are that the approach is "focused on outcomes," "acquiring skills," "students being able to do something," and "performance criteria."

TeacherA01 stated, "for me, true CBE is a flexible structure and allows students to advance at their own pace and progress in learning after demonstrating mastery." Similarly, teacherA02 shared teacherA01's belief, "CBE is about flexibility and the ownership of choice to students based on their aspirations and accommodating their needs." Nevertheless, despite their understanding of CBE, both feel that the current system's design does not reflect the intended purpose of the competency approach. All teachers demonstrated positive perceptions about CBE if structured and executed properly and democratically around student success. The following excerpts of teachers' definitions and perceived understanding of CBE exposed the lack of alignment in competency-based practices and justified the need for more teacher involvement and training.

> So, true competency-based says two major things: 1) you are able to discover about yourself whether or not you have the competencies and with that comes the notion that I have discovered that I do not have the competencies, so I am in the wrong path. So, I should be able to change, ask and not be penalized, but we do not do that. 2) an assessment, but the assessment is there to say when you have attained the competency, it

is not like, so three strikes you are out, it basically states that you are not ready at this point in time, you need to take the time to get there and once you get there, you can go on to the next step, level or process that you have to master. But our system is not designed that way (TeacherA01).

Similarly, according to two additional teacher participants:

So, in every learning outcome there's knowledge embedded in it, there are skills embedded in it, and there are attitudes embedded in it, and the competency is the knowledge, the skills, and the attitudes embedded in that are learning outcome. And so that is what needs to be turned into learning activity and is an assessment right? The competency is a well thought out learning outcome. But you need to know what's underneath the learning outcome (TeacherB02).

It's a kind of teaching that focuses on outcomes, in the sense, what you can do after this course more than what knowledge you will acquire. You should be able to use them in different contexts and disciplines. Disciplines can not be taught by focusing on abilities through competencies, knowledge, and the process it takes to achieve the competencies are important (TeacherE02).

Additionally, another teacher's response highlighted the discrepancy in CBE practices that are not in the best interest of students:

My view of competency-based education is throwing out learning and education and teaching for exam preparation, their version of education. So, I saw this as a perfect example of capitalism as a form of education, right? It is the values associated with capitalism, with the values that are now imposed on education (TeacherC02).

Based on the above-stated views of participants, it is apparent that one of the significant constraints and challenges is the variations in perceptions of what CBE is, as well as the lack of understanding and clear expectations. Teachers' responses also revealed possible inconsistencies in their classroom practices centred around competencies. Several participants communicated that the competencies are "vague, general, broad and do not reflect the reality of various disciplines." For example, one teacher noted, "I am not advocating to get rid of competencies, but to write them in clear language; this would make a great difference for teachers" (TeacherB02). Considering this, teacher participants identified several constraints to their implementation of CBE:

Constraints

- all disciplinary programs are government-prescribed programs that tell you exactly how the programs will be laid out.

- teachers' limited involvement in program design and development

- the restriction on course hours and which disciplines can teach a course.

- mandated competencies do not reflect the whole process that is involved in attaining a competency.

- the formulation of competencies that go directly to performance criteria is confusing and misleading.

- depending on the program and discipline, some competencies are vague, broad, and generic, making them impractical.

- lack of consultation, review process, adjustment, and revisions after issuing a reform policy or guideline

Furthermore, as teachers shared definitions of CBE, they reflected on their experiences and ongoing challenges.

Challenges

- The programs and courses are not structured to allow students to learn at their own pace,

- The course hours assigned are not feasible for the material required to be covered,

- In the framework of CBE, the structure of the CÉGEP system fails to provide flexibility, and not doing so falls short of meeting students' needs,

- Lacks provisions for teachers to modify, adjust or clarify competencies to accommodate learning needs,

- Progress in CBE settings is blocked when teachers have little input in educational changes,

- Some competencies provide little to no flexibility, making assessment measures unfair to students,

- The assumption is that all students will advance at the same level, and pace is in the structure of competencies,

- The lack of clear documentation to guide the structure of competency implementation makes it difficult to achieve all the objectives effectively and

- The competencies are very general, so they would not draw attention to the variety of different needs that our students have, which becomes another layer to pay attention to that is not necessarily built into our course from the beginning, and adjusting halfway does not work, either.

The Lack of Equity and Social Justice in the Competency-Based Model

Educators' voices and experiences provided a concrete understanding of how the absence of agency in educational reform inherently contributes to inequity and social injustice. This level of exclusion can potentially "change the dynamics of reform initiatives" that do not result in improved conditions (Datnow, 2012, p. 196). However, as suggested by some participants, this limited inclusion in educational change may be an intentional attempt to preserve the status quo and/or advance the neoliberal education agenda. Furthermore, teachers perceived that the discrepancy and inequity of the competency-based model are embedded in the curricula.

TeacherA02 stated, "as a government entity you can issue a very nice manual that is well-written, but how is it received, how is it being applied, what are the gaps that are being identified and practiced and how are you responding to those identified gaps by doing revisions to the policy? Such a post-review process is non-existent in these reform practices.

The benefits, experiences, and self-paced learning proposed by CBE contradict teachers' lived realities. Two other participants believed that the CBE approach is about "self-discovery in the learning process" (TeacherA01 & TeacherA02); however, the current structure reflects "here is this, this is how we operate, come in, meet the standards, and then you are out" (TeacherA02). Moreover, some teachers found that assessing students' competency levels using the same approach can be challenging and inequitable. Four teachers interviewed for the research project mentioned that some students would not fully grasp the competency, and others would need more time. These students eventually are penalized grade-wise or must repeat the course. Therefore, teacher reviews suggested that the structure and time constraints factor do not make incorporating alternative assessments based on needs feasible. They also found measuring

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students' competency achievement difficult because it often serves as an injustice to students. Such experiences demonstrated that equity and justice are lacking from the onset, as there is no review process to inquire about possible challenges and gaps. One educator described the absence of a follow-up reform assessment as "a disconnect that tells me teachers' participation or involvement is minimal, if not lacking" (TeacherA02). Teachers' collective responses also revealed discrepancies between mandated policies and workplace realities.

Additionally, coupled with the constraints and challenges, educators shared some critical perspectives illuminating the lack of equity and justice in the current structure of CBE. For instance, teacherA01 shared that:

An area where our educational system is not equitable is the limited opportunities and resources provided for students depending on the area they live in; it should not matter where you are coming from; you should have equal access to these types of systems.

Similarly, on the issue of structural inequity, another teacher participant explained the following:

There is also the fact that because a lot of the guidelines are not translated in English, tells you that there is an exclusion of a certain segment of teachers who teach in the Anglophone CÉGEP system. So, just by looking at the lack of documentation in English, it exemplifies and shows you by evidence that there is a segment of teachers who were not included in the process and not thought of in the dissemination of the process, which is a very sad thing (TeacherleaderA02).

Furthermore, in challenging the neoliberal or market framework of CBE reform, the following two teachers provided these insights:

The teacher is no longer the expert. I know why the competencies are being imposed, and I do not want my students to become these little models of competency outcome, I don't

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want them to be shaped that way. I think it's deforming them in a lot of ways, and it's not

helpful for what they actually need to do in life in a specific kind of way. I am content

and student-driven and not competency-driven (TeacherC02).

The government literature refers to CBE as outcomes; outcomes are outputs, it is a

product. And the competency-based approach, I am not against it, but I think that it can

work if it is executed the way it was intended. The issue in Quebec is that not everyone

understands it, but the system really is not set up to support it (TeacherleaderA01).

Despite teachers' challenges and constraints when implementing CBE changes, this discussion

demonstrates their commitment to addressing students' needs. The above analysis and the

following discussion confirm teachers' ongoing struggle with incorporating practices and

equitable changes for all students.

Negotiating In the Margins: Reform Initiatives and Addressing Classroom Realities

Overall, the findings explained how teachers negotiate daily between doing what is in the

best interests of students' learning and fulfilling reform mandates. This constant negotiation

occurs for teacher participants, especially concerning the transfer of knowledge and learning,

competency achievement, and acknowledgment of existing classroom dynamics among students.

For example, while it is common practice that some students are expected by their families to

contribute financially by working and earning an income or taking care of younger siblings, it

does not make it right, as such factors potentially directly impact their learning and everyday

experiences (Farooq et al., 2011; Gobena, 2018; Rahman et al., 2023). Students forced into these

situations tend to have little time and effort to complete course requirements adequately, thus

impeding their overall performance. Additionally, some students will not grasp the conceptual

knowledge necessary to demonstrate effective competency attainment.

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Two common challenges that some participants shared that they faced are: (i) the decision of having to penalize students grade-wise who are unable to remain on task as their peers without being able to assess the underlying difficulties, and (ii) struggle with whether to temporary digress from current curriculum demands and revert to teaching students basic conceptual knowledge that is necessary to move forward effectively. These are just a few tensions teachers grapple with daily, and they should not be placed in this predicament. Additionally, as teachers shared, the lack of resources and limited power of what they could do to address such issues only exacerbates the problem for students. My research study's findings elucidate the conflicts teachers encounter when negotiating to implement educational reform and address social inequities among students. Moving forward with the status quo and overlooking such inequalities thus increases educational disparities among disadvantaged students.

Moreover, when government-imposed changes do not consider such challenges or make it feasible for teachers to have the capacity to make the relevant adjustments, findings expose the continued inequities such hegemonic practices pose for students. Furthermore, when structural and curriculum changes are irresponsive to changing socioeconomic dynamics in the homes these students come from, students' achievement and educational trajectories are adversely affected (Farooq et al., 2011; Rahman et al., 2023). Therefore, if student success is essential at the local and governmental levels, then such inequalities must be addressed more practically, thus demanding more tangible involvement of teachers in decision-making. The literature supports that human and material resources can help with the [effective] implementation of new educational content required by [reform changes] (Capacchi et al., 2022, p. 145). Teachers more involved in structural and reform changes in their workplace can better prepare students to embrace such changes. Teacher participants' responses suggested that piloting new educational

initiatives to pre-test reform changes could help identify inequities and obstacles beforehand. This approach would also help teachers better understand the changes required to implement and better equip them to do so.

Furthermore, participants' hesitation and negotiation to implement new educational changes could be attributed to the limited contribution to the reform process. Teachers' interview responses show the challenges experienced with interpreting and enacting reform initiatives in ways that would help struggling students and promote equality. Another important finding that evolved from this research is that when teachers are given predesign educational changes, with little to no opportunity to participate extensively in the initial planning, the above-discussed unresolved problems persist. The obstacles teachers encountered further revealed discrepancies between policy demands and the reality of what is happening in practice. The literature contends that important weak links exist between policy demands and practice in educational institutions (Capacchi et al., 2022; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Due to the delimiting role, collaboration, and power of CÉGEP teachers in policy reform development, such weaknesses will continue to exist. Research indicates that teachers are wary about introducing new pedagogical changes that they "have had little input and control over in their daily work" (Capacchi et al., 2022, p. 155). Therefore, it is such experiences as this that "can impoverish the development of thought [in education and] deprive teaching of innovative practices" (Capacchi et al., 2022, p. 156).

Summary and Conclusion

Although CBE can potentially revolutionize student learning, its standardized competency-based practices reflect an agenda that does not genuinely promote social change. I argued in chapter one that standardized approaches like CBE should not be accepted uncritically (as all things good) regarding students' best interests. Such methods, like CBE, reduce the

educational process by minimizing the importance of knowledge to emphasize workplace competencies. The previous analysis examined the experiences and viewpoints of college instructors in a competency-based setting. Some inequitable competency-based practices identified by teachers are the lack of a post-reform consultation process, the isolating approach used to structure competencies, and the language used in developing policy documents. Findings also show that prioritizing competency development can limit students' success and constrain their potential, leading to opportunity disparities.

Additionally, as with any educational reform implementation, obstacles are inevitable, as shared by teachers. However, participants voiced various ongoing constraints and challenges that contributed explicitly to poor and no consultation and involvement from teachers. A significant finding echoed in my research is that teachers' willingness and positive attitudes toward implementing new educational changes correlate directly with their engagement in the developmental process.

On the other hand, as teachers shared their definitions and understanding of CBE, the uncertainty about providing an accurate response was a concern expressed by at least six participants. I assured them that the question aimed not to assess their accuracy but to identify the alienating nature of CBE environments and the need for more training. Findings support the view that teachers will do the required job to the best of their ability regardless of the limitations. Despite the constraints and challenges, some ways teachers have incorporated competencies in classroom practices include backward design, assessments, class activities, collaborative learning, blended learning, seminar discussions, and presentations. However, teachers' accounts confirmed that no matter how effective the reform is, they will not maintain practices that are not in the well-being of students and perpetuate injustice. Therefore, doing so requires participants to

have the necessary resources, training, and self-empowerment, which is discussed more in the subsequent sections.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Theme 5: The Need for Resources and Pedagogical Development Training**</p>

My research revealed that adequate resources and practical professional development and training are two essential components that are critical to maintaining coherent educational practices and teachers' sustained relevance. In support, the research literature states that educational institutions that sustain reform changes and consistently obtain favourable outcomes "provide teachers the proper training and support and the needed continuous [professional] development to ensure that they can meet the needs of students" (Weingarten, 2014, p. 7). An interview-based study involving 15 teachers from five Swedish schools explored a local reform project known as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and concluded that teacher professional development is a crucial element for successful school reform (Gericke & Torbjörnsson, 2022; Mogren et al., 2019). The lack of support in this area also contributes to the "deprofessionalization of teachers, which impedes students learning and denies access to high-quality education and resources" (Weingarten, 2014, p. 8). However, nearly all participants talked about/expressed the lack of systematic and valuable professional development and training, and their concerns about providing an accurate understanding of CBE reflected the need for improvements.

Teachers' feedback indicated that relevant pedagogical training is necessary due to limited involvement in reform design and underrepresentation during consultation processes. They firmly believe that this will assist in providing them with the necessary tools to effectively do their jobs when it comes to implementing educational changes. All participants indicated they had not participated in any college-based training or workshop centred on CBE. Several teachers

added that there were a few occasions when competencies were discussed on pedagogical days but at a very abstract level. Some teachers who obtained CBE professional development stated that these were personal initiatives that were not feasible for most teachers without release time.

TeacherD02 thought, "if a competency-based system is to be taken seriously, there must be training for teachers to understand what that means and to know how to incorporate it into their curriculum." Unfortunately, the uncertainty of effectively incorporating competencies into classroom practices continues to loom among many participants. TeacherC01 stressed that as "professionals and frontliners in the educational system, we are not even comfortable defining these terms central to our practice." Due to the lack of a clear understanding of the application expectations of competencies, the same teacher stated, "we often have to validate what students are doing and why they are doing it by comparing it to the workplace." Therefore, teachers find it unfortunate that workplace skills must be used to justify the relevance of their everyday work practices.

Furthermore, teacher participants collectively shared that professional development opportunities must be accessible to faculty and administrators, thus meaning more resource provisions to ensure that release time is available to do so. For example, teacherD01 stated, "teachers generally do not have the time to participate in professional development exercises such as continuously revising courses." The same teacher pointed out that "the specific resources we have access to are minimal, so no resource is given to teachers: not financial, not time and no training, especially the latter on how to support students with special needs" (TeacherDO1). This analysis highlighted the shortcomings of policies and decision-making on resource allocation and professional support for teachers. Teachers are naturally reflective beings and would make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of students. Nevertheless, their responses emphasized

the need for relevant training and professional development to have a sense of self-competence and confidence to enact curriculum changes in their classrooms.

