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EDITORIAL

Between intentions and outcomes: where scholarship begins

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Entre intentions et résultats : *la où commence le scholarship*

Medical education is full of good intentions.

We design assessments to support learning, curricula to develop competence, educational innovations to improve teaching, and initiatives to promote equity and social accountability. These intentions reflect what we value and what we hope education can accomplish.

But intentions are not outcomes.

Between what we set out to achieve and what happens lies the complexity of educational practice. Our designs encounter people, relationships, institutional cultures, and circumstances we cannot fully anticipate. Learners and educators interpret, negotiate, and adapt what we create. What takes shape in practice may differ from what we envisioned, without necessarily indicating failure.

We often approach the gap between intentions and outcomes as a problem to solve. When an initiative does not work as anticipated, we look for implementation barriers and consider how to improve fidelity to its design. Those questions matter. Yet they can position the original design as the standard and practice as a departure to be corrected.

What if that gap is also an opportunity for scholarship?

Sawatsky and Chang[1] examined how educational practices can signal priorities at odds with espoused values, while Eva[2] highlighted what our approaches to improvement reveal about our values. Building on these observations, I propose that the differences between intentions and educational realities are not only signals to interpret or gaps to close. They are themselves worthy of scholarly inquiry.

Assessment provides a useful example. We build assessment systems to support learning and inform decisions about competence, yet assessment does not automatically produce the learning we hope to foster. Scott[3] reminds us that assessment can shape performance without necessarily promoting learn-

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ing. Understanding how learners respond to assessment therefore offers insights beyond its stated purposes.

A related question concerns how educators enact assessment. Marceau and colleagues[4] explored the validation practices faculty members use in classroom-based assessment, revealing approaches that may not be explicitly articulated through established frameworks. Their work illustrates how examining what educators actually do can generate knowledge without first demonstrating that their practices are deficient.

The same reasoning applies beyond assessment. Khan and colleagues'[5] account of Indigenous-led capacity building for virtual healthcare illustrates how the significance of an educational initiative can extend beyond its immediate technical purpose, encompassing local leadership, relationships, and community capacity. Examining such experiences can reveal dimensions of educational practice that evaluations focused solely on intended outcomes might overlook.

Ott and colleagues[6] provide a particularly useful illustration. In their examination of competency-based curriculum-making, they show how adaptations are not simply deviations from an intended curriculum: they can arise as educators respond to tensions between curricular intentions and the realities of practice. Such adaptations can illuminate assumptions in the original design and offer insight into how educational purposes are negotiated in context.

The implication for scholarship is important. Rather than treating intentions as fixed benchmarks, we can investigate how they were formed, whose priorities they reflect, and how they evolve in practice. We can study enactment and experience without first identifying an unexpected outcome, and examine what discrepancies reveal about our understanding of educational phenomena.

This is not an argument against careful design or evaluation of intended outcomes. Rather, it invites us to remain attentive to what our research questions and frameworks may overlook. Examining adaptations, competing interpretations, and unanticipated consequences can reveal limitations in how we originally understood an educational problem. Sometimes, what we learn from practice is more informative than whether an intervention worked as planned.

We should keep asking whether educational activities accomplish what we intended. But we should also examine how those intentions are enacted, experienced, and sometimes transformed.

Perhaps some of our most valuable scholarship begins precisely where intentions and educational realities diverge. At CMEJ, we welcome submissions that explore that divergence.

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