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Characteristics and conditions for innovative teachers:  
International perspectives. Routledge**

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**Livingston, K., O’Sullivan, C., Attard, K. (Eds.). (2024).  
*Characteristics and conditions for innovative teachers:  
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Reviewed by: Bonnie Stelmach, University of Alberta

Livingston, O’Sullivan, and Attard’s *Characteristics and Conditions for Innovative Teachers: International Perspectives* deserves a place among contemporary commentaries about what our education systems need. A statement by Allard in the penultimate chapter captures the motivation for this book: “In an uncertain future, where we cannot foresee future advancements and future need, we need citizens who can continuously learn from their environment” (p. 145). The book condenses a multi-university study called *Developing and Supporting Innovative Teachers*. Members of the Association for Teacher Education in Europe’s (ATEE) Research and Development Community on the Professional Development of Teachers (RDC PDT) envisioned the study at their annual meeting in 2016. As explained in Chapter 1, researchers from 16 countries in Europe, Africa, and North and South America designed a qualitative study focused on “what being an innovative teacher means, the challenges of innovation in schools, and the implications for teacher professional development” (p. 4). The co-editors’ premise is kindred with well-known scholars of change, such as Fullan and Quinn (2024), who recently argued that public education is outdated and most secondary students are bored at school because they are disconnected from the content. Learning to learn is the pathway to the future for students and teachers alike, an imperative the co-editors identified as increasingly entrenched in policy and reports created by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Post-pandemic, innovation that inspires continual learning has wide appeal.

The book’s subtitle describes the work as international. Except for one contributor from Brazil, the authors hail from European institutions, and the chapters focus primarily on European cases. This European-centric approach may matter to international readers, such as Canadians, for whom education is a provincial and territorial matter and where national educational policies do not exist. Despite the differences in governance models and cultural assumptions across nations, one cannot deny that globalization, or more specifically, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which Sahlberg (2016) has written extensively about, impacts all education systems. Readers from jurisdictions that participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; OECD, n.d.), for example, will likely appreciate the policy roots of the emphasis on innovation. Further, given the attention to teacher agency and professional learning and the inclusion of data from preschool to post-secondary, several chapters

transcend borders. This book may interest policy makers and educational researchers, especially those who are responsible for designing and implementing teacher education programs.

The conceptual ground is set in the first chapter with the definitions of innovation. While the authors admit ambiguity around the concept, originality, creativity, and invention dominate throughout. Those scholars wishing to plumb historical and theoretical depths of innovation and craving a debate will have to seek other scholarship (e.g., Blok, 2021; Cooper & Waterman, 2024; Faud et al., 2022; Godin, 2017). There is no serious interrogation of the presumed goodness of innovation. All innovation is therefore always positive. Readers must accept this assumption to appreciate the contributors' interpretations of the data. Further, a value-neutral approach to innovation was taken, which begs the question of whether and/or how this came to bear on data across the countries that participated in the overall study. On the positive side, that innovation is not delimited to teachers' use of technology and social media, or focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) sets these authors' innovation agenda in a different direction compared to much current scholarship as evidenced in current tables of content in leading journals such as the *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching*.

An outcome of the research is the model of innovative teachers derived from a synthesis of the findings. This model is presented early in the book on page 12 and is attributed to Livingston's earlier work. Three key elements constitute the model: personal and professional characteristics of innovative teachers, school-level and macro conditions hospitable to innovation, and implications for teacher education programs. The co-editors describe the relationship between personal characteristics and conditions as dynamic, yet it is unclear how characteristics and conditions interact with teacher education programs or vice versa. In the absence of predispositions leading to innovation, what is the role of teacher education programs in preparing teachers to innovate? To what extent are teacher education programs positioned to anticipate the changing needs of pre-service teachers and the classrooms they will encounter? By incorporating organizational elements, the author of Chapter 6 proposes a revision to the model, but a chapter dedicated to applying the original or revised model may have demonstrated the authors' claim of the dynamic interplay among the categories. Lacking this, the model is a compilation of "static normative lists of characteristics to identify innovative teachers" (p. 6), even though this is precisely what the authors claimed they were avoiding.

Most chapters offer thematic descriptions of the empirical data (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). Conceptual or theoretical frameworks are declared, but it is sometimes unclear whether and/or how the frameworks influenced the data collection, analysis, or interpretation. As an example, Chapter 3 focuses on understanding the relationship between "teachers' aims, their agency and innovative actions" (p. 36). The authors drew from a "temporal model of agency" (p. 36) which views agency as a function of how one is positioned in time. Tables summarizing what teachers most often identified as characteristic of innovation and what enabled and hindered innovation are helpful. Less obvious is how the temporal orientation of teachers influenced these characteristics and conditions to reach the interpretations presented in the tables. One might wonder how the career stage, for example, might influence teachers' perceptions of what innovation means and whether their practice transformed over time. Further, resources (time, materials, money) were reported as an enabling condition, but would it not be more innovative to figure out how to be effective *in spite of* a lack of resources? How did teachers' perceptions of time and resources contribute to or limit their innovation?

Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 have a similar orientation. Tables and the use of participants' voices from varying perspectives are again how the interpretations are provided. Chapter 4 appears to focus on K-12 teachers, whereas Chapter 5 turns its attention to preschool educators. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the conditions that support teacher innovation and how teacher educators perceive their innovation, respectively. Chapter 6 stands out because it shifts the unit of analysis from the individual teacher to the organization, raising the question of where innovation resides. Using Senge's (2006) five disciplines as a framework, the authors reimagine the original model presented on page 12, thus strengthening a conceptual spine to advance the importance of the organizational conditions for teacher innovation. In this chapter, school leaders reported on the value of giving teachers time to develop curricular mastery before expecting risk-taking. They also emphasized that innovative teachers play a key pedagogical leadership role. This is a particularly useful insight for cleaving current expectations that school leaders (e.g., principals and school heads) bear the responsibility of creating the conditions that support innovation.

The inclusion of the post-secondary context in Chapter 8 is a strength of this book. So often pre-school to Grade 12 teachers are studied in isolation from the contexts which shaped them. The authors of this chapter duly implicate teacher education programs as a challenge to teacher innovation, claiming that current models of teacher education tend toward creating “passive technicians rather than transformative intellectuals” (p. 119). Once reading the categories of traits and conditions laid out in this chapter, readers might wonder: were there any innovative programs in these countries where the data were collected? How should professional development change in light of these data? What institutional constraints do teacher educators face? Concrete examples always help to solidify an argument and inspire problem-solving.

Chapter 9 is engaging because philosophical questions are raised:

Are we mistakenly taking innovation and good practice to be the same thing? Is the term innovation being wrongly used to put under one umbrella, anything that is not the old stereotype of schooling that involved students memorising facts and figures...? (p. 139)

The author warns against the assumption that teachers’ “self-questioning will automatically lead to the transformation of practice” (p.142). Their proposal of critical pedagogy as the answer to this, however, is a simplified response considering the classroom and social conditions that form the backdrop of teachers’ work identified throughout the chapters: diverse student learning needs, inequality, and the public accountability pressures that arise from a neoliberal agenda. This latter challenge is captured most clearly in Chapter 2 in which the author reviewed an impressive number ( $n=38$ ) of policy documents published by the OECD, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) between 2009 and 2021. They argued that “productivity, entrepreneurship, or the market economy” are “automatically justified” in policy discourses about innovation, leading to a “utilitarian vision of innovation” (p. 26). Indeed, neoliberalism positions innovation as both a means and an end. Ball (2024) has articulated this paradox as policy incoherence, stating, “Schools are being expected to be both innovative and conservative, to deliver social mobility and social cohesion, to improve cognitive and noncognitive skills, to be collaborative and entrepreneurial” (p. 146). It is not unusual for educational researchers to pin educational challenges on neoliberalism. However, as Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) argued, without fleshing out its complex principles and operations, neoliberalism is used in a “non-specific way” that risks “perpetuating the dominant discourse of neoliberalism rather than disrupting or challenging it” (p. 269). Without deeper consideration of the socio-economic conditions—perhaps in Chapter 2 or 10—teacher professional development may continue to be colonized within the neoliberal discourse, making it difficult to imagine a world beyond the critique. Ironically, imagining a peaceful co-existence with neoliberalism would require innovative thinking.

Ensuring coherence is a challenge for edited books. I commend the co-editors for achieving consistency in voice throughout the chapters; at no point did I feel jarred by a change in tone or style. Most readers will not read cover to cover, so cross-referencing between chapters establishes coherence. Admittedly, I expected a much more detailed map of the book in Chapter 1. Outlining the intentions of the forthcoming chapters would have explained the organization, and provided clues to readers looking for particular foci. My linear read exposed the repetition that understandably results when multiple authors report on the same study. Instruction from the co-editors to the contributors to minimize the description of the methodology may have been a way to address this.

On that methodological note, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was identified throughout, but the outcomes of the empirical analyses were decidedly descriptive. In its original conception, IPA is used to gain insights into how people make sense of major life experiences (Smith et al., 2022), but insights into the sensemaking processes that guided participants towards or away from innovation were not articulated. From a methods perspective, that all researchers were faithful to an identical interview protocol (see page 9) raises questions about how the emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of qualitative research was understood. Vignettes and templates were proclaimed to have driven analysis; failing to include those in an appendix left me curious about the role they played. Analytical rigor came into question. Also, regardless of the data source, chapter findings tended to mirror each other; therefore,

collapsing some of the chapters and performing cross-case analyses of teacher, principal, and teacher-educator perspectives may have deepened the analysis and led to more compelling claims.

A key question is, will this book lead to “transformative professional development” (p. 162) as promised in Chapter 10? That is debatable if one subscribes to enduring laments by scholars who have argued that innovation over the decades has been more aspirational than transformative (Murphy, 2020; Sarason, 1990).

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