According to my research findings, at the CÉGEP college level, "many teachers are content specialists" (TeacherA01), lacking critical knowledge and training as trained teachers. In addition, several participants agreed that there is limited to no professional training and support for these individuals to help them transition into their new roles as teachers. Four out of ten participants believed that many teachers' lack of a pedagogical background impacts the quality and effectiveness of classroom practices. Two teachers stated that "hiring practices need to be reformed by employing more teachers with an educational background or having them commit to obtaining the necessary training upon entering the college system." Similarly, for teacherleaderA01, CÉGEP colleges':

> Ability to facilitate elements such as Performa training and blended learning training to teachers and administrators need to be made possible. So, what is lacking is the commitment on the part of the college and the college system to encourage this type of pedagogical development so that we have more pedagogues in the CÉGEP system. We have a ton of subject experts in everything but education.

Generally, teachers, especially those trained in pedagogy, realize that understanding the dynamics of education as a field is essential to maintain consistency, alignment, and perhaps even equity in practices. Nevertheless, while some teachers support the idea that having a relevant educational background brings added value, they do not suggest that teachers lacking such experiences should not be employed. However, they recommend that seeking improvement in this area within a designated time after being hired should be part of the employment contract. Furthermore, training and professional development are sometimes necessary to help teachers

feel confident and empowered and that their classroom practices are relevant. It is not to be confused with challenging their competency and capability as teachers or discipline experts. TeacherleaderA01 adequately supported this view by stating that:

> If I go through a physics degree, for example, I will not spend my time completing a physics degree looking at pedagogy because I am getting a physics degree. But when I decide on becoming a teacher, there is an element in my job that requires me to understand some pedagogy. So, in that, continuous training and support to teachers is essential and crucial so that they can always be up to date with what they are teaching and why they are teaching it. But not just that, but also have a sufficient understanding to challenge what they have been told to teach and to find ways to understand how to take a policy like this or a guideline like this or this competency and how do I apply it differently in order to cater to the needs of my students. To afford that flexibility to a teacher, you need to equip them with knowledge and that knowledge will only come through continuous training.

The "continuous improvement of teachers is key to high-quality student learning; therefore, resource policies must foster healthy funding" (Weingarten, 2014, p. 7) allocation. Acquiring this level of transparency demands that teachers be more actively involved in decision-making.

Competing for Resources and Inequitable Practices

The above discussion also justifies the need for professional training and development to be accessible across the board in college institutions. However, the distribution of resources is not clearly understood or conveyed, and there seems to be a level of inequitable practices. During the interview, responses from several participants highlighted the inequitable nature of release time distribution and how this deficiency contributes to other shortcomings. For example,

in objection to colleagues competing for resources, one participant firmly stated that this is not right. Another teacher suggested that in many cases, the same select few teachers receive resources to work on projects and participate on various committees. TeacherC01 recommended that "implementing a healthy rotation process to get a diversity of voices, opinions, and perspectives to weigh in on essential things" is a plausible approach to maintaining equity. Similarly, teacherA01 emphasized that "equity is not just for our student population and changing the education to respond to it, it is also for the resources supporting the educational system, namely, our faculty. So, practices are not equitable."

Teachers' narratives suggest that when it comes to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), we cannot just talk about it. However, every aspect of our institution must reflect and be representative of these standards. Overall, teacher participants' responses suggested that educational equity should be visible daily in workplace practices. They believe that equitable educational reform should encompass the following.

> It comes down to consultation, teachers must be invited to the table. Also, as teachers recognizing and knowing that we have agency, but also being given that agency by getting our opinions and perspectives. There needs to be a variety of voices represented to reflect existing diversity at the college level. A level of accountability should be required from those involved in decision making processes (TeacherC01).

Moreover, teachers feel that the extent of support rendered to all faculty members demonstrates inequity. For example, one participant perceived that teachers who feel most supported are the ones who have release time to work on projects and various committees. Consistent with this notion, two teachers awarded an annual resource allocation, state that access to professional training has improved, but they did not view it as a concern. However, one

teacher acknowledged that the bias in response could be due to being a recipient of such resources. This response and other feedback shared by participants demonstrated that teachers with release time resources conveyed little to no issue concerning professional development offerings. This indifference in teachers' attitudes and concern toward access to adequate professional development resources is problematic, as it shows the procedures used are unfair, not in the best interests of all teachers, and only a select few teachers are reaping the benefits.

> The decision to determine which projects are eligible for resources or who receives release time seems to be a systemic issue propagated by the process as the same handful of people receive funding or a large amount of it (TeacherC01).

Summary and Conclusion

One of the common reasons for allocating resources is that public funding prioritizes programs and projects that will meet immediate local needs. Unfortunately, this response aligns with neoliberal perspectives and shows how external interests influence education. The lack of information, inadequate training, and insufficient consultation are significant contributing factors to the variations in teachers' understanding and incorporation of competencies and other educational changes. All teachers, even college personnel, agree that there needs to be significant changes and improvements in resource availability and distribution. Moreover, the findings indicate that CBE outcomes display unfair and isolating characteristics, as fewer resources limit collaboration opportunities and adequate professional development. There is a collective plea to improve access to release time resources to allow more teachers to participate in local discourse on reform and pedagogical development and training. Some participants argued that there needs to be transparency in allocating resources, and teacher representatives should be a part of this decision-making process. Otherwise, the outcome of this process creates tension and division

among faculty members. Hence, teachers believe that a more transparent and equitable distribution of resources and improvements in the selection process is essential.

Theme 6: Promote Teachers' Work Credibility and Success Stories

A theme that stood out and resonated from teachers' narrations emphasized more tangible acknowledgements for the projects and academic work teachers do to help transform and improve education locally. Nevertheless, this theme is essential because what teachers shared concerning colleagues echoed collective empowerment and collaborative knowledge construction. These spontaneous interactions allowed teachers to critically assess their classroom practices and enact agency with imposed reform policies. They believe more awareness should be placed on local educational initiatives that improve practice and increase student success. Therefore, participants emphasized that sharing the incredible success stories of colleagues in more tangible ways is lacking.

For example, participants further proposed that the information of teachers who have resources to work on projects related to student success or educational changes should be made readily available. Publicizing this information will keep everyone well-informed on what teachers are doing, how these projects progress, and the future outcomes or success stories. In addition, teachers believe that pedagogical days should not be the only time the faculty is privy to this information. Furthermore, they asserted that recognizing the efforts made toward student success demonstrates value, support, and appreciation for teachers' contributions.

Teachers do all this work, and they produce results. And those results could and should be shared at ped days and it's not really happening. I got a grant to work on a software-related project with another teacher. And I think it's going to be great, but you know it

has to be shown to people like you and other teachers. It must go somewhere. It has

actually made a difference (TeacherB01).

The same teacher added, "there are projects that show students are getting better, which means

that teachers are doing a great job. So, these are the kind of projects I think we should foster and

highlight" (TeacherB01). Furthermore, when the pandemic started and abruptly disrupted face-

to-face education, teachers ventured into many self-learning, self-discovery, and self-training

exercises to test different instructional delivery modalities. Based on participants' feedback,

teachers developed some exciting and transforming ideas that should be further advanced.

Today coming out of the pandemic they're realizing the value of these tools, and how

they can be properly used. But we also need to be able to show them how to reproduce

what they were doing before and improve upon it by using not only new models, but the

existing teaching models, so take what they were using, if they're more comfortable

continuing with what they were doing, finding ways of adjusting it to make it more

relevant to the population, and to make it easier for teachers to develop it and to deliver it

(TeacherleaderA01).

Some participants felt that random conversations with colleagues and hearing about their success

stories with classroom practices were important enabling factors that supported them. They

spoke positively of the advice, guidance, and encouragement received from these unplanned

communications.

On the other hand, although teachers' responses on professional development and

training were not uplifting, the positive experiences about interaction and networking with

colleagues were evident in their responses. Most participants indicated that locally held

workshops and pedagogical days have not necessarily provided them with ways to exert and/or

showcase agency in their pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, they believe these events allowed them to interact with colleagues in ways they would usually not be able to do. Moreover, such collaboration has resulted in sharing ideas, strategies, and feedback on what worked in the classroom and what did not. Research also suggests that professional development should be "organized in ways that draw upon teacher collaboration" (Gericke & Torbjörnsson, 2022; Datnow, 2012, p. 195). Therefore, teachers' responses to the benefits of professional development revealed that these events had been a resource that facilitated networking and the sharing of successful classroom practices with colleagues. Perhaps pedagogical days should promote this collaboration that cultivates teachers' understanding and exerts agency by sharing experiences with colleagues. Additionally, research supports this type of interaction by referring to it as "sharing good practice" (Woolner et al., 2018, p. 234).

Moreover, during the interview, three participants suggested creating a professional community with only teachers that would encourage this collaborative working and reflection. TeacherB01 recommended organizing:

> Departmental pedagogical week, that involves teachers within the department as speakers, who share on some ideas that they tried and were successful. But there can also be outside speakers from other departments. The essential approach is to ensure that external guest speakers possess a background in pedagogy, this is a vital criterion.

Summary and Conclusion

Participants emphasized that "teachers are creative, and some of their colleagues are involved in some amazing work" that either makes a difference among other teachers or contributes to change in students' performance. They contended that credibility and value must be placed on their work, starting with sharing success stories. The literature suggests that any

approach contrary to this will "limit the practice of cross-curricular teamwork, reduce chance interactions, and [hinder] deliberate collaboration …" (Woolner et al., 2018, p. 235). The above analysis provided some positive effects of teachers' engagement and local involvement in transformative initiatives.

Additionally, teacherleaderA02 emphasized the importance of "creating a professional community of practice" for this type of networking to continue regularly. These factors should be integral to future professional development activities as they can potentially reinforce a sense of support and value. Overall, teachers believe these local small-scale initiatives can be vital in enacting relevant and equitable changes. The data analyzed, and findings presented in this chapter discussed the trajectory that shaped teachers' workplace experiences and how such practices limit or constrain their involvement. Teachers' narratives also suggested that to improve the inequitable practices, they must find alternative ways to address and resist dominant power relations that sustained this culture. Consequently, the following two themes address how recognizing teachers' presence, voice, and input can contribute to equitable and sustained educational changes.

Themes 7 and 8: Challenging the status quo: Amplify Teachers' Voices

The discussion of the following two themes addresses the research question: *What changes/modifications in the current CBE model could lead to more equitable and sustainable reform efforts*? While the question pertains to changes in the CBE model, instructors oppose the narrow perspective of educational changes and suggest that the CBE model should embody a more inclusive framework. Based on interview findings, instructors firmly believe equitable and sustained changes in the CBE model can be achieved by first addressing underlying concerns and issues. As such, findings indicate that the problem is not with the actual model, but the

inequitable practices and changes embedded in and transmitted through it. These inequitable

practices can manifest in various ways, such as unequal access to resources, which results in

inadequate release time for research work and other professional development and exclusionary

policies that isolate teachers from involvement in reform. For example, enhancing professional

development and training provisions while involving teachers in shaping competencies is vital to

driving positive change. This approach values teachers as change agents in educational

improvement, demonstrates a commitment to successful school reform, and provides the

necessary support to teachers. This realization significantly shifts the focus of my discussion to

the crucial need for resources and training, amplifies faculty voices, and challenges the status

quo.

As neoliberal conditions continue to shape CBE reform, teacher participants' stories

report that educational and societal inequities are perpetuated, and their voices are marginalized.

Such findings align with supporting the status quo where dominant practices and decision-

making processes are maintained. As a result, I decided to combine themes seven and eight

discussions because I believe that bringing out and/or amplifying teachers' voices is a significant

agent of change to challenge the status quo and enhance and sustain equitable reform in CBE

settings. Therefore, the inequitable and market-driven framework dictating the direction of

education further justifies the urgency for more research that strengthens teachers' voices and

experiences.

Moreover, my research findings demonstrate that incorporating teachers' ideas and

having them participate in educational reform strengthens their commitment to ensuring

successful changes. For example, the literature supports this conclusion as teacher-led reform

movements focusing on collaborative planning and democratic decision-making have been

successful (Sung et al., 2022). As teachers often take on the role of implementers of imposed reform, a teacher-oriented approach goes against the rhetoric of mandated educational changes. Sung et al. (2022) indicate that this strategy reflects "the emerging concepts of teachers as change agents as [their professional] identity, perspectives and visions of schooling … are [essential factors in educational] improvements" (p. 402). So, it appears that adoption and implementation are positive when reforms acknowledge and incorporate teachers' values, beliefs, and views. The significant elements in which teachers believe amplifying their voices can challenge the injustice perpetuated by neoliberal practices and foster more just and sustained reform are presented in themes seven and eight of thematic discussions.

Theme 7: Challenging the Status Quo

Competency-Based Education and the Influence of Neoliberal Marketization

Education, which includes having access to schooling and participating in decision-making, is supposed to be one of the most important democratic social rights (Callender, 2014; Sheppard et al., 2021; Weingarten, 2014) afforded to everyone. However, findings based on interview data show that recent educational reform mandates at the college level in Quebec are relatively indifferent to the demands and reality of educators and students. While standardized approaches like CBE are standard practice in higher education due to their potential added value to workplace preparation, teachers' perspectives and experiences remain poorly investigated in these learning environments (Ham & Dekkers, 2019; Pokes et al., 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2022; see also, Hodge, 2016c). Thus, the lack of research supports the need for further exploration of teachers' perspectives and voices.

Interviews with teachers further explained how neoliberal principles through CBE inform and define what students learn, to what extent, and at what pace. As suggested by teachers and

corroborated by existing research, such reforms have contributed to profound consequences regarding inequitable practices, budget cuts, limited resources, reduced course offerings and hours in some programs, and increased competition within and among colleges for funding allocation. These are distinctive features of neoliberal conceptualization; as teacherB01 stated, "capitalism, of course, kind of fosters this sense of competitive thinking, and so on. But like we are supposed to be beyond that right, as an educational institution." Another teacher reiterated the lack of equity exhibited by neoliberal ideologies.

> It is hard work if you believe in justice and an equitable world because it disrupts the comfort and privilege enjoyed. This is all connected to the neoliberal process of organizing institutions. Neoliberalism has no interest in upholding justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. It is interested in competition, material accumulation and fighting for resources (TeacherC02).

Teachers' feedback suggested that this level of competitiveness in accessing resources to help improve students' instructional practices should have no place in education. Therefore, some participants believed that the democratic nature of CÉGEP college education continues to be challenged by imposed marketization policies and labour force needs. Based on reflective interactions with teachers, the following analysis amplifies their voices and experiences.

What Drives Educational Changes?

The significant emphasis on developing and increasing specific workplace competencies and sustaining economic competition continues to market higher education as the vehicle to achieve these objectives. This marketization of education is a key contributor to the "emergence of students as consumers" and driving the charge toward neoliberal educational policies (Mintz, 2021, p. 80). For example, local reform measures that have led to restructuring programs and

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reduced public (government) funding have been shown to transform college education dramatically. These neoliberal features have infiltrated educational practices; thus, promoting competitiveness among colleges and education as a democratic public good is diminishing. The central theme underpinning education as a public good refers to it as "an engine of economic success … particularly when its task is to train future workers to fill necessary market positions" (Mintz, 2021, p. 83). This limited trajectory of CBE for the marketization of skills and "training for employability" (Mintz, 2021; see also, Levidow, 2002, p. 227) presents implications for "access to higher education" (Mintz, 2021, p. 84) and equitable practices.

Generally, all participants believed that the needs and betterment of individual students do not drive current educational reforms. Instead, many teachers contend that decision-making is shaped by external interests, benefits, and profits without considering student success or needs. Hodge (2016c) referred to his 2007 research, confirming that "one of the salient features that make CBE a hallmark of neoliberal education discourse is permeability to be controlled by interests outside the institutions and practices of education" (p. 143). The use of educational institutions as a mechanism to advance economic and workforce interests continues to hinder progress and equitable practices. The following response from a participant elucidates the presence of the market-driven nature of CBE, which is also the central argument of my research study.

> The proposed benefits of CBE are not in the best interests of students because the model is not for students' benefit beyond marketability. The benefit of an education is immeasurable, and you cannot reduce it to a grade or object. We are creating a society that is obsessed with getting a job and material gain (TeacherC02).

Furthermore, with the belief that education should be about student success no matter what that may look like or how long it takes, some CÉGEP have adapted programs to facilitate students learning. However, current reforms that are significantly structured from the government level limit colleges from having this flexibility in making decisions that are in students' best interest. For example, teacherA01 shared that "the government is changing the flexible nature of many of these programs," which will soon become non-existent. The teacher participant added, "the issue I have with this is that the current offering of some of these programs that cater to students who would not otherwise attend CÉGEP will disappear" (TeacherA01). Unfortunately, the current CBE structure informing curricula at the CÉGEP level cannot accommodate some of these students. As explained below by a teacher participant, adjustments are incorporated to address the reality colleges face.

> There was no hope that these students would end up in university, but because of the program and the way that it has been developed, these students are given the time to mature, prove their competency in the area of study, find their pathways, work with their strength and they find the need to continue; this is going to disappear. And this is going to disappear because the current government is taking curriculum and clamping down on it, they are being very rigid with the curriculum (TeacherleaderA01).

While the competencies incorporated in various CÉGEP programs provide flexibility, the demands are relatively rigid and not structured in a way that makes it easy to accommodate learning diversity.

> Some students need a longer time to develop the skill set to get there, but our system does not do that, if you are not successful the first time around, you are removed or flushed out off the program. It is not at the pace of the student, but at the pace where we have

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considered as a normal progression and where the majority of the students would actually

be based on how we are training them. And they have a cut off here, so, if a student is not

ready, that student is held back, while the rest of students move on. But looking at CBE, I

would say that the key thing is that it is a flexible structure, it allows students to progress

in their learning after demonstrating mastery and sometimes they can do it at their own

pace, but the nature of our educational system dictates that they have to advance at a pace

that has been established to be at a fair pace to allow students to progress (TeacherA01).

Furthermore, there is a consensus that the structure of competencies and reform changes

coincide with neoliberal economic perspectives. Moreover, as teachers suggest, the new reform

mandates have obvious shortcomings due to the lack of consultation. For example, the following

excerpt addresses the neoliberal language incorporated in communications between teachers and

college personnel.

> But like every time I hear, and I'm not by far, not the only teacher who thinks like that
>
> every time you hear them call students clients. Every time I hear them use business
>
> jargon when they're talking about education, it is giving me goosebumps right? This is
>
> not what we're supposed to be about (TeacherB01).

Additionally, concerning the market-based language used in college settings, teacherC02

maintained similar views as teacherB01:

> Teachers are being referred to as content specialists and content deliverers and students
>
> are called clients. But this is how market-driven language and ideas filter in, they infect
>
> the spheres, and they are coded language. Then when you object to this type of
>
> perspective, you are called, one of them, which is one of the ways those fundamentally
>
> opposed values insert themselves in our everyday (TeacherC02).

The following excerpt from teacherB02 shares how neoliberal standards shape CBE practices:

> Yes, CBE does have perspectives of neoliberalism embedded, especially when the words such as target, retention rate and graduation rates are used, those are seen as industry type concepts. The use of these concepts does not focus on student success in terms of learning quality and meaningful assessments. The competencies are structured with the goal to meet societal needs. The adoption of a market-driven framework in education is not appropriate and would not be my priority at all. It's coming from people who say that we need these types of workers, and we need to educate a certain number of students to become these workers and that's market driven (TeacherB02).

Furthermore, based on the two narrations below, teachers believe neoliberal educational practices limit students' learning experiences and contribute to inequity. For example, as one teacher participant stated:

> Due to not enough consultation, there is a new course with more than ten reduced hours. Some topics have been eliminated, but there is still too much material to cover in a lesser number of hours. This view is also shared by all my colleagues (TeacherE02).

Another teacher inferred how workplace preparation practices are taking precedence over quality teaching:

> When you review the competencies and objectives from the ministry, on one hand, you could argue that there's nothing overtly terrible or wrong about some of them, particularly in general education. But the overall point of those ministerial guidelines seemed to be about a market-based analysis of career opportunities. And then we must modify the teaching to fit those, so we would lose that general aspect of learning (TeacherC02).

TeacherE01 stated that discussions on CBE have mainly focused on "what should be covered and how many hours, but very little about the actual method and its implementation." Teachers are under pressure to get students to pass through their programs in the shortest time possible. Such pressure is demonstrated in reduced course hours and the elimination of courses in some programs. Teacher participants believe education should provide a broad experience for students, and the ideologies driving competency-based practices limit this type of learning. The notion that learning should significantly focus on specific competencies for "job preparation is a bad drift of CBE," argued teacherE01. The same teacher viewed competency as "autonomous, where students should be able to see the big picture" beyond the specificity of the competency. This participant agreed that "CBE is beneficial for the job market," but it should not solely be applied in education to meet immediate needs; otherwise, students lose the opportunity "to see the big picture." TeacherE01 believed incorporating CBE should reflect global competencies that allow students to transfer their knowledge to other fields rather than one specific area.

The points discussed above demonstrate that teachers believe that general education is essential for students learning, as it equips them with diverse competencies to use in various settings beyond the workplace. However, as teacherE01 and several other participants suggested, the current structure of competencies limits students as there are cases where they are too vague or specific. The research literature supports this by arguing that when "formulating competencies are taken out of the hands of educators, the links between content and actual workplace practices are weakened, leading to standards that were too vague to promote excellence …" (Hodge, 2016c, p. 152). Therefore, teachers' perspectives confirmed the presence of the neoliberal element in educational reform, as changes made minimize the relevance of general education, reduce course hours, and delete essential content knowledge.

Theme 8: Amplify Teachers' Voices and Increased Empowerment Sustainable Educational Reform: The Move Forward

Educational reform decisions seem to be created in a vacuum, with little or no consultation and input from those most impacted. However, moving forward in a prudent way that does not cause more harm than good requires collaboration, which must start among teachers. Similarly, teachers' interview feedback supports the need for more substantial teacher involvement in reform decision-making processes, increased resource availability, and pedagogical development and training improvements. These factors are essential to provide teachers with the knowledge, skills, and expertise to adapt appropriately to educational changes. The research literature emphasizes that "professional development is organized in ways that draw upon teacher collaboration" (Datnow, 2012, p. 195) and "has reinforced the fact that teachers need to be active agents in educational reform to realize improvements in the processes of teaching and learning" (p. 193). Thus, educational decision-making and "policies that continue to ignore evidence-based practice" and [research] "hinder students' growth" (Niemi, 2021; Weingarten, 2014, p. 9).

I conclude this section by presenting teachers' voices on how active and efficient participation in decision-making leads to equitable and sustained changes. I further share their subjective experiences and perspectives to explain why neoliberal marketization of education is insufficient to sustain reform and identify the necessary measures for the longevity of educational changes. To contextualize the analysis in this section, teachers responded to the following interview questions (among others):

1. Are teachers afforded adequate opportunities to participate in the educational reform developmental process? Explain.

2. What social initiatives are necessary to continue ongoing awareness towards promoting democratic educational reforms?

3. Is adopting a market-driven framework to guide educational reform appropriate? Why or why not?

4. What do you think is necessary for the longevity of educational changes to be sustained?

5. What is your definition of equitable educational reform? For example, its design, implementation, and practices.

Factors that Hinder Sustainable Reform: What Needs to Change?

Teachers' responses were unfavourable regarding consultation procedures and transparency in decision-making from the Ministry of Education (governmental level). Notably, nearly all participants (9 out of 10) believed that consultation does not involve adequate teacher representation, and by the time consultation occurs, significant decisions are practically finalized. Despite variations in their responses about the consultation process and selecting persons to participate, all participants agreed that changes must include a bottom-top approach, and that more teacher involvement is needed. It is crucial to actively involve teachers in decision-making processes at all levels to ensure that educational changes are well-received and maintained. The research literature emphasizes the significance of including teachers in the planning and development of reforms rather than treating them solely as objects of reform (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016). The findings in the next section indicate that this approach to reform shows promise in motivating and gaining the support of more teachers

Consultation and Decision-Making Constraints

Although the linguistic reform Bill 96 (Law 14) did not exist at the initial stage of my research, its implementation came at a crucial time as it further illustrates reform decision-

making inequities. However, participants felt it was essential to address the undemocratic educational changes imposed on English CÉGEPS. To incorporate more French instruction, unilateral modifications to the English CÉGEP curriculum were made without consultation with teachers required to implement these changes. Teachers are committed to preserving and promoting the French language, as they understand its importance in identity and the province's further advancement and development. However, they all argue that there must be more equitable and unifying ways to achieve this. Teachers' feedback on the current language reform Bill 96 shows disapproval as they believe it will have dire consequences for *all* students and the province of Quebec. Some teachers also argue that this bill reflects neoliberal ideology and will result in Québec losing the labour force to other provinces. The workforce needs employable graduates who are proficient French speakers, thus placing another limitation on preparing students for diverse opportunities. In addition, participants indicate that no discussion with language teachers and no widespread consultation phase to address colleges' responses and recommendations to the government occurred.

Furthermore, some participants indicate that few to no initiatives exist to promote discourse among educators on educational issues and changes, especially at the governmental level.

> There are big changes made, but the colleges who are being impacted seem to have no say as to what should happen as it relates to what is in the best interest of those directly involved (TeacherB01).

Although teachers perceive their involvement in educational reform as vital, the following two excerpts from participants explain the ongoing challenges faced with having their voices heard in such critical dialogue.

I don't feel that our input is considered; there's no input from the base (teachers) from what I can see and hear from colleagues. I don't think that anybody feels that they gave an input for this recent reform, except when it came at the local level and by then it's still a bit too late to submit recommendations to the government if some problems are noticed (TeacherE02).

So, you are talking about giving teachers guidelines to do revisions, but then there is not enough dialogue that is happening with the teachers and still you are expecting those same teachers to do the program revision on the practical level to execute it. There need to be more voices involved in the process and voices not just in terms of theoretical planning but really voices from the teachers who are in the classroom and experiencing things and out of the experiences, the policies need to start responding to their needs and experiences, rather than have a nice theory in our heads and then have the teachers figure out a way on how to apply that theory (TeacherA02).

Some participants felt isolated in figuring things out without support or guidance on applying recent reform requirements effectively. For example, with great concern, teacherE02 stated that there were many questions, but the relevant persons were not accessible to ask these questions. With teachers' unheard voices about pedagogical changes becoming a norm, it weakens the democratic education process and strengthens the status quo. Due to the recently imposed educational changes, teachers feel that the democratic nature of teaching and learning is diminishing. In addressing the question of whether current reform practices threaten the democratization of education in Québec, teacherD01 firmly stated:

Yes, especially as it relates to Bill 96, as in the way it is currently formulated, it will impact Anglophones. But the bill will also affect Francophones even more because there

isn't equal education or equal opportunities being offered. These pieces run completely counter to democratization. Also, Allophones or immigrant families are brought up often with this bill. And I think that it is extremely disappointing because this is where even more resource access, and opportunities should be provided because this is the group who probably suffers the most. It is also frustrating that this discourse is discussed in terms of English and French and who has the right to that language, which completely puts aside the question of Indigenous languages.

Similarly, teacherD02 emphasized the inequity perpetuated in the imposed French language Bill 96 on English CÉGEPS:

Language plays a role in educational development, and I think it is a detriment. I feel the lack of freedom, it is kind of contradictory because in some ways there's this interest in terms of a focus in Quebec on equity. Yet there's this terrible inequity in terms of language and education. I don't know if there's any other place in the world where students are prevented from choosing their language of instruction, even as adults. So, I feel that's truly detrimental at a very fundamental level (TeacherD02).

As the following two teacher-participants argue, valuing and promoting equitable education practices involves seeking insights from educators to maintain education's democratic nature.

When there are persons without a background in pedagogy making critical decisions about how teachers should do their work, this leads to a concerted effort to resist. As such, changes are being made from a strategic point of view that doesn't have any connection to the purpose of education in life (TeacherC02).

Additionally, as suggested by another teacher, education must be a liberating experience for all students.

To promote democratic education reforms, one important thing is to value public education by investing resources, in my opinion; that's still one of the few ways that people can improve their condition. In all the stories that I have read about people coming from different minorities who made their way and made their voices heard, it was always through education. And if you think also about native people right, that probably among the ones who had the worse experience with education, right, as we know now, with the boarding (residential) schools and everything, still the way, they speak about it, becoming writers, and writing books and telling their story. So, despite what they had in their public education, through education, they can talk about it, then they can change the way the world sees them, and they can make their voices heard. So, I think that first of all, public schools should be promoted and valued, and the profession of teaching should be also valued at all levels (TeacherE02).

Furthermore, teacherD02 expressed that the imposed language bill was politically driven:

So, in terms of governmental policies, clearly, there's a disconnect. There's a total disconnect, especially when I turn to this example of the language issue, you know, and the current Bill 96. I think it's political and there are agendas, not, I think, we know it's political, and there are agendas, and that agenda has nothing to do with those concern. In fact, I think it's very unethical. This bill is the definition of unjust policies when, for me, persons who are directly affected are not taken into consideration (TeacherD02).

According to participants, more relevant materials, skills, and resources must be provided through professional development to better equip teachers to implement reform changes effectively. Additionally, the findings discussed below demonstrate a need for more professional

development experiences, as teachers suggest such opportunities foster collaboration among teachers.

The Lack of Professional Development and Training

The need for more professional development and training initiatives was a heavily discussed issue among the research participants. All ten participants believe that relevant professional development and training are essential for the sustainability of reform efforts as they contribute to teachers feeling confident and knowledgeable about what is required. Both teacherleaderA01 and teacherleaderA02 mentioned that student success requires a collective effort as "it takes a village" to achieve, "but one group that seems to get forgotten frequently is faculty." As teacherleaderA01 suggested, much emphasis is placed on quality teaching to achieve student success, but this is impossible without improving teachers' professional development and training. In support, all participants of this research study agreed that scheduling two to three pedagogical days a year is inadequate. As teacherD02 indicated, "training and professional development for faculty have to be incorporated into the functioning of the institution." TeacherB02 noted that "promoting democratic educational changes involves making more professional development time available to teachers. There also needs to be a big investment in teaching and learning because that's what we do."

When asked about the role of professional development in helping teachers implement educational changes and exert agency, most participants (8 out of 10) indicated that their training and understanding were "self-sought, based on personal initiatives and ideas and support gained from colleagues" (TeacherA02; TeacherB01; TeacherB02; TeacherC01; TeacherD01; TeacherD02; TeacherE01 & TeacherE02). Teachers felt they benefited little from local pedagogical days and did not receive concrete materials that facilitated their needs. However,

two teachers highlighted the practical nature of many of the sessions from the English CÉGEPs intercollegiate pedagogical development. According to participants, local professional development sessions should be centred on teachers' needs and lived experiences in the classroom. As such, an approach would provide opportunities to develop concrete and ready-to-use materials and activities and potentially increase teachers' attendance at pedagogical events. Many emphasize that their participation in professional development has dwindled due to its lack of usefulness in classroom practice. For example, seven participants explained that some of the sessions provided on pedagogical days are relevant knowledge-wise. However, teachers added that pedagogical development is mainly centred on individual teacher initiatives and projects, which are usually abstract and impractical for most teachers to adapt according to instructional objectives.

Generally, findings demonstrate that once teachers find pedagogical training applicable and valuable, they are encouraged to engage in reflective practice. Additionally, meaningful pedagogical development discourages randomly deciding how to teach and engage students. However, it promotes organizing more concrete strategies to help students attain the required competencies and a more profound learning experience (Weingarten, 2014). Teachers' feedback also showed that this level of reflection on their practice raised awareness of gaps, discrepancies, and challenges existing CBE reform presents for educators and students. Overall, findings from my research suggested that preserving the longevity of reform and getting teachers to buy into its relevance must be justified beyond workforce value. As listed below, several consistent key features emerged from interview data that teachers emphasized are critical in reform development, implementation, and longevity.

- Due to limited resources, there needs to be a rotation for project funding and release time assignments,

- Reform mandates must reflect diversity in decision-making ideas,

- Decision-making committees should represent the diversity of faculty members,

- Emphasize equity in educational changes by promoting transparency and timely consultations,

- Educational reform should promote more than career possibilities or outcome value,

- If it is CBE or language reform, imposing restrictions will create more significant problems and hinder the success of mandated changes,

- Open and uncoerced dialogue on educational changes and potential impacts must become prevalent,

- Teachers and educational institutions must be provided with more autonomy to make decisions that will improve students' chances to thrive,

- Through professional development, establish collaborative communities that are organized and managed by teachers,

- Meaningful, relevant, and practical reforms require consultations with teachers to be explicit,

- Opportunities need to be available for more teachers to participate in discussions and understand what proposed changes translate to in practice,

- The necessary provisions need to be made for more advanced training on understanding, implementing, and assessing competencies,

- There needs to be more ongoing collaboration and communication across all the different sectors of the college,

- There needs to be more transparent communication on educational changes where teachers understand the implications and how they fit into them,

- The usefulness and vitality of reforms need to be grounded in research evidence before implementation,

- Promoting collaboration with teachers and students is an essential ingredient, and

- Foster increased dialogue between teachers and administration.

Summary and Conclusion

The above interview findings suggested that systematic support and "a shared commitment" (TeacherA02; TeacherB02; TeacherC01) are required to ensure the sustainability of reform. This support would mean that there are adequate release time resources, practical and context-specific pedagogical development, follow-up review process on educational changes, and making teachers' involvement at all levels of decision-making intentional. The analysis presented for themes seven and eight extensively focused on teachers' voices and enacted the limitations experienced with reform practices informed by neoliberal ideologies. As teachers shared what is necessary to sustain reform and effectively move forward, it shed light on what it means to be active agents in the reform process and better understand how changes are happening. A deeper analysis revealed the denigration of educators' experience and expertise in CBE neoliberal reforms. These findings supported the importance of understanding the broader working conditions that shape CBE environments and how such experiences marginalize teachers' voices.

Nevertheless, results from my research showed teachers' willingness to implement educational changes but also stressed their objection to supporting inequitable practices. Hence, their responses in this section addressed several essential elements that could lead to sustainable

educational reform. For example, collective responses from teachers demonstrated that having the necessary professional development and resource support are significant motivators that influence the sustainability of reform implementation. This chapter has shown how critical discourse that adopts a critical ethnographic approach can nurture and promote self-empowerment and agency in participants. Moreover, the original impetus for this research study was the evident disparity in major educational decisions, changes made at the college level, and the timeline of when teachers are made aware or invited to be involved. Instructors' narratives echo this concern, citing "unequal power relationships and the repressive tendency" (Hansen, 2001, p. 217) of their voices in workplace changes, particularly at the macro (governmental) level. Therefore, the analysis presented in this chapter substantiates that moving forward demands authentic educational changes that incorporate teachers' voices and reflect ongoing democratic collaboration in these learning environments.

Furthermore, teachers' perspectives suggested that reform sustainability is linked to incorporating their beliefs in educational changes. They believe that, in some cases, significant gaps exist between reform mandates and teachers' educational ideology. Although teachers' responses varied when asked if the goals of CBE align with their educational philosophy, they all shared that it does not entirely connect with their vision of what education should be. In addition, participants noted definite discrepancies between their philosophies of education and CBE practices, as achieving an outcome cannot take precedence over the education process and learning experience. Teachers perceived that educational changes centred on CBE principles do not align with their philosophies because they significantly limit students. The final chapter concludes with a concluding discussion linking my research findings to the theoretical

framework and methodology. It also demonstrates how the analysis is rooted in existing

literature.

Chapter Six

Theoretical Considerations and Overall Discussion

In my thesis, I explored what working in a competency-based environment is like for teachers by presenting the findings in their authentic voices. In this section, I critique and reflect on how the theoretical frameworks of critical theory and critical pedagogy (CP), coupled with my critical ethnographic methodology, better structured the execution of my research and the reporting of participants' narratives. Employing my research through these critical lenses kept me reflective throughout the process and committed to providing a liberating and democratic experience for participants. Additionally, I conclude my analysis by discussing selected findings from my research with the literature review in chapter two of my thesis. More specifically, examining findings in the context of existing research confirms ongoing issues with CBE that are consistent with the literature and effectively identifies the scholarly contributions of my study as presented in Table 2: *Emergent Themes from the Literature Review, Research Data and Contributions*.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations: Employing Equitable Reform Changes

Critical research allows teachers to explore workplace practices, critique, question, challenge, and reveal inequities. This level of awareness leads to self-empowerment and, eventually, potential action for equitable changes. Considering this, the present research study is grounded in the ideological notions of critical theory and CP. In my thesis, I employed a critical ethnographic methodology to explore the lived experiences of local college teachers working in a competency-based environment.

Over the past two decades, with a significant focus on the economy and job market, economic advancement and meeting workplace demands have become key focuses of government reform policies such as CBE. These policies suggest that a:

> Comprehensive and diversified curriculum with a long-term perspective and open to the world can best prepare the citizens of tomorrow to meet the challenges of a pluralistic society that welcomes diversity, a knowledge-based job market that is constantly evolving, and economic globalization (Québec Education Program, 2001, p. 2).

Nevertheless, critical scholars have drawn attention to the problematic ways these policies are often structured and imposed on teachers and schools and the power structures that influence their vitality (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 1989 & Thompson, 2017). My thesis highlights how CÉGEP teachers' voices reveal the perpetuation of domination, injustice, and inequalities by neoliberal-informed CBE practices. My objectives were to explore the conditions under which CBE is implemented, examine the injustice such practices create, and propose suggestions that could initiate more equitable and sustained reforms.

Moreover, the principles of critical theory emphasize the importance of critiquing social structures such as the workplace and school. This level of critique leads to the deconstruction of false consciousness and the identification of the values and norms (Agger, 1991) that shape everyday conditions under which people live and work. In my study, teachers' responses demonstrated a self-critique of workplace culture, communicative practices, and the infiltration of power relations in everyday life. These aspects adhere to the principles that underpin critical theory. During the interview conversations, as I explored teachers' experiences, responses disclosed their realities of negotiating between incorporating emancipatory classroom practices that serve students' best interests or implementing inequitable educational policy and reform

demands. Teachers critiquing the daily happenings of their workplace culture was vital as it made them realize that they had little and, in some cases, no involvement in shaping pedagogical practices. Consequently, this experience empowered them as it contributed to participants uncovering the social conditions needed to help construct and retrieve a valid knowledge of self. Frankfurt School theorists suggest that only "in an understanding of the dialectic [between teachers and the workplace that the magnitude of inequity internally and externally] could be open to modification and transformation" (Giroux, 2009, p. 41).

Furthermore, communicative action is essential to social change (Habermas, 1971); as participants reflected on the limited role they were asked to play in reform from the governmental level, they identified similar experiences in their immediate work culture. Some teachers had conflicting views regarding academic freedom, inequity posed by reform, and decision-making. At the same time, some participants critiqued and questioned the language in communications, reform consultation process, and required expectations and found them undemocratic. The dialectical thought suggests that when teachers are not involved at the initial stage of reform dialogue and decision-making, the status quo goes unchallenged, as "there is a link between knowledge, power, and domination" (Giroux, 2009, p. 34), which is exacerbated.

Additionally, critical theory asserts that knowledge is power, and alienating teachers from participating in competency and curriculum development safeguards those who get access to the dominant knowledge. Such inequitable ideologies will continue to inform education. When teachers have limited participation in knowledge construction, they are unaware of the embedded injustice and the disconnect between reform policies and their lived realities. Recognizing the infiltration of power relations in knowledge construction is difficult, as cultural power relations are exerted not by force but are subtle. However, hegemonic actions manipulate teachers into

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believing they are a part of the major reform process by allowing them to participate in the latter stage. This creation of false consciousness gains consent to the status quo and maintains social class dominance. During the interview conversations, the dialogue allowed teacher participants to reflect on and critique workplace practices and reveal any discrepancies through questioning and answering. Within the communication process, dialectics reveal the contradictions, inconsistencies, insufficiencies, and non-democratic nature embedded in both the neoliberal and capitalist practices and uncovers the "power of human activity and human knowledge as both a product of and force in the shaping of social reality" (Giroux, 2009, p. 34). Nevertheless, critical pedagogy proposes alternatives to challenging the status quo and bringing about positive change. Although teachers have no power to determine what knowledge and expectations are incorporated in reform policies, this theory offers essential guidelines for invoking self-agency in classroom practices to bring about equitable transformation.

The Teacher-Student Dialogue: A Liberating Pedagogy in Classroom Practices

Educational institutions continue to be used as spaces for the "reproduction and [perpetuation] of social struggles, inequities, and power differences" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 252). Although teachers' participation in educational change discussions is essential to "improving student achievement" and learning (Weingarten, 2014, p. 7), they have limited involvement, as neoliberal ideologies inform policies and reforms. Progressive scholars like Paulo Freire (1970) have posited alternatives to this anti-democratic educational reform. For instance, collaboration and problem-solving education acknowledge the role of all participants as critical in knowledge construction and the learning process. This approach, however, makes "classroom discourse inherently political" but also provides the ideal setting for teachers and students to "engage in social change" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 252). Freire (1970) refers to

critical theory in classrooms as a critical pedagogy of practice. Therefore, critical pedagogy provides the framework and direction teachers can adopt to enact the principles of critical theory in classroom settings.

Additionally, CBE practices must be critically examined to trace the "ideological and material conditions that contribute to sites of domination and struggle" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 253). In other words, conscious teachers must not willingly transfer the required knowledge and skills to students without questioning the relevance of their input in the process of knowledge construction. They are to critically assess the elements used to legitimize the competencies and knowledge incorporated in reform. Findings from my research study revealed that most participants deemed the decision-making process and consultation around educational changes inequitable, exclusionary, and undemocratic. The analysis of interview transcripts confirmed that they are aware of the economic and workplace needs shaping reform policies. Moreover, although teachers acknowledge the relevance of addressing these needs, their feedback suggested that market-driven and workforce demands offer an immediate temporary fix, leading to more struggles and disparities among those who should benefit.

Furthermore, teacher participants acknowledged the difficulty of exerting more agency in decision-making centred on educational changes, as education is inherently political (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1997 & Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 252). The hidden political agenda is usually embedded in reform, influencing classroom power relations and interactions among teachers and students. Interview dialogues showed that, generally, teachers are aware of the controlling, restricted, undemocratic, and inequitable nature of recent educational reforms. One participant stated, "if you read the educational documents and policies, that domination language is hidden in there" (TeacherC02). Nearly all participants mentioned the

politically driven nature and injustice of educational changes that disadvantage many individuals. TeacherleaderA01 indicated that "just being a publicly funded institution creates constraints and gaps in the college educational system. The current revision is politically motivated; it's not designed to meet specific needs of students." Similarly, several other teachers' responses demonstrated this awareness. For example, teacherA02 emphasizes the political nature of education:

> Educational systems whether they are locally or within the wider Canadian context are generally politically driven. The civic aspect of education has been lost in politics, unfortunately. And only when we realized that the educational quality needs to be maintained regardless of what political party is in power, only then will we start having a new system that speaks to the needs of the people, rather than the political aspirations of a few (TeacherA02).

Similarly, another participant shares the potential ramifications of politically driven education reforms:

> Educational policy is being put in place for political gain as opposed to the good of society. We are going to see fewer individuals being able to properly function in society and to be able fill the labour workforce. Reform failure is contributing to the existing gap, one of them being, the original goals were to control and add a quality assurance component to the curriculum (TeacherleaderA01).

Additionally, as expressed by teacherA01, such politized educational changes present enormous inequities for the students.

> I mean there is inequality in the way that we treat students depending on the program that they are in. And there's inequality in the way that we assign resources for performing

higher performing students versus lower performing students. There's inequity in our program design because we will put more resources in the programs that draw more students versus those that do not (TeacherleaderA01).

Another insightful point made by a teacher-participant addressed how teachers must resist undemocratic educational practices.

Teachers must also have a sufficient understanding to challenge what they have been told to teach and to find ways to understand how do I take a policy like this or a guideline like this and this competency and how do I apply it differently in order to cater to the needs of my students. To afford that flexibility to a teacher, you need to equip them with knowledge and that knowledge will only come through continuous training (TeacherleaderA02).

This analysis demonstrated the hegemonic status of politics and the economy, especially in the context of educational development and changes. Knowledge through educational reform is constructed in isolation by partially including or eliminating teachers from the process. Considering the assertion of the political nature of education, critical pedagogy exposes the inequitable conditions that neoliberal CBE practices foster. Interview analysis also confirms that the knowledge and guidelines informing reform were not socially structured but represented a dominant few aspirations, ideologies, and voices. However, findings showed that teachers are conscious of what is happening and the resistance they are up against with their workplace's social and structural power arrangements. At this juncture, teachers must change the course of classroom discourse and power relations dynamics with students. Critical pedagogy suggests that such neoliberal pre-structured interactions are mediated with domination and suppress their subjective voices. Several teacher participants (4 out 10) argued that current conditions driving

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reforms "limit students by hindering engagement and the curiosity element involved in the learning process." Critical pedagogy opposes the banking method of education and proposes that teachers "embody practices" that encourage "students to engage in the social construction of knowledge" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 253).

Educational changes are politically informed, and the classroom is used as the stage to execute and continue the status quo of the dominant culture. The political imposition of preparing workforce-ready individuals interferes with the democratic and emancipatory nature of educational practices as they obscure the citizenship-building dynamics of education. Many teachers also shared that most recent educational changes and developments do not align with their beliefs or philosophy of education, as they are limiting and taking away the democratic right of individuals in many ways. TeacherB01 stated, "it is anti-democratic and is definitely going in the wrong direction; the democratic spirit is being threatened." TeacherB02 argued that:

> Current educational changes threaten the democratization of education in the province because the government is taking away individual choices and restricting enrolment access to college institutions based on language. I think that this is terrible because education should be growing. I find it very oppressive, and it does not feel like a democracy.

This sentiment was echoed by all teacher participants involved in my research study as they argue that consultation and the invitation to participate in reform discussions are conducted too late. Excerpts from interview conversations showed that teachers are examining their practice efficacy in meeting students' needs and nurturing well-rounded citizens. Many participants no longer accept the norm as something good for them or their students, as changes do not reflect their lived realities or those of their students. Questioning and critiquing can change teachers'

and students' perceptions and understanding of classroom pedagogical practices. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, the teacher and students function as equals in the process of knowledge construction, where power relationships in the classroom are uncovered and dismantled. Students can participate in a liberating educational experience where they can question, challenge, and collaboratively construct knowledge and identify discrepancies. Furthermore, they can deconstruct imposed knowledge, critique, and understand how structural (social and political) ideologies do not acknowledge their subjective experiences. This level of awareness, or what Freire (1970 & 2009) refers to as *conscientization*, demonstrates rejection of the banking concept and adoption of the problem-posing approach.

Essentially, schools and the classroom will continue to be sites of discontent due to the structural and social conditions that influence pedagogical practices, knowledge construction and "privilege specific forms of knowledge" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 256). Critical pedagogy emphasizes that the decision to resist the status quo and attempt change is not an individual fight but a collective action initiated on social justice, equality, and empowerment (McLaren, 2009). Teachers as critical pedagogues must reconstruct classrooms to reflect an empowering dialogical relationship. However, to maintain and strengthen this liberating discourse, teachers must continuously question discrepancies and "critically understand the social contexts and initiatives to change inequitable conditions (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 255).

One of several key concerns that resonated from teachers' interviews was the need for more local research to explore the immediate realities of educators in the workplace. This type of research encourages teachers to promote emancipatory "classroom discourse and acquire academic language to empower [students and themselves] …" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 253). However, Freire (1985) emphasizes that the teacher-student dialogical relationship is not

enough for empowerment; it also requires a critical understanding of the social structures and hegemonic relations that dictate and shape their culture's daily happenings and experiences. Consequently, by employing a critical ethnographic method, I incorporated the proposed principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy as a research tool, particularly during the data collection and analysis stages. The ideas of these theorists guided me in engaging participants in a dialogue of self-empowerment that promoted agency and knowledge construction, not only about working in a competency-based environment but, more importantly, understanding how such neoliberal-informed reforms shape and influence their everyday realities. Therefore, during my research, using the critical ethnography theoretical framework helped me understand teachers' agency (or lack thereof).

Reflecting on Critical Ethnography

Drawing on the perspectives of critical ethnography and employing this theoretical foundation allowed me to provide a deep exploration of teachers' lived experiences in competency-based environments and illuminated how neoliberal structured CBE reform marginalized their voices. Since this theoretical lens advocates for participants' voices to dominate the research process, I applied critical ethnography as a methodology during data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings. Additionally, research incorporating "critical pedagogy in [educational discourse] "links data collection and analysis using qualitative methodologies" such as a critical ethnographic framework (Carspecken, 1996; Rogers, 2011; Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 257). This further supports the relevance of employing critical ethnography within my thesis.

Although the analyzed accounts represent individual teachers' lived experiences in a neoliberal-driven CBE environment and cannot be generalized, they contribute to the dearth of

critical ethnographic discourse (Kincheloe, 2003; Meyer, 2011; Palmer, 1998). Teachers reported extensively on the limited involvement in educational reform and the lack of practical professional development experiences. Not having more relevant professional development and training or adequate resources to participate in these initiatives hinders involvement and access to the critical discourse on emancipatory knowledge construction. However, conducting this research through a critical ethnographic lens allowed teachers to realize and exert their agency (Priestley et al., 2015; Schleicher, 2011) and collaboratively construct knowledge that reflected their subjective workplace realities.

Collaboration is another essential feature of this methodology because it exposes the inherent disparity in power relations (Kincheoloe, 2003) in workplace culture. Critical ethnography emphasizes reciprocal dialogue (Spradley, 1979), where participants in this research were actively engaged in the process as subjects shaping their reality. Teachers felt empowered to share their stories as they had the opportunity to invoke agency and contribute to constructing shared knowledge. The dialectic between interview participants and myself and a better understanding of teachers' subjective experiences and perspectives illuminated the challenges and inequalities encountered in a culture that had become comfortable with the norm. During the interview, collaboration was a critical component for teachers. This importance was evident in their interactions about classroom practices, communicating with colleagues, and the need to be more engaged as active participants in enacting reform.

Nevertheless, data analysis showed that participants understood how decision-making and practices about their work are embedded within a social and political context. These conditions alienate them from their work and contribute to increased tensions. This level of dialogical sharing allowed me to identify how external power relations are at play in teachers'

daily work. Equally important, critical ethnography's emphasis on the communicative process and uncoerced dialogue (Carspecken, 1996; Comstock, 1982 & Lather, 1986) kept me reflecting on our dialogue, not to perpetuate the dominant discourse that my research advocates against. Also, a critical methodology encourages critique and self-reflexivity to contest domination and resist hegemonic practices, which extensively shaped and guided my interview interactions. This methodological influence helped me to realize the importance of exploring teachers' lived experiences in such a dialogical and reflective manner, to not only add voice to their stories but also to allow my understanding to be shaped by the embodied knowers.

Furthermore, given that an essential concept of this theoretical lens is culture (Carspecken, 2000; Gramsci, 1988; Masemann, 1976), it was obvious that participants' interview narratives were intertwined with their understandings of students' culture, workplace culture, personal experiences and communication with colleagues. For example, some participants emphasized how their cultural background and experiences, educational or social (race or class), encouraged them to reject undemocratic work conditions and foster a more collaborative and unrestricted student experience. Although not a central theme emerging from the data analysis, culture cannot be separated from this research or its methodological framework. Several teacher participants shared the impact and influence of past and current cultural experiences on their personal life and professional trajectory. In this vein, teacherleaderA01 emphasis on "cultural responsiveness" suggested the importance of cultural sensitivity being considered and incorporated into practice. Hence, critical ethnography's consideration of the cultural element in educational practice helped me to interpret and better understand teachers' struggles and experiences, which are often unvoiced.

Within my research methodological orientation, I adopted the positionality of voices stance, which required that participants and their voices be the integral focus, where findings and analysis accurately tell their lived realities (Fine 1994; Madison, 2005). This stance also guided my decision to take on the insider role throughout the research process. Taking on this position significantly contributed to the depth of knowledge obtained from participants, as they saw me as a part of their community, collectively advocating for change. Furthermore, teachers explicitly resisted the narrow and limited representations of neoliberal educational reform. Consequently, employing critical ethnography and perspectives from critical theory and critical pedagogy helped me visualize what was occurring in teachers' lived realities and how their professional and personal lives were impacted.

Employing a critical methodology also guided me in engaging with the data in a meaningful way that represented participants' authentic voices. I chose critical ethnography because it shares the same perspectives as my critical theories: to promote a more collaborative and equitable research experience for teachers. This notion goes against conventional ethnography, where people are used as valuable objects for data collection, with little to no input on interpreting and reporting their experiences. Collaboration provides a more liberating, noncoercive and empowering opportunity for teachers to collectively strategize methods to challenge and resist dominating educational practices. Thus, this type of joint research drives social change (Madison, 2012; Thomas, 1993). I culminate this analysis by discussing critical findings concerning existing literature. Following this discussion, I conclude, acknowledge potential limitations, and explore further research possibilities.

Overall Discussion of Findings in Connection to the Literature

In my dissertation, I explored and better understood through the voices of college instructors how neoliberal competency-based reform disenfranchised them from workplace practices. My ethnographic methodology provided a platform for teachers to experience self-empowerment by establishing a liberating atmosphere that revealed implicit power relations shaping the daily conditions of educational institutions. In reviewing and analyzing the literature base of my thesis, the themes extracted suggested that similar challenges and concerns still exist in CBE environments (see Table 2 below). On the other hand, as shown in Table 2, the findings garnered from the analysis also drew attention to specific ways the current research contributes to the discourse and literature on this subject. However, they both revealed that reforming the social and institutional structure and culture regarding educational decision-making is necessary. As this section culminates the discussion on the eight themes that emerged from the interviews, it is essential to note that several dominant themes (*institutional support*, *increased teacher involvement* and *challenging the status quo*) surfaced from teacher participants' experiences. Nevertheless, the analysis and insights discussed here highlight these themes in connection with existing literature and the research's overall contribution.

In addition, teachers' responses and data analysis were also structured around identifying themes in the data that addressed my four research questions. For example, the ten participants' perceptions and experiences working in a competency-based structured setting were organized into eight themes based on response similarity and frequency. As a result, I was able to gather rich and extensive data that addressed the complexity of practice for teachers in these environments. Interview data and analysis helped me to identify and maximize teachers' construction of their knowledge to reveal: (1) What is wrong with this social reality? (2) How did

it come about? (3) Whose interests are being served? and (4) How can we make things better? (Bowman, 2016).

I posed the questions: (1) *What is wrong with this social reality?* (2) *How did it come about?* and (3) *Whose interests are being served?* (Bowman, 2016). The culminating discussion that follows reiterates: (1) the conditions under which CBE is advanced, (2) the goals of this pedagogical approach and how they contradict teachers' lived realities, and (3) identifies CBE outcomes in terms of promoting inequitable practices. The literature indicates that CBE reform was meant to "… prepare the citizens of tomorrow to meet the challenges of a pluralistic society that welcomes diversity, a knowledge-based job market that is constantly evolving, and economic globalization" (Quebec Education Program, 2001, p. 2). Other research suggests that the competency approach was targeted at reducing high school dropout rates and accommodating the learning needs of more students (Ministère de Éducation du Loisir et du Sport [MELS], 2013; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Ordonez, 2014). On the contrary, my research findings reject these policy aims, which are shown to reduce systematic support by limiting resources and alienating teachers from participating in reform decision-making, which is critical in addressing the stated goals. Moreover, according to teacher participants, the neoliberal competency-based approach implemented at the college level hinders students' potential, with negative consequences outweighing the perceived benefits.

Table 2

Emergent Themes from the Literature Review, Research Data and Contributions

Themes extracted from the literature review	Themes extracted from data	Research contribution
Educational reform challenges/concerns Competency-based educational challenges, in particular	*Challenges for Educators Policies, Procedures, and Power*	Need for resources and training (Institutional support) Role of education
Neoliberal reform and social status	*Constraints of competency-based education*	Instructors' credibility and success outcomes
Teachers' role and power	Need for resources and training (Institutional support)	Amplify faculty voices and empowerment
Sociopolitical context of competency-based education and embedded power relations	Role of Education	Challenge the status quo
Stakeholders and partnerships	Instructors' credibility and success outcomes	
Constraints of competency-based education	Amplify faculty voices and empowerment	
	Challenging the status quo	

The themes listed in column one were extracted from my literature review in chapter two. In addition, column two contains the themes that emerged from the research data and those that are italicized highlight similar themes found in the literature review. Finally, the third column presents the thematic contribution of my research to existing literature. The research findings and existing literature indicate that the intended purpose of applying a CBE framework at the CÉGEP level was not to provide equitable opportunities for all. As teacherA01 stated:

There are so many reasons why the reform failed, one of them is the goals that you just

stipulated weren't the original goals. The original goals were to control and add a quality

assurance component to the curriculum.

Additional findings from my research disclosed several key discrepancies between competency-

based policies and what is happening in educational institutions. For example, teachers realized

that significant gaps exist between workplace conditions and mandated policies and practices.

Further conflicts were found in the gap between reform policies and the cultural realities of

teachers. Moreover, such conditions under a CBE framework provide limited learning

experiences for students, challenge and disregard teachers as experts, and exclude them from

critical decision-making, thus alienating them from their work. Their responses suggested that

such approaches leave teachers and struggling students marginalized and powerless.

Additionally, market-driven ideals have ingrained themselves in educational policies and

reform development. As participants reflected on the CÉGEP competency-based curriculum,

they used words such as "a factory," "output product," and "CÉGEP is like a meat packaging

system" (TeacherA01; TeacherA02 & TeacherC02) to describe its practices. Such language

aligns with neoliberal theory, which indicates "a state possesses a high skills equilibrium when

its institutions and systems foster a well-trained, capable and innovative workforce which

produce goods and services that sustain high wages" (Hodge, 2016c, p. 147). Teachers suggested

that government policies for educational reform continue to provide intervention support to

encourage the marketization of education. For example, as shared by participants, the reduction

of some course teaching hours and the elimination of specific general education courses are an

indication of getting students to graduate at a faster rate. As a result, teachers believe that

emphasis is on output quantity and not quality, which is not in students' best interests. The

educational practices incorporated in the competency-based framework enforce political and economic interests that "reinforce the implementation of and use of dominant … notions of what is valid and invalid knowledge" (Dei & Karuancery, 1999, p. 112).

Additionally, concerning competency-based practices facilitating individualized assessment of students' achievement, several teacher participants suggested essential limitations in this area. This concern also surfaced in other educational institutions; as a report by *Global News* addressing grade inflation (boosting) in high schools, Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA) president Jennifer Maccarone states, "there needs to be flexibility in the evaluation process to provide a variety of learners" (Leclair, 2017, para. 14). A similar perspective was echoed by some research participants who proposed that more variations in the evaluation of students need to be possible because standardized performance assessments do not accurately reflect the potential of all students.

Moreover, findings from my research and existing literature (Capecchi et al., 2022; Steele et al., 2014) imply that formal and informal educational experiences should be used to assess students' competency achievement. However, educational models like CBE do not acknowledge the relevance of students' cultural knowledge in classroom practices. Critical ethnography emphasizes that culture is vital in education and knowledge construction (Anderson, 1989; Carspecken, 1996; Masemann, 1999). Therefore, in failing to acknowledge how cultural, structural, social, and political features can perpetuate inequalities or promote change, market-based notions illustrate some inherent disparities in CBE practices (Mintz,2021; see also, Sefa Dei & Karuancery, 1999; Hodge, 2016c).

On the other hand, teacher participants also mentioned a common obstacle to contributing to reform sustainability. The challenge experienced has to do with the lack of consultation and

limited opportunities to participate in reform decision-making processes. However, successful implementation and sustained educational changes necessitate teacher input (Hokka et al., 2017; Tao & Gao, 2017; Salinas, 2017). In addition, current research findings reported teacher participants' discord with the isolated ways reforms are structured. As discussed, based on teachers' feedback, this form of CBE at the CÉGEP college level overrides teachers' agency in significant ways to conform with rapidly meeting neoliberal economic and workplace expectations. I contend that these conditions of neoliberal-driven reform and competency-based practices are the basis of perpetuating inequalities.

Market discourses continue to reshape educational changes and development (Hodge, 2016c; Rossiter & Heron, 2011), particularly in colleges that adopt competency-based curricula. Through educational reform, market-based perspectives are replicated in schools to ensure that students are socialized to remain in their appropriate class system and, eventually, the same class positions in the workplace. Nevertheless, the prevailing culture and structure informing educational reform seem to view teachers' voices and involvement as hindering mandated changes. Such an environment in educational reform stresses competencies, workplace skills, labour force readiness, and being marketable, all of which reflect a neoliberal globalization ideology. My thesis findings corroborate insights from the literature to argue that CBE is not inherently alienating. However, the findings also suggested that labour market reform policies cultivate a divisive atmosphere and hegemonic relations (Hodge, 2016c; Sefa et al., 1999; McCall, 2013; Weingarten, 2014). Therefore, examining the influences of neoliberal globalization on provincial college education requires an accurate assessment and understanding of the conditions underlying competency-based education practices.

As extensively shared by teacher participants working in the trenches, the reality of conditions in competency-based settings provided evidence of how political, workforce and economic interests have dominated educational reform. As noted by teachers, the original purpose of employing CBE at the college level is not reflected in practice, as curriculum restructuring gears toward aligning practices with neoliberal beliefs. In addition, themes from the data (see Table 2) identified similar concerns and challenges discussed in the literature. The overview of the findings addressed my first three research questions and pointed out that the competency-based model enacted at the college level necessitates a significant gap between the interests of educators, students, and policymakers.

Changing the Trajectory of Educational Reform

Furthermore, in response to the question *How can we make things better?* (Bowman, 2016), data analysis suggests that a crucial step to achieving this requires having educators' interests and professional well-being represented in reform policy. This level of representation entails a bottom-up approach to consultation and decision-making, adequate resources, and more professional training opportunities for teachers (Niemi, 2021; see also, Earl et al., 2003; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; McCully, 2006 & Towers, 2012). Teacher participants added that the top-down approach to educational changes is not in the knowers' best interest and does not reflect their workplace's reality, beliefs, needs, and priorities. In addition, as an alternative to addressing the conditions under which competency-based practices are employed, research findings further advocate amplifying teachers' voices in critical discourse like this. Therefore, some relevant changes that could lead to more equitable and sustainable reform efforts are highlighted in the following discussion.

Although teachers acknowledged the relevance of aligning education with workforce and economic needs, all participants emphasized their objections to underpinning educational changes by rationalities of neoliberal economic perspective. Teachers critically examined the inequitable nature of everyday practices in connection to their educational values and beliefs. They emphasized promoting and providing an educational experience that is "well-rounded," "global," "fosters life-long learning," and "encourages curiosity." Teachers expressed the importance of offering students a more holistic education that does not just concentrate on workplace preparation and economic needs. As demonstrated in their shared educational philosophies, teachers believe that one's belief about the value of education is essential for sustainable reform. Although some (3 out of 10) teachers mentioned that certain aspects of CBE aligned with their philosophies, all of them voiced issues with the pre-packaged competency-based mandates provided by the government. They agreed that the workplace and economic value placed on education is limiting, isolating, and inequitable, further advancing the gap between educational changes and the underprivileged.

Furthermore, with the view of making things better, several teacher participants offered some suggestions. As it relates to what equity in educational reform should reflect, teacherB01 stated:

It's always a good idea to give more power to the people who are doing the teaching, more power to teachers and by giving more power, I don't mean like just throw release time at them, but give them the professional support, give them the resources. Take them seriously, and I think maybe most importantly get them involved in the decision-making process and not just go like I have some release time, do some little project, and you know that'll make us look good or something. But they need to be represented; they need

to have a seat at the table where decisions are made. Yeah, representation is essential. In terms of equity, it's complex.

On the other hand, as the following participant commended the structure of the Quebec college system, it was also emphasized that there is still much work to be done.

> TeacherB02: One of the fundamental differences about the CÉGEP system, in comparison to others, is the offering of general education, which is an extremely brilliant option for students. But there also needs to be a better program approach of understanding competency-based approach and getting teachers to buy into it. If this occurs, the outcomes will be brilliant.

Additionally, as explained by teacherA01, several aspects of the college system structure need to be transformed:

> So, I think that one thing that needs to change is the collective agreement. The collective agreement is about working conditions, part of the working conditions should include teachers' ability to contribute to the development of curriculum. The collective agreement does not talk about anything concerning the development of curriculum, with the exception of faculty, who are released to do work on curriculum development have ownership of the materials that they develop, that is all it says. Firstly, I would suggest that the collective agreement needs to change to reflect or value curriculum development as a part of the task of faculty members.

Many teachers in my study underscored the value of teacher-initiated collaboration, which excludes administration and governmental involvement. They believe this type of networking can lead to a stronger teacher community committed to change, as shared below by teacherA02:

So, it is commitment and shared vision are very important. I think that these are two key words because if everyone was working in a different connection even if it is in the right direction, but if they are not committed, we are getting no where. We are being pulled in different directions, but if we have a shared vision, it could be a very broad vision, it could be making the educational system equitable. It could be very broad, but at least we all know that we are going in that direction. So, yeah, shared vision and commitment from everyone.

Additionally, research supports this notion of commitment and shared vision; as Nanus (1992) states, "there is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared" (p. 3). Another study found that "shared vision and trust among stakeholders are particularly important to unleash the reform's full potential" (Gericke, 2022, p. 241). Moreover, too much political interference and control over pertinent educational decisions exclude teacher involvement and consultation and hinder open collaboration. Teachers adopting a collective perspective and responsibility to implement educational changes effectively require a more participatory and democratic culture of involvement. For instance, they need to be more involved in pedagogical decisions, demanding support and (increased) allocation of adequate resources to allow teachers to participate in these discussions. Teachers need to see their voices reflected in decisions about their work.

Furthermore, the participants also cited improvements in teacher involvement in local college decision-making as necessary. There is teacher involvement at pedagogical development days, but this is mainly on an individual basis. Most participants suggested that teachers should have more direct involvement in collaboratively proposing topics and preparing sessions for

pedagogical days. For professional development to be effective and attract more teacher presence, it cannot be organized in isolation or only involve a small number of teachers. One participant indicated that "the attendance and interest level at pedagogical days could be higher if a culture of participation" (TeacherD01) is promoted. The same participant added that teachers must be tangibly involved in shaping pedagogical days. Hence, this can only happen through more consultation beforehand. Data analysis revealed high dissatisfaction with how local pedagogical professional development is planned and executed. Nevertheless, some teachers acknowledged that they remained hopeful that local decision-making would improve but proposed the need for more professional autonomy in this area.

Participants suggested starting an initiative that highlights teachers' work locally. Several responses from the analysis credited teachers for peer guidance and consultation on classroom practices. For example, while sharing teachers' success stories relative to classroom practices was not a focus of this research study, it was demonstrated as a vital aspect for many participants. The research literature suggests that understanding how "networking among teachers" benefits them can "support or constrain improvement around professional development and educational reform" (Datnow, 2012, p. 195). It adds that such feedback provides a better "understanding of what it means for teachers to be agents in the reform process …" (Datnow, 2012, p. 195). Hence, teacher participants suggested that the need to be included in policy discussions about their work in more tangible ways is not the only motivator for their contribution to sustained reform. Other factors include acknowledgement, recognition, and support for their work and contribution to improving practice and student success.

Regarding the potential possibilities of CBE, there are undoubtedly mixed opinions. On the one hand, as the literature suggests (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Johnstone & Soares, 2014;

Ordonez, 2014), the proposed benefits of CBE can help improve student learning, but on the other hand, there are significant discrepancies about this approach that have not been afforded adequate attention in existing research (De Bruijn, 2012; Johnstone & Soares, 2014; Mulder et al., 2009). Additionally, teachers' experiences and concerns about the structure and challenges have received little consideration (Hodges, 2016c). An essential finding in my research indicates that the marginalization of teachers' voices is evident due to the neoliberal approach informing education reform to serve the interests of labour markets. The current research study further contends that the status quo of the role of education and training, particularly in competency-based settings, must continue to be contested and not accepted as all things good. Apple (1990) maintained that the language of learning tends to be apolitical and ahistorical, thus hiding the complex nexus of political and economic power and resources that lies behind a considerable amount of curriculum organization and selection" (p. 29).

Summary and Conclusion

Teachers' voices and subjective experiences in competency-based environments amidst an ongoing provincial-wide Social Sciences program revision at the college level highlighted the political and economic agendas influencing educational changes. I drew on the perspectives and experiences of instructors to reveal the direct impact of external dominant forces, which "influence over what transpires in educational settings" (Hodge, 2016c, p. 143). As my analysis demonstrates, such impacts have led to inequitable practices, alienation of how teachers work, and diminished involvement of teachers in decision-making, all discouraging many teachers. Findings showed that reform in competency-based environments is mostly isolated initiatives, downgrading teachers' voices and experiences.

Moreover, given the ideological drivers of educational changes in the province, teachers' involvement presents an opportunity to challenge the status quo. The analysis of the interview data underscores the potential for more research to amplify the authentic voices of teachers. This level of collaborative work allows teachers to share their subjective experiences of their daily working conditions, which may not immediately seem inequitable. By critically understanding the oppressive nature of neoliberal ideologies, teachers and students can challenge and resist knowledge and practices geared toward preserving the norm. Based on their perspectives and experiences working in a competency-based structured institution, teachers' accounts revealed why educational reform could not be business as usual. Consequently, findings further propose that dismantling the existing status quo will not be easy, but collectively it is not impossible.

Conclusion

My thesis attempted to examine the influence neoliberal globalization has on an aspect of Québec's educational system, particularly at the college level. A primary aim of my research "focused on interrogating how micro-level practices that assembled with macro influences, particularly political rationalities of [neoliberal competency-based policies]" (Powell, 2022, p. 21) perpetuate inequity and are not in the long-term welfare of students. Although it is claimed that CBE approaches are meant to provide, education-wise, an "equal" or level playing field for all students, as shared by participants, its practices disenfranchise many of them. This limitation, in turn, leaves colleges struggling to structure a program that caters to these students and provides them with opportunities like their peers. However, this flexibility that colleges have, as indicated by instructors, will soon become non-existent as a new Social Sciences reform is in effect. How such changes have been structured and implemented shows that instructors cannot modify changes in students' best interests.

Additionally, the data and findings in my study suggest that engrained patterns of inequality and domination reflected in educational reform have created competency-based learning environments that can "negatively impact many students, particularly minority students" [immigrants] (Hansen, 2001, p. 218). Such effects are the result of "systematic racism [embedded in educational changes that do not consider] factors related to racial and [social] issues that further complicate [the learning experience] for students" (Hansen, 2001, p. 218). An evident approach to addressing such inequities is for instructors to be more directly involved in reform discussions and provide the necessary flexibility to support students, as they have "clear ideas of underlying factors that contribute to difficulties" students face (Hansen, 2001, p. 217).

Hence, following an extensive review of studies over the past two years, I discovered no qualitative or quantitative research that illuminated teachers' voices extensively on this subject.

Given the apparent inconsistencies and inequities influenced by reform, structuring changes concerning teaching and learning cannot be conducted in isolation. Instead, a more collaborative culture must be nurtured and promoted, considering the informal learning experiences they bring to the classroom and an inclusive, collaborative approach. Educational reform needs to be responsive to the needs and demands of all students. The "promise of education is to meet students' emotional, social and health needs"; [therefore], "reclaiming this promise requires a shift in the [enactment] of policies and practices" (Weingarten, 2014, p. 8). Student success must be the determinant of educational policy changes and decision-making. Nevertheless, educational reform and determining what changes are necessary for student success continue to be contentious, whether at grade school, college, or university level. Based on the literature reviewed, such aspects are complex and demand collective action from all directly involved in education. Some significant issues from the research literature concern how neoliberal CBE reform implementation is happening and the underlying injustices these practices impose on teachers and students (Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Hodges, 2015; Magnusson & Osborne, 1990).

Additional concerns are related to a lack of sustainable reform practices and the inefficiency of the continued top-down approach to reform policies, decision-making, and implementation (Hubers, 2020; Niemi, 2021; see also, Datnow, 2002; Earl et al., 2003; Elmore, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). Considering that existing research (McCall, 2013; Morcke et al., 2013; Mulder et al., 2009) predominantly focuses on student outcomes and performances and rarely documents educators' perspectives and experiences relative to educational changes,

demonstrates a gap between policy and actual pedagogical practices. Consequently, I argue that probing instructors about the impacts of neoliberal CBE on their lived realities will illuminate the conditions that sustain these practices and expose the inequalities that market-driven reforms impose on teachers and students. I further argue that more inclusive approaches to decision-making and the implementation of educational reform need to be adopted, and instructors' perspectives and experiences can be influential in this regard.

Moreover, competency-based education is not a new approach; however, many practices implemented are taking a direction that "reflects industry's needs and priorities" (Hodge, 2016, p. 150) over the expertise of teachers and students' well-being and the overall aims of democratic education. For example, more now than ever, politics and economies are adhering to neoliberal policies, which have undermined several facets of society, including education. Nevertheless, with the growing discourse concerning equity in education and transparency in educational decision-making (Niemi, 2021; see also, Dei & Karumanchery, 1999; Hodge, 2016; Weingarten, 2014), one way to improve this is by teachers empowering themselves through critical assessment of workplace conditions and documenting their experiences.

The first data analysis and research findings chapter presented a broad, focused perspective of teachers' lived realities. It demonstrated how teachers are constantly negotiating between reform expectations placed on them, ignoring the challenges faced and fostering a learning experience that is in the best interests of *all* students. The second part of this analysis chapter applied critical ethnographic principles by resisting dominant relations during the interview. This resistance was demonstrated by focusing on the critically conscious nature of participants and extensively drawing on their responses. Moreover, a key objective of my research study was to reveal in the voices of teachers how neoliberal economic and workplace

standards are shaping educational reform policies. Based on data analysis, such a market-driven approach results in many challenges and setbacks in these learning environments. From participants' feedback, internal barriers include a non-supportive work structure, inadequate release time resources, and limited pedagogical experiences. Some more general obstacles documented by teachers include lack of consultation, limited involvement in decision-making about their work and inconsistencies between policies and practices. Additionally, based on the findings of my research study, teachers acknowledged the unique benefits of the CÉGEP college education for all students compared to other provinces. However, they expressed concern about the culture and divisive direction influencing current reform in these institutions, which is undemocratic and not in the best interests of students.

In competency-based environments, the structuring and formulation of competencies are the most significant aspects, as everything else, from programs and courses, is developed around them. Nevertheless, when competencies are structured at the macro (government/ministerial) level without teachers' direct involvement, one questions their appropriateness and whose interests are being served. Many participants described how the tension between the isolated nature of educational decision-making and workplace expectations inhibits increased participation from teachers at local colleges. Some suggested that the deliberate top-down dominant approach to planning and managing educational changes perpetuates the status quo. Findings further disclose that the disconnect between policymakers and the reality of workplace practices contributes to downplaying concerns made by teachers. Therefore, from the experiences shared, reform and workplace decisions necessitate a more collaborative outlook where teachers' insights and expert knowledge are concerned.

Furthermore, teachers are exposed daily to the reality of provincial college education and possess a more substantial experience and understanding of addressing systemic inequalities. Participants' responses highlight significant disparities in consultation on changes concerning their work and the lack of resources available to participate in such decision-making processes. Nevertheless, how can they help marginalized students when their voices have been silenced in the reform process? The theoretical insights and ethnographic methodology helped me design a research study that did not reproduce the undemocratic practices and experiences participants encountered. Throughout my research, I advocated resisting hierarchical system practices, which my study demonstrated are prevalent in education. For instance, the interview process encouraged listening, and teachers could critically assess the neoliberal ideological dominance embedded in the language spoken and knowledge transmitted to students. They critically reflected on workplace experiences and classroom practices and identified existing discrepancies. As demonstrated by the data analysis, they felt comfortable openly responding to the questions and asking questions themselves. Some participants identified this research as a means of building a community as they shared concerns about the inequitable nature of several workplace experiences and practices. These aspects are congruent with the perspectives of critical theorists, as through participation in a praxis-oriented research study, teachers could contribute to knowledge construction tangibly, revealing the inequity experienced in competency-based environments and voicing what needs to be changed to make things better. Therefore, these types of experiences will potentially encourage teachers to use their classrooms:

As political and democratic sites … to furnish opportunities for students to critically question oppressive systems, hierarchies, and sociopolitical inequalities. [In doing so, teachers can] connect classroom learning and students' lived experiences and worlds, to

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create social transformation and empowerment in the marginalized students' lives (Safari & Rashidi, 2015, p. 39).

More specifically, the philosophical underpinning of critical pedagogy further supports the relevance of my study, as the application of neoliberal policies in education poses a threat to its democratic nature. Critical pedagogy exposes and challenges the contradictions within neoliberal educational reform that serve to preserve hierarchical relations of power and class, as demonstrated by participants' interviews. This approach brings hope for teachers, students, and educational institutions as it provides a critical framework that offers insights and guidelines to understand better and tackle the struggles faced with reform. Critical pedagogy also provides practical applications and strategies teachers can use to equip themselves and students better to collectively resist and challenge the unjust practices perpetuated by informed neoliberal reforms. As discussed in the literature review and chapter three on theory, critical pedagogy was used to promote self-empowerment and teach teachers how to identify hidden ideologies in reform policies.

In addition, critical theory aimed to encourage participants to exert agency and not to be implementers of reform changes but to critique the demands and unravel the perpetuated disparities. In this view, I situated the structure of my interview conversations with teachers, data analysis and discussion of findings through the lens of critical theory and critical pedagogy, as the former provided the foundation to advance the work of the latter. Moreover, I created an emancipatory experience for participants to encourage them to exert similar agency in classroom practices that would create empowering and sustainable changes. Therefore, when teachers are engaged at this level in critical decision-making about their work, quantifying education to employment and economic possibilities is contested, and educational democracy can be a reality.

Furthermore, grounded in a critical ethnographic framework, my research sought to critique, disentangle, and unveil how social structures and hierarchical power relations marginalize teachers' voices and agency in market-oriented educational reforms. My study intended to understand college instructors' subjectivities and experiences relative to their neoliberal-informed workplace culture. Critical ethnography indicates that an attempt to separate theory and practice or subject and object, particularly in a critical inquiry involving human subjects, is an act of domination and injustice. The theoretical and methodological advances and emphasis on dialogue and the dialectical process in critical ethnography provided a platform for democratic and uncoerced discourse. As suggested by the literature, realistic and equitable reform improvements and sustainable educational change are possible through "sustained engagement between policymakers and practitioners in difficult discussions about resources, expectations, and existing … realities of classroom context" (Hubers, 2021; see also, Datnow, 2002; Elmore, 1996, p. 48; Finnigan & Daly, 2012). Therefore, with its fundamental focus on struggling to dismantle forces of domination, inequality, and oppression, critical ethnography was a suitable methodological approach to achieve the objectives and answer my study's research questions.

Finally, my research demonstrates that the commitment and receptiveness of teachers to ensure the effective implementation of reform are based firmly on the extent to which they are involved in the development process. Therefore, reform must consider teachers' pedagogical beliefs, as this factor could potentially influence teaching and learning (Hubers, 2020; Niemi, 2021; see also, Soldat, 2009 & Tatto et al., 2012) and their receptiveness to incorporate new practices consistent with mandated changes (Charalambous & Philippou, 2010; Wilson & Cooney, 2002). Although not a correlational study, the emergent themes and findings

demonstrate that isolating teachers from participating in changes that inform practice and expect positive and long-term benefits is impossible.

Nonetheless, my research provided vital insights into the current conditions, experiences and perspectives of teachers working in a competency-based context. It offers a stepping stone with scope for further research into this discourse. Therefore, research such as this one is essential for bringing teachers' voices of their experiences in these learning settings to the forefront. This type of ongoing collaborative research can be used as "leverage to work towards positive change" (Datnow, 2012, p. 193). My thesis research provided an opportunity for teachers' advocacy to ensue. I believe that strengthening teachers' positions is essential, thus requiring educators to mobilize collectively and share their subjective knowledge, experience, and truth regarding neoliberal competency-based reforms. Therefore, for teachers to make impactful changes in this respect, opportunities must be provided or created by teachers to engage in "policy advocacy" (Aydarova et al., 2022, p. 144) research and activities to have their voices heard. My research study also contributes to the vast body of philosophical and theoretical knowledge on critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical ethnography. It demonstrates that by disseminating more research such as this, educators will have access to concrete ideas and guidelines on exerting agency in practice. Additionally, such research will help teachers understand how to incorporate empowering and collaborative learning strategies in the classroom to bring about equitable change in decision-making and educational reform. In light of my thesis findings, there is much more to explore on this subject. Nonetheless, it presents some crucial overall implications, as outlined below.

Research Implications

Through my research, I have found that restructuring CBE and reforming policies to align with neoliberal standards have significant implications, especially for teachers, students and policymakers. By examining the perspectives and experiences of college instructors, I have identified the conditions that support CBE environments and what needs to change to promote fairness, social justice, and the sustainability of educational reform. Due to the nature of CBE, these learning environments are well-suited for adopting a market-based structure that hides "the consequences of neoliberal policies" (Mintz, 2021, p. 103). These effects include limited or no consultation with educators, "organizing an educational system largely around workforce development, undervaluing a comprehensive education essential for upholding democracy, and providing equal opportunities" (p. 103). My research study makes a significant contribution to the field of education, particularly in the context of CBE reform. The implications of my findings underscore the study's importance and relevance, highlighting its potential to advocate for change in educational practices and policy.

The results can help inform better reform policies and educational practices. For instance, when teachers are involved in the early stages of reform, they can pinpoint the reasons behind students' lack of success, leading to more effective policies and methods that enhance students' performance. Moreover, teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes, contributing to economic productivity. Therefore, teachers' voices are critical to promoting students' success, as they interact directly with students frequently and can gain firsthand insights into students' needs.

My research has revealed that teachers are often excluded from crucial stages of the decision-making process and the development of educational reform. Policymakers tend to limit

their involvement, possibly because teachers could disrupt the status quo. Moreover, current research (Aydarova et al., 2022) and my research findings have demonstrated that when teachers can participate and share their lived experiences, they are empowered to advocate for change effectively. Teachers' input and contributions to reform efforts can influence their motivation and dedication to ensuring the success and sustainability of such changes. However, tangible contributions from teachers are currently being hindered and restricted because their voices can bring attention to the social injustices of neoliberal CBE reform and, in turn, challenge and resist such unfair practices. This adds to the literature on the effectiveness of critical ethnographic research's potential to liberate the oppressed.

A critical analysis of this subject shows that the commercialization of education leads to unfairness and unequal practices, especially for the most disadvantaged. Narrowing education to a market-based approach results in reduced public funding and more competition in resource allocation. This practice leads to greater disparities in accessing quality education and providing appropriate professional development for teachers and student opportunities. Furthermore, as emphasis is placed on competencies and their potential employment and economic benefits, it becomes clear that limited focus and resources are given to teachers' concerns, challenges and professional needs. These findings suggest future directions for policy changes and the revamping of CBE curricula to ensure that the educational system is aligned with the needs and beliefs of its key stakeholders, the teachers.

In addition, my research provided insights into why the "goals of reforms are often not achieved" (Niemi, 2021, p. 16) and why teachers' support is not significantly positive. For instance, some results of teachers' beliefs regarding the purpose of education include *partnership*, *community*, *student improvement and enrichment* and *bettering people's lives*.

However, teachers are discouraged and disappointed as neoliberal CBE, which often emphasizes competition, individual achievement, and market-driven outcomes, contradicts their purpose of what education should be. Future CBE policies may want to consider these findings as they pose crucial implications for the effective implementation of reforms. Additionally, future research studies can comprehensively explore teachers' educational beliefs and CBE reform, as such variables are shown to be critical in how changes are adopted and incorporated into practice. These results highlight the need for cohesive and practical guidelines for CBE changes and suggest that CBE changes are effective and sustained when developed in collaboration with teachers. Findings reported that teachers are frustrated and encountering difficulties with the recent Social Science reform. They feel that the changes do not align with their real-life experiences.

A comprehensive survey of the literature has revealed a lack of research studies locally, especially those using a critical ethnographic approach to explore teachers' experiences in CBE environments. The limited literature underscores the need for more educational reform research on how educators perceive CBE. Using a critical ethnographic methodology, my research explored teachers' perspectives and experiences in CBE settings. However, the same factors can be used employing other research approaches to investigate whether similar results would be obtained. This potential for future research brings hope and optimism for progress in the field and a deeper understanding of CBE from educators' perspectives.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that bringing together several like-minded people to initiate this movement highlights the importance of advocacy in promoting equitable practices. Recording teachers' discussions and sharing through evidence-based research can help challenge and oppose neoliberal policies. This documentation can be a powerful means for advocating

concrete contributions to reform, ultimately exerting pressure for policy changes. The dialogue should provide opportunities for all voices to be heard, and training sessions are needed to develop individuals' ability to advocate and support advocacy.

My thesis findings only represent the significance of the situation in an English CEGEP. I cannot assert that the impact is comparable to that of other CEGEPs, particularly the French colleges. Therefore, findings open opportunities for future research in other colleges and contexts, advancing knowledge and understanding on this subject. Nevertheless, overall thematic and narrative responses conclusively demonstrate that CBE policies align with neoliberal beliefs, perpetuating inequalities for students and teachers. These findings are significant as they support my thesis purpose and central argument and provide practical evidence for future studies.

Despite the potential contributions of my thesis study to advancing scholarly knowledge on this subject, it is essential to note that this inquiry aims not to generalize but to particularize the research relative to the culture under investigation. This aligns with an essential aim of critical ethnographic research grounded in critical theory and critical pedagogy. Therefore, the work is anticipated to be carried out even after the completion of the study. Creating a practical critical ethnographic praxis "requires learning and imparting skills that will allow research subjects to continue investigating the world in which they will go on living" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 401). Moreover, I hope that the outcome of my research will motivate fellow teachers to maintain and encourage professional dialogues that improve their agency in developing and implementing education reforms. Therefore, research findings suggested that achieving successful student outcomes and meeting economic demands are not the only factors determining whether a reform continues. Instead, teachers' perspectives, experiences, and input during the developmental reform phase have been demonstrated to be essential determinants for the

longevity and sustainability of education changes (Coburn et al., 2012; Datnow, 2012). As the policy legitimacy crisis revealed, "including or excluding [teachers' expert knowledge] can have remarkable consequences on commitment level" (Niemi, 2021, p. 23).

Limitations

Before concluding, I would like to draw attention to some of the limitations of this study. First, one of the apparent limitations of my research is that it involved only college teachers and not students. This is essentially a limitation of scope. Nevertheless, as critical pedagogy suggests, this change in reform practices requires raising *teachers' conscientization* to acquire the critical skills necessary to engage and support students in this learning experience. Second, this research was conducted on a small scale, involving ten teachers, some of whom have taught at both English and French CÉGEPs. While this is considered a limitation by most positivist researchers, it is not a limitation for those working in critical or qualitative research. Moreover, since my research only focused on an English college, it would be advisable not to generalize the findings to the broader CÉGEP teacher population, as the situation may differ, especially in French colleges.

Third, another limitation arose from the data collection that involved a one-time multiple individual interview session with participants. The fact that teacher interviews were anonymous, and that anonymity has been upheld as promised and mandated by the tri-council policy. Also, due to the nature of the subject under investigation, protecting participants' identities was in their best interests and contributed to eliminating power structure barriers that usually hinder open dialogue. Consequently, conducting a culminating collaborative discussion with all participants was impossible after individual responses to the interview questions. Fourth, it is essential to note that most research participants come from academic backgrounds rather than vocational

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professions. This participant selection may have, to an extent, led to a one-sided perspective, as competency-based education primarily prepares students for vocational and career-oriented roles.

From a theoretical standpoint, perhaps a limitation of this study would be not conducting an observational exercise of one or several teacher participants engaged in critical dialogue with students. Nevertheless, despite the identified potential limitations, this research raised awareness of teachers' conceptualizations about current experiences and challenges in competency-based learning settings and highlighted additional areas for further investigation.

Future Research

My research study utilized a primarily qualitative approach with no quantitative component, which was a deliberate choice based on the overall research objective. Further research could involve a quantitative study between teachers from English and French CÉGEPs to assess for existing correlations between experiences and perspectives of CBE. It would be interesting to determine if a quantitative study would yield similar results and further support the significance of more critical education research. Also, multiple qualitative approaches could be employed, such as focus groups and textual analysis of policy documents, forums, and blog posts. Such approaches have the potential to garner rich feedback and reveal a different perspective on teachers' experience. Finally, due to research focus and scope limitations, my study addressed another underdeveloped area: teachers' success stories' impact on their colleagues' exerting agency. A more in-depth investigation in this area could be beneficial for teachers to adopt practices that reject the construction of dominant knowledge that silences their voices.

Additional research critically evaluating teaching and learning from teachers' and students' perspectives is needed. Without documentation or research substantiating the

conditions under which CBE practices thrive, it is hard to justify the undemocratic nature of such informed neoliberal reforms. The findings from my thesis could be extended by exploring students' lived experiences of pursuing college studies structured within a competency-based framework. Doing so can contribute to a collective perspective of knowledge building rather than just from teachers' perceptions. As a visible minority, publishing this study in a minority language presents limitations. Having a Francophone CÉGEP conduct similar research would mobilize a more diverse discourse and enhance the dissemination of knowledge on this subject to a larger spectrum of the population.

Reflective Closing Remarks

Furthermore, with the current debate and objection against Bill 96 (Law 14), I once again questioned and doubted my eligibility to conduct this research as an Anglophone, a minority voice and language whose existence, relevance and impact are under scrutiny. However, as demonstrated by participants, such a bill signifies why my study is essential and timely. It notably justifies educators' lack of consultation and involvement in critical decision-making and policies that impact their work. My research further revealed the marginalization of teachers' voices in pertinent decisions on educational structural and developmental changes. As supported by research participants, the current study illuminated the authentic voices of teachers as it relates to concerns not frequently documented in existing scholarly work on this subject. Therefore, addressing the inadequacies and inequalities that challenge nurturing students' full potential requires teachers' collective voices to be echoed in more tangible ways, that is, through research that directly reports and reflects the reality of the conditions under which they work.

My thesis aims to illuminate the disconnection between the norm of continued reform and the reality of what is happening in educational institutions, particularly concerning CBE.

As my thesis has highlighted through the voice of a sample of college instructors, the rhetoric controlling CBE reforms calls for serious concern and underscores the urgent need to challenge and address neoliberalism's growing influence in education. Failure to do so will jeopardize the very essence of education as a democratic and social right. This will lead to a significant increase in social inequalities and other forms of oppression and marginalization. As my thesis research proposes, an alternative to fostering actual change within education and addressing and dismantling the neoliberal stronghold relies on intentional collaboration and critical engagement from educators.

Moreover, my research revealed the challenges teachers encounter, the dominating power relations, and the inequitable practices embedded in dictating and controlling their realities. Findings provided a better understanding of how a critical lens can illuminate oppressive and undemocratic actions and decisions that may seem reasonable and *just* in hindsight. However, my study does not claim that critically informed research will revolutionize these learning environments; it suggests its value in creating awareness and attention to the maintained disparities due to neoliberal education policies. My research advocates for discussions on educational changes that build bridges rather than drive the charge of division. It further proposes that enhancing the discursive opportunities for teachers is a critical step towards changing the narrative regarding participants' unheard voices in discussions about their work. Therefore, initiating change in this respect must start in local college environments among teachers, not just collectively being vocal about their discontent but adopting and incorporating classroom strategies that do not reproduce repressive neoliberal practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Course on Research Ethics Certificate of Completion

PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS
Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Sophia Miah

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

25804892

Date of Issue: **18 November, 2021**

Appendix B

Certification of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Human Subjects

Concordia
UNIVERSITÉ · UNIVERSITY

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Sophia Miah
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Education
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	Listen! Can You Hear Me? Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners' Perspectives and Experiences Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment
Certification Number:	30016040

Valid From: April 08, 2024   To: April 07, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Richard DeMont

_____

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix C

Institution Ethics Letter of Authorisation to Conduct Research

Ste-Foy, February 16, 2022

> **Initiator of the Request:** Sophia Miah
> **Principal Investigator:** Sophia Miah
> **Collaborator(s):** Dr. Ayaz Naseem (Faculty Supervisor, Concordia University)
> **Project Title:** *Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners Perspectives and Experiences - Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment*
> **Ethics Review ID #:** 2022-02-D-002

Dear Ms. Miah,

Thank you for your submission of the aforementioned study to Champlain Regional College for review. We have completed an ethical review process under the delegated approach, which is used for protocols that present no more than minimal risks to participants.

We are pleased to inform you that we find this study to be compliant with the ethics requirements of Champlain Regional College's Institutional Policy on Research and aligned with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2018). It has therefore been granted a full ethics approval by Champlain Regional College.

Please make sure that you meet your constituent college's requirements with regard to the coordination of interviews with faculty members and administrators. We take this opportunity to wish you every success with this research project.

Regards,

Edward Berryman
Directeur du Collège Constituant
CEGEP Champlain – St. Lawrence

Hello, my name is Sophia Miah, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I am contacting you regarding a study I am conducting entitled: "*Listen! Can You Hear Me? Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners' Perspectives and Experiences Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment*." I am currently at my dissertation research stage focusing on competency-based education (CBE) reform, its implementation, challenges, and role in improving student learning. More specifically, in the context of examining competency-based education reform, adding voice to teachers' experiences in these educational settings by sharing their lived realities is the focal point of my research efforts.

The goals of my research study are to investigate the perspectives that influence competency-based reform and explore instructors' and administrators lived experiences of working in these pedagogical environments. Thus, encouraging more dialogue and discourse that potentially lead to offer concrete guidelines for sustaining CBE reform in ways that produce equitable outcomes for teachers and students.

If you are a tenured or non-permanent instructor and administrator employed in the Cégep college system for two consecutive semesters and more, I am interested in talking with you about your perspectives and experiences of working in a setting informed by competency-based practices and policies. Furthermore, if you would like to have more details about the study and want to volunteer, please contact me directly by using the enclosed email address, and we can schedule a time to discuss your interest.

If you volunteer to participate in the study, it will involve an audio-recorded interview session with your consent and at a time convenient for you. If you decline to be recorded, I will take detailed notes. Given the current pandemic situation, the interview can be conducted via telephone or zoom audio-only. The interview duration will be approximately three to four hours, which can also be organized as two separate sessions upon request.

Although I will be aware of your identity during the interview, no personal information about you will be disclosed or identifiable in the information collected or the final research report. Therefore, steps will be taken to maintain anonymity throughout the research process. Your participation is voluntary, and if you agree to participate in the interview, you have the right to withdraw at any time, without any consequences. There is no compensation or risks that will be incurred from your participation in this research study. The information collected will be kept in a secured location for approximately five years after the research is completed, immediately after which it will be destroyed. This research study has been reviewed and received ethics approval by the Concordia University Human Research Ethics Unit. Should you have any further concerns

or questions about your involvement in the study, please do not hesitate to contact the following persons:

Dr. Ayaz Naseem
Supervisor
Tel: (514) 848-2424 ext. 2043
Email: ayaz.naseem@concordia.ca

Research and Ethics Compliance Faculty
Concordia University
(514) 848-2424 ex. 7481
Email: oor.ethics@concordia.ca

Sophia Miah
Principal Investigator
Tel: (541) 431-2401
Email: so_miah@live.concordia.ca

Recruitment Email Script (Third-party recruitment)

Hello, my name is Sophia Miah, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I am contacting you regarding a study I am conducting entitled: "*Listen! Can You Hear Me? Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners' Perspectives and Experiences Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment.*" I am currently at my dissertation research stage focusing on competency-based education (CBE) reform, its implementation, challenges, and role in improving student learning. More specifically, in the context of examining competency-based education reform, adding voice to teachers' experiences in these educational settings by sharing their lived realities is the focal point of my research efforts.

The goals of my research study are to investigate the perspectives that influence competency-based reform and explore instructors' and administrators lived experiences of working in these pedagogical environments. Thus, encouraging more dialogue and discourse that potentially lead to offer concrete guidelines for sustaining CBE reform in ways that produce equitable outcomes for teachers and students.

I am contacting you to request your support in recruiting participants for this study. As Academic Dean with access to all faculty members and employees, your advertisement of participation in my study via the college's general email communication would help me significantly in the recruitment process.

Upon completion of the study, a summary of findings would be sent to you that maybe useful in further informing professional development efforts designed for enhancing instructors' pedagogical approaches and collaboration on how to develop and sustain reform methods that are in the best interest of all involved.

Dr. Ayaz Naseem
Supervisor
Tel: (514) 848-2424 ext. 2043
Email: ayaz.naseem@concordia.ca

Research and Ethics Compliance Faculty
Concordia University
(514) 848-2424 ex. 7481
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Sophia Miah
Principal Investigator
Tel: (541) 431-2401
Email: so_miah@live.concordia.ca

Appendix F

Demographic and Professional Information

Participant's Name		Date	
Name of educational institution and address			

Gender:
Occupation: (i.e., your role/position at the college)
Program and discipline (if applicable):
Number of years in occupation/role:
Employment status: (i.e. tenure/non-permanent)
Educational background:
Professional Background
Do you incorporate competency-based education in your instructional practices? Tick [✓✓] the most appropriate response. □ Yes □ No □ Sometimes □ Rarely
Is competency-based training and updates regularly integrated in pedagogical development activities? □ Yes □ No □ Sometimes □ Rarely

Appendix G

Consent Form for Research Subjects

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Listen! Can You Hear Me? Unheard Voices: A Critical Ethnography of College Practitioners' Perspectives and Experiences Working in a Competency-Based Mediated Environment
Researcher: Sophia Miah
Researcher's Contact Information: Email: sophiam101@gmail.com
Telephone: 514-431-2401
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Ayaz Naseem
Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: Telephone: 514-848-2424 ext. 2043
Email: ayaz.naseem@concordia.ca
Source of funding for the study: Not applicable

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A.   PURPOSE
The purpose of my research is to investigate the perspectives that influence competency-based reform and explore instructors' and administrators lived experiences of working in these pedagogical environments. Thus, encouraging more dialogue and discourse that potentially lead to offering concrete guidelines for sustaining CBE reform in ways that produce equitable outcomes for teachers and students.

B.   PROCEDURES
If you participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic information form and participate in a three to four hours audio-recorded individual interview with the researcher with your consent. You can also choose not to be recorded, in this case, written notes will be taken during the interview process. The interview session can be organized into two separate sessions on different days and times upon your request. The interview will be conducted using a platform and mode (telephone/zoom audio/video chat) that you are comfortable with at a time and location that is convenient for you.

You may also choose to participate in reviewing a one-page summary of preliminary findings near the end of the study and provide feedback by email to the researcher. Participation in reviewing the summary and giving feedback will occur outside of work hours. If you wish for

your feedback to be considered by the researcher, it must be emailed to the researcher within 14 days of receiving the preliminary findings summary from the researcher. This may require an additional 30-minutes of your time outside of work hours should you choose to provide feedback.

In total, your participation in this study will take approximately four hours and 30-minutes of your time. If you have concerns or questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

C.   RISKS AND BENEFITS

You will not be harm in any way because of your participation in this research study, therefore, there are no foreseeable risks involved in participating.

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, the potential benefits of the proposed research study for you and potentially the wider college community are as follows (i) you will have the opportunity to reflect on your work experiences and teaching concerning competency-based education and make improvements where necessary. This type of dialogue and reflection can help better inform and sustain educational reform and identify areas requiring further research, (ii) your participation can help formulate better strategies to increase and improve ongoing collaboration centered on sustaining educational improvements, and (iii) you can contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the current research study topic.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: demographic data, audio-recorded interview with consent, and feedback (optional) on findings if you choose to participate in this process.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be coded. That means that the information will be identified by a code (e.g. A01, B02.). The researcher will have a list that links the code to your name. Your identity will be kept confidential by removing any data that is likely to point directly to the participating instructor.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

We will destroy the information by shredding where applicable and delete all electronic files five years after the end of the study.

F.   CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you do not want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher in writing by email within 30 days following your interview.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯

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If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Appendix H

Interview Guide and Protocol for Instructors

Interview Questions for: Instructor Participants

Research Question

1. What is the social context under which the implementation of competency-based reforms is taking place?

Guiding Interview Questions
   a. In your own words, define education.
   b. What has your experience been like with teaching?
   c. Are you familiar with the term competency-based education? If so, what is your understanding of competency-based education?
   d. The competency-based approach has been mandated as apart of the college curricula: In what ways have you incorporated this approach into your pedagogical practices?
   e. To what extent have teachers been involved in the decision-making process of structuring a competency-based framework for educational institutions?
      i. How were teachers consulted about the restructuring of educational curricula to adopt a competency-based approach?
      ii. How did teachers contribute to the structural and implementation processes?
      iii. From a training perspective, how would you describe your ability to effectively incorporate a competency-based framework into classroom practices?
   f. Considering your philosophy of education, what are your perspectives about the goals of competency-based education?

Research Question
   2. How has a neoliberal agenda of competency-based education impacted educational improvements and developments in the Québec college system?
Guiding Interview Questions
   a. Do you understand the concept: neoliberal educational reforms? (Teachers will be provided with a definition to investigate their understanding about CBE reform and its potential impact on education in the Québec.)
   b. What impact does the current structure and implementation of competency-based education have on students' capabilities?
      i. How does a competency-based framework offer a balanced pedagogical experience for students?
      ii. Are standardized approaches like CBE adequate to prepare students for diversified employment opportunities?
      iii. Are the proposed benefits of CBE in the best interests of students? Explain
   c. What factors are fueling educational development and improvements in Québec?

Research Question
3. What are the underlying tensions and challenges experienced by college instructors working in a competency-based environment?

Guiding Interview Questions
    a. How do you feel about decisions made regarding changes at your workplace?
    b. How do you feel about decisions made that affect teachers professional and teaching practices?
    c. What resources are available to guide teachers with competency-based instructional practices?
    d. What overall challenges do teachers faced with implementing standardized approaches like competency-based education?

Research Questions
5. What structural constraints and social factors contribute to teachers' resistance and dissatisfaction toward competency-based practices?

Guiding Interview Questions
    a. How has professional development assisted in preparing instructors to implement pedagogical changes?
        i. What type of pedagogical workshop have you participated in recently?
    b. What initiatives are in place to promote discourse among education stakeholders on issues and concerns related to educational (CBE) reform?

Research Question
6. How do CBE policies and practices challenge teachers' role as agents of social change?

Guiding Interview Questions
    a. What are your views on how competency-based practices are being implemented?
        i. Do current CBE practices align with your beliefs as an educator? Explain.
    b. Do current reform practices threaten the democratization of education in Québec?
    c. Do you think that the results of CBE accurately reflect the reality of social diversity in the classroom among students?

Research Question
7. How do teachers exercise their agency to either adapt to or resist the changes brought on by the reform?

Guiding Interview Questions
    a. What factors do you think contribute to the variations among teachers understanding and implementation of competency-based practices?
    b. How is the role and input of educators relevant in decision-making process about their work?
    c. Has professional development been effective in helping teachers to exert agency or improve practice?

Research Question
  1. What recommendations would instructors working in a competency-based education environment make to support equitable learning opportunities that could be sustained over time?

Guiding Interview Questions
  a. Are teachers afforded adequate opportunities to participate in educational reform developmental process? Explain.
  b. Is there a gap between workplace practices/expectations and educational policies? If yes, explain what gaps exist and how existing gaps can be bridge/align?
  c. What social initiatives are necessary to continue ongoing awareness towards promoting democratic educational reforms?
  d. Is the adoption of a market-driven framework to guide educational reform appropriate? Why or why not?
  e. What do you think is necessary for the longevity of educational changes to be sustained?
  f. What is your definition of equitable educational reform? For example, its design, implementation, and practices.

Appendix I

Interview Guide and Protocol for College Personnel

Interview Questions for: College Personnel Representatives

1. What is your definition of education?
2. How are the curricula designed at the CÉGEP levels? Briefly explain the process.
   a. Are instructors adequately involved in the developmental process? Explain
      i. What measures can be taken to increase instructors' involvement in educational reform?
3. What are your perspectives on CÉGEPs' pedagogical practices being structured using a competency-based education framework?
   a. What is competency-based education?
   b. How is competency-based education effective in improving student learning? Provide examples that are specifically related to your institution.
   c. Considering your philosophy of education, what are your perspectives about the goals of competency-based education?
   d. Do you think that the results of CBE accurately reflect the reality of social diversity in the classroom among students?
4. Is there a gap between workplace practices/expectations and educational policies? If yes, explain what gaps exist and how existing gaps can be bridge/align?
5. What factors are fueling educational development and improvements in Québec?
6. What do you think is necessary for the longevity of educational changes to be sustained?
7. What is your definition of equitable educational reform? For example, its design, implementation, and practices.
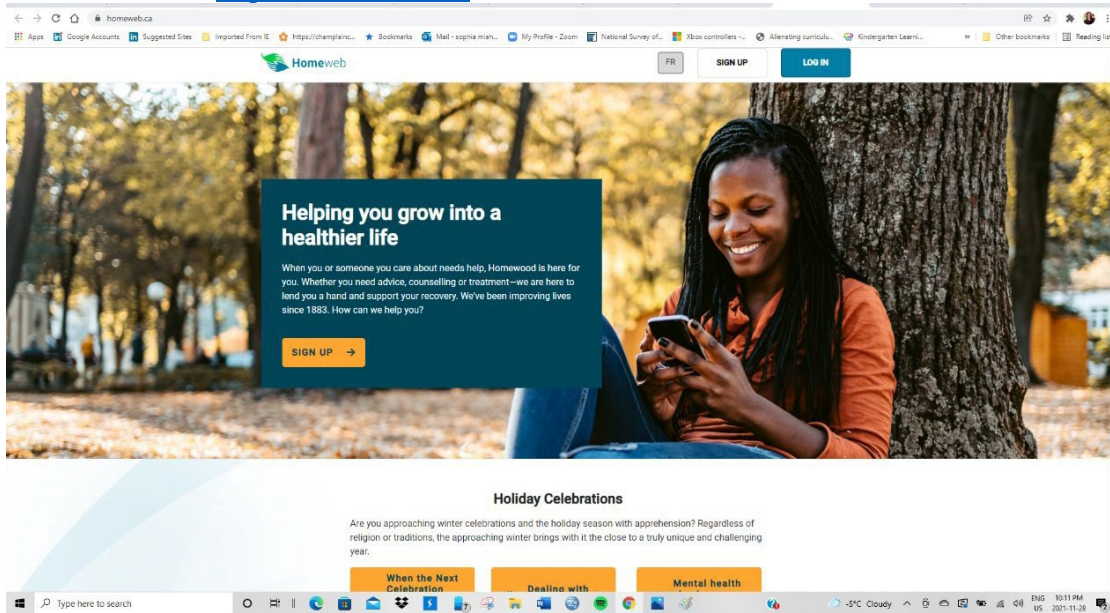
Appendix J

Counselling   and   Support   Services   for   Participants

Employee Assistant Program (EAP) Information (Screenshot Images)

If any of the research participants had become distressed or emotional during the interview sessions, the following screenshots show the registration information and support resources offered by EAP that I would have provided to participants.

Retrieved from: https://homeweb.ca/

Retrieved from: https://homewoodhealth.com/corporate/about/our-